

**MEMENTO MORI, ANAMNESIS  
AND THE CONSOLATION OF POETRY:  
ALVARO URTECHO'S *CANTATA ESTUPEFACTA*<sup>1</sup>**

The four epigraphs that preface Alvaro Urtecho's impressive first **poemario** effectively summarize its thematics: **Post mortem** awareness of terrestrial existence ("Abajo, al reino de la tierra./ Lejos del reino de la luz." Novalis); human life as a performance in which one appears to oneself as a detached actor ("Ángel o marioneta: ahora, al fin, tienes espectáculo." Rilke); **memento mori**, the awareness of death especially at intensely lived moments ("La muerte es de la vida la inseparable hermana./ La muerte es la victoria de la progenie humana." Rubén Darío); and poetry's mediatory function between consciousness and experience ("el canto/ del peldaño/ el canto/ rodado/ el canto/ del gallo/ y los sollazos/ los amargos largos sollazos." Carlos Martínez Rivas). In the context of Nicaraguan literary production during the decade of the Sandinista Revolution, whose usual themes are radical social transformation, personal reminiscences, erotic love and the recuperation of national history, Urtecho's writing distinguishes itself by its philosophical bent and its examination of the poetics of death.<sup>2</sup> The pretension of universality, the dark brooding, the graphic descriptions of physical decomposition, the prolific, iconographic and often immoderate imagery, and the devaluing of earthly glories call to mind the baroque mentality, but without the pious bitterness of counter-Reformation Catholic revanchism. In fact, Urtecho's cosmology is closer to that of ancient Greco-Roman religions, with additional acknowledgements to Dante and Rimbaud, quotes from whom serve as epigraphs for individual poems. The Italian and the Frenchman also descended into the underworld, imaginatively and psychologically, revealing to us what we cannot see for ourselves: the tormented souls living respectively in the spiral of hell and in the poorest Parisian neighborhoods.

"Orfica," a poetic descent into an underworld that is the modern city at night, owes much to Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer*. Seeking not his Eurydice but rather himself in the sign-system of the streets, the subject begins his vain quest with a paronomasia that is one of Urtecho's signatures (orificiosórfico). He is looking for the absent self whose sense remains hidden:

---

<sup>1</sup> Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Outstanding representative authors of these four thematic tendencies are, respectively: Ernesto Cardenal and Rosario Murillo; Daisy Zamora and Vidaluz Meneses; Gioconda Belli; and Sergio Ramírez and Jorge Eduardo Arellano.

Orificios, rostros, huellas busco  
del tiempo. Busco signos. Alzo  
el dedo para saber quién soy,  
de quién es mi pasado ...

Mas  
la pregunta sigue ahí: inquisición  
inútil del pensamiento  
sobre el sentido (17)

The seeker splits off from the contemplated self, dissolving into the inhabitants of the underworld in whom he expects to see himself reflected. In the first pair of lines, that hope of connectedness and the reality of rupture are expressed, respectively, by the attached postpositioned and the detached prepositioned first-person object pronouns:

¿no es cierto que mírome mirarme  
y que me reconozco en tanta faz?

...  
¿Es que no me disuelvo,  
átomo, en raso círculo? (18)

As he advances through the realm of the night people, his surroundings spin out of the control of his perception (“¿Podría detener/ el paso de tantos para reconocer/ un rostro igual? Pues hay/ velocidad, hay vertigo...” 20) and he can find no reciprocity for his questing gaze (“los ojos en el aire,/ buscando cómo extraer un pedazo/ de miel de la penumbra: una mirada,/ una sonrisa en esa vasta procesión/ de figuras y fugas sin fin” 20-21). As he descends further, his impressions become more confused and the text—at the levels of stanza, line and sequence of ideas—becomes progressively disjointed, together with his sense of identity:

Sí, sí oigo  
..... o el tímpano  
—¿qué tímpano?— ha mentido.  
¿Qué,  
pues, entonces?,  
¿qué soy, qué  
somos? (23)

Ironically, the poem rebounds into a tighter construction at the very moment when the **hablante** describes his impression of being dismembered by the music of a discotheque (with its intermittent strobe light) to which he dances. At the same time, his feeling of loss of self is rendered by a **gradación regresiva** descending from the concrete to the two-dimensional:

