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## Childhood, Cycles of Loss, and Poetic Responses

### Setting the scene

In his first two major collections of poetry, *Élegos* (1967) and *Muerte y memoria* (1972),<sup>1</sup> Eugenio Montejo presents us with the foundations of what will become his poetic universe. Much like the actual universe, these early poetic building blocks constitute not so much a stage which will be left behind, buried under the subsequent pages of poetry, as one which grows by expansion, the symbols, concerns, and topoi becoming more complex and intertwined, but the essential matter out of which all is, ultimately, formed remaining the same.

As their titles indicate, these early collections are bound up with death and mourning, and, in line with these central thematics, Montejo sets up two distinct spaces and times in these works: the childhood and youthful past of the poetic *yo* and the present of the poet and his poetry as it looks back on and surveys that past, this dialectic being particularly prevalent in *Élegos*. The first lines of the first poem of this collection, ‘En los bosques de mi antigua casa’, introduce us to this schema and set out the scene on which the rest of the collection will build, as we are told how ‘En los bosques de mi antigua casa | oigo el jazz de los muertos’ (*É*, 5). The poetic *yo* remembers those who are now dead, hearing their music in his mind, which in turn adds to the sombre ambience. But it is the backdrop to this music and this remembrance that anchors both these lines and the collection as a whole. They indicate the setting of the past which is described and mourned in *Élegos* as being the rural house of the poetic *yo*’s childhood, hinting, in the process, at the Vallejian debt to be found in Montejo’s early poetry, here chiming with Vallejo’s ‘Canciones de hogar’ in particular.<sup>2</sup> This *casa* represents the central location

<sup>1</sup> Montejo’s first collection of poetry, the often-ignored *Humano paraíso*, stands apart from the majority of his work in terms of poetic form and subject matter. Montejo himself commented in personal correspondence that ‘pronto advertí que todo aquello [*Humano paraíso* and the influences behind it] nada tenía que ver con mi sensibilidad, que era una caprichosa forma de plantearme mis comienzos’ (13 September 2005). Unfortunately, time and space do not permit me to rescue this work here from its status as a bibliographical curiosity.

<sup>2</sup> Américo Ferrari notes that, in addition to the final section ‘Canciones de hogar’ of Vallejo’s *Los heraldos negros* (1988: 3–120, pp. 108–15), the insistence on ‘la casa y el

in seven of the twenty-one poems that make up *Élegos*, and within it and around it Montejo constructs the full space of the past homestead.

The rural location of this homestead is emphasised by a focus on the presence of trees both in the *bosques* of the opening poem and throughout the collection. ‘Acacias’ stands