Sólo soy un extraño asombrado,  
un gesto que busca gestos, un trazo  
inscrito en el lenguaje de incienso

de este crematorio que disuelve  
cada uno de mis miembros hasta sentirme  
fibra, tendón, nervio, brusco jirón de mí  
franja en el aire, impulso, rasguño exaltado (25)

Finally, the hellish nocturnal city is described as shredded, fantastic, ethereal, false, transfiguring and frightening:

¡impostura, historia, imperio, metal ardido!  
¡Blanco espacio de huesos que me transfigura! (27)

For this Orpheus there will be no escape from the vortex into which he has ventured.

If in "Orfica" part of life is experienced as a living hell, in "Lontano" death is portrayed as disembodied consciousness when a recently "deceased" person, being lowered into his grave, is advised by an unidentified counselor. The corpse is leaving behind institutions, feelings, signs and movements, all construed as oppressive, limiting definers of the self. The smooth syntactic transition from the former to the latter category implicitly indicts the pillars of social life:

Dejaste todo atrás: familia,  
iglesia, escuela, patria,  
sellos envilecidos, mascarones  
del pánico, cariátides amenazantes (132-33)

Now, however, death has liberated him from the "nombres que ya no nombran" (133) so that he may begin to exercise his freedom. In the brilliant light of his imagination, the lucid corpse not only is able to perceive his own funeral but also to recollect his life: people who loved and despised him, a seductive, dancing woman, times of day, tombs, deeds and dates. When the consciousness separates from the body, it will open its eyes, jump, measure itself against the wind, throw itself on the ground, throw off its angels, get drunk, show itself in all its horribleness, give out a devilish laugh and

avanza, invoca, persigue  
esas visiones, esas formas  
que a ti, jardinero platónico,  
te conciernen.  
Duerme, poeta, duerme.  
Duérmete, niño. ...  
¡cuánto espacio en el sueño! (136)

And so we learn at the very end that this death is a metaphor for the creative dream (and the dreamy creation) of the poet, released both from social conventions and his body, pure in its freedom, horrible in its irreverence ("tu risa, tu voz espantosa" 136), innocent in its self-centered desire.

These two poems, located respectively at the beginning and end of the

collection, represent the two poles of an experiential itinerary: the frightening dissolution of the self in an alienating world, and the liberating detachment of the poetic soul in free inventiveness. Three other compositions that continue the development of a poetics of death revolve around the **memento mori** theme, especially with reference to sexuality. In "Quevedesca," love between the sheets, described in terms of excitement and heat ("Una ráfaga de fulgor entra en las sábanas,/ levanta el miembro" 109), is put forward consciously as a means of countering the obsession with the eternity and coldness of death ("Ignoro/ cuánta escarcha, cuánto tiempo de témpano/ tiene la muerte" 109). And in the paronomastically entitled "Música de cámara," sexuality is raised to the level of a religious ritual aimed at warding off unhappiness:

como si el oscuro rito del amor  
quisiera vengarse  
de nuestro vasto mundo humano,  
felizmente humano,  
tristemente ... (113)

The daring forward displacement of the adverb "tristemente" both separates it from "el oscuro rito del amor" whose task is to distance sadness from the lovers' minds, and establishes an interlocking order ("humano/ felizmente humano,/ tristemente") in which the latter adverb serves to cancel out the first even as the awareness of death impinges on any attempt to block it out:

El gozo estremecido del soplo que les llega  
del lado de la muerte. (113)

The most complete and disquieting treatment of the **memento mori** theme is found in "Ahora y en la hora," with its clear liturgical allusion. Addressing an anonymous **tú**, the speaker first evokes his youthful erotic experiences, including detailed images of sexual intercourse and a highly sensitive treatment of adolescent behavior and psychology in which he ridicules himself with good-natured indulgence. All of a sudden, he addresses not **tú**, but **vosotros**, spectators of a theatricalized sexual encounter the self-consciousness of whose participants reveals their adolescence. These are two versions of the same phenomenon, one emotional and innocent, the second analytical and impersonal. This first part ends with a characteristic juxtaposition of sexuality and mortality. The leap from late childhood all the way to death collapses the life-span, devaluing all intermediate stages of human development and making sexuality less an aspect of psychological growth than a biological race against time:

Y ese ritmo,  
ese roce de piel tras la brisa  
de gasas,  
esa danza íngrima,

esas aberturas totales  
del propio espacio  
...  
hay una antigua y sagrada intensidad  
en esas emociones que anteceden  
a la suprema experiencia  
de la Muerte (60)

Part two is a meditation on our constant but vain attempt to forget death because, as Hegel shows, the principal of any entity's destruction is present at its inception:

Lo percibimos en el fulgor de la estrella  
entrevista en los árboles como un fruto  
encendido ...  
en la infinitud de tantas telarañas,  
en esas cordilleras hialinas de las nubes  
que desde hace mucho se disuelven. ...  
En la carne de la criatura oral que balbució. (61)

There is something buried beneath the earth, we are told, that slips into all lovers' bedrooms, that makes all creatures panic, that is even in the landscape, whose breath crosses the world and remains in everyone's memory. In part three, the speaker departs, leaving to "vosotros" the darkness, and heading toward a light in an apparently death-transcending movement, there to meet the "tú" of the poem's beginning. That encounter ends in disappointment, however, as palpable hope disintegrates into primordial dust:

el brillo que ofusca,  
la puerta  
de mi cuarto que se abre  
para encontrarte a ti: fantasma, demonio,  
ángel, poeta, hombre, otro, yo ...  
Me miras,  
me saludas, sonríes cordialmente  
y luego te deshaces en la ceniza. (67)

In "Lázaro," with its inference of death and resurrection, the speaker evokes an analogous psycho-physiological process in a living person. A sudden flight of nearby doves quickens a stroller's footsteps, freeing from his body the metaphorical corpse imprisoned within it:

Fue como si algo  
se escapara de la carne,  
sorprendida su raíz.  
Como si al muerto que guardo  
le levantaran la losa y por el mundo  
caminara ya sin nada entre las manos. (77)

The lightness of being is rendered by the brevity of the first stanza and by the swiftness with which the single principle clause races to its conclusion before the pause at the end of the second line. The **hablante**'s prior weightiness is expressed by the sheer length of the second strophe, by its total of eight tonic stresses in only 32 syllables, by the profusion of twelve bilabial and alveolar stops, and by the pair of accented diphthongs in the initial line. The seven fricatives in stanza one renders the traditional image of the breezy soul leaving the body while the four alliterative liquids express the lifting of the heavy tombstone in the midst of the heaviness exerted by the surrounding musical elements in the second strophe.

The life --> death --> rebirth pattern forms the underlying matrix of the haunting "Chopin en mi habitación," which appears to be a programmatic interpretation of an actual piano piece heard by the implied author. The first part evokes a lush nineteenth-century theater whose attentive audience is listening to unmistakably Romantic music with its rich harmonics:

Notas encarnizadas empantanándose,  
y el denso color: antiquísimo  
lejano y concentrado, antiquísimo  
todo: eterna sombra. (104)

Out of the music comes the vision of a drama sketched in a series of highly evocative rapid strokes. Since each detail of this ecphrasis is a cliché of Romantic iconography or dramaturgy, we can easily trace its trajectory from violation of social taboo, through pledge of eternal love, peril, flight, defamation of religious prohibition, ephemeral happiness, and destined sadness, to inevitable tragic death.

voces torturadas del pasado, el cáliz  
prohibido de una noche, la furiosa  
obsesión del adolescente que quiso  
eternizarse petrificando soledad  
y destino en la más pura hondura  
del sentido ...  
El vino derramado,  
los gritos, pasos en el sendero,  
jardines, rosas, una fuente,  
conventos, el claustro del  
convento, las manos en las rejas de la celda, terrazas,  
gradas de mármol interminable,  
claro del bosque, risas del  
agua más cercana, tristezas,  
un eco trágico en el azul  
marino, una campana, un  
cementerio ... (104-05)

In spite of the accumulation of commonplaces, we find here no satiric register, no desire to ridicule Romantic aesthetics. Rather, we are asked to take them seriously,

which prepares us to accept the magical power of anamnesis through art at the conclusion of the poem. It is death that furnishes the bridge to part two of the piece, which places the speaker in Paris's Père Lachaise Cemetery, presumably near Chopin's tomb. There he imagines the dead young composer (he departed this world at age 39) first as imminent music potentially pulsating through his favorite instrument ("¡tiempo temblando en el piano, su silencio/ dilatándose como nunca!" 107) before its audible eruption in which Chopin's eternal being is heard ("¡Chopin: su sangre/brotando de las teclas!/ Pausa. Paredes/ de la cripta. Losas apartadas. Resurrección/ de los muertos. Presencia. ¡Chopin al fin!" 107-08). This literally melodramatic revival reverses the tragic death of the young artist indirectly figured in the drama suggested by his keyboard music. What earlier was expressed as a Romantic cliché and was thus implicitly unrealizable — "la furiosa obsesión del adolescente que quiso eternizarse petrificando soledad y destino en la más pura hondura del sentido" — comes true, as music lifts the tomb cover and the apotheosized artist regenerates himself by his own titanic willpower.

It is logical that Urtecho should attempt to capture Chopin's musical obsession in poetry, since in "Armonía," which describes the onset of poetic inspiration, writing is conceived as the remembering of "las cuerdas olvidadas" (75). All his poems are bits of one indivisible poem received intermittently and transcribed obediently ("De nuevo el poema. ... Obedezco." 75). Memory is understood as a collaborative, recuperative process inexplicably channeled through the poet and producing contentment: "Soy feliz: aspiro/ el polvo de los muertos" (75). By breathing in the ashes of the dead and exhaling them in poetic form, he is able to outwit death itself.

"Añeja luz" evokes some of the phantoms that appear spontaneously to the writer. In a graceful elegiac elan marked by anaphora, rhyme and a central ellipsis (the absence of the verb in the second clause) which illustrates the very theme, he first asks **ubi sunt**

¿en qué paraje oscuro se apagaron,  
en qué cruces o silencios, en qué  
mar monumental naufragaron? (99)

before evoking an eerie pantomime with its Virgilian pathos:

Bruscamente

retornan descastados al compás disolvente  
de la música, y en cada uno de sus gestos  
fluyen viejas escenas olvidadas, ojos  
como olas en un mar de cenizas. (99)

Here, the sweeping propositions, the extensive use of **encabalgamiento**, the exquisite fitting of rhythm to meaning, the descriptions of pathetic gestures and facial expressions, and the stunning final metaphor show how carefully Urtecho

has studied Dante's *Divina Commedia*. The poet recaptures what now barely holds together, for the realm of death indefinitely retards, but does not stop, the dissolution of humans who have become disembodied grace and beauty:

Sal,  
leve sol, gracia entrevista, pétalo  
desgranado, persona, forma que antes  
fue luz, después tiniebla pura. (99)

A counterpoint between the barely palpable and the scarcely visible is established in the **gradación silábica** leading up to the pivotal "persona" in order to transmit the notion of an entity on the verge of disappearance. The **gradación regresiva** at the end, while affirming the ghosts' continuing gradual disappearance, serves nevertheless also to fix them because of the stabilizing character of the parallelism embedded in the broader rhetorical figure. In this way, Urtecho's poetics of death can integrate the ephemeral nature of life with his art's ability to capture it before it should vanish.

Poems about writing poetry itself punctuate *Cantata estupefacta* from beginning to end. "Génesis" situates the inception of poetic production in sounds ("Los pájaros habitan tu pecho./... Escuchas. ¡Silbido, canto, grito,/ algarabía!" 80) that the codifying technician translates into a system of signs ("la letra que va/ trazando signos" 80). In "Simposium," a loose analogy based on the phonemic similarity among "siglos" ("Astros claros de la noche" 93: time as measured in celestial movements), "sigilos" ("Altos rastros en dispersión./ Mundos hasta el fin perdidos." 93: trails to be followed) and "signos" ("Escritura del Poema" 93) defines Urtecho's art as a system of meanings leading through time and space to mysterious destinations. The play on words **signos** "el Poema/ detenido entre el Sí y el No" (93, emphasis mine) seems to say that poetic meaning, neither an affirmation nor a denial, moves us along different paths, the value lying in the journeys of discovery themselves.

Scarcely a poet has not found inspiration in the theme of the lack thereof, and ours is no exception. "Nacimiento" is an **alborada** that chronicles that genre's typical movement from muteness and solitude, through stimulation by dawn's light and its infusion of music into the landscape, to the poet's release of his expressive powers. The **hablante**, initially "Enmudecido./ íngrimo" (81), becomes a resonance chamber for the day, which is initially perceived as pure rhythm:

Otra vez el día inicia  
su latido, la trama de sus horas,  
el vasto ser de su arena infinita. (81)

The poet will situate himself in the Great Chain of Being, an idea bodied forth in "el vasto ser," emulating the birds which in European poetry have traditionally figured him:

—Raudo gorrión, golondrina, gallo,  
¡cómo lo reconoces, cómo entonces  
entonas tu labrada pizca de plata y cobre (81)

The first imitation of the diurnal rhythm will be hesitant:

¡Oh día! Fortalecido  
estoy en tu vientre sonoro intentando  
hilvanar unas cuantas palabras que animen  
mi existencia, unas inciertas líneas  
que digan tus encantos. (81)

Paradoxically, from the very beginning of the **alborada** the poet has been in full possession of his expressive powers, having already succeeded in exploiting the morning's "bodega redescubierta, cuerno de la Abundancia" in order to produce "¡Escritura, ternura de la página crecida!"

If the "trompeta de azafrán del día" (81) releases the poet from creative paralysis, in "Consolación del fuego" he claims that "el murmullo amarillo/ del otoño" has the opposite effect:

No sé qué grandes angustias  
me producen estos días de inmoluciones  
y lejanías cargadas de frío  
y palabras no halladas (95)

The product is, of course, the same: an outpouring of lyricism on the subject of the absence of inspiration, such as the whispering lines that describe the empty space of the undeceived poem:

creí oír el poema,  
y era sólo el espacio con bujías blancas  
ante las puertas de la ciudad interminable,  
sin nombre ya  
como en los cuentos grises de algún  
Maëlstromm. (95)

This set of poems about poetry itself, as well as the use of the **alborada** form and the high incidence of allusions to Greek myth and European poetry, theatre, music and places, show that Urtecho consciously, even insistently, situates himself in a pan-European intellectual and artistic tradition rather than a primarily Latin American one. The tension between his Old World inheritance and his New World residence is most apparent in the extended autobiographical poem "El velo tras la piel," which evokes the poet's fondly remembered childhood on both continents. To be sure, the tropical Nicaraguan vegetation furnishes a setting for the affective development of the future poet,

Fronδας, frondas  
que el corazón frecuentemente visitaba,  
escuchando tan cerca el brotar de las aguas,  
el sendero enamorado de la Canción. (41)

but it is seen as exotic and subordinated to a strictly European concept of decoration:

Motivo  
para la porcelana: ese barranco  
de rosas diminutas y el ramaje súbito  
abanicando. (41)

To this Nicaraguan infused with European roots, values and aesthetics, Latin America is not unequivocally home, but rather a locus into which he is imperfectly spliced:

cuando los velos ingravidos de tus  
antepasados  
vigilaban tu sueño, insuflaban visión  
en las venas ...  
unas palabras antiguas  
pero contemporáneas ... que te sirvieran  
para purificar el lenguaje de la tribu  
y reconciliarte con tu destino  
hispanoamericano. (39)

For this reason, the boy who the writer once was felt the tug of his ancestry, the past, the dead, upon traveling to Avignon, Barcelona, Madrid, Toledo, Segovia, Salamanca, Ávila, Burgos and Aranjuez (“Ahora y en la hora,” “El velo tras la piel”), asking what he would be, how he could possibly exist if he could not travel over the sea that links the old Spanish empire:

Si yo  
no tuviera el mar ... ¡El mar!  
...  
¡El mar de todas las vertientes!  
¡El mar nuestro! (48)

There is, in all the poems of *Cantata estupefacta*, an expansiveness born of the poet's built-in “caja de resonancia” (47) which allows him to gather up and incorporate into his emotional and artistic vastness (he really has a Romantically titanic idea of these capacities) “tantas despedidas y muertes/ y espacios idos” (47). He asks what might happen

Si yo no tuviera,  
dime, este vasto universo abierto, (48)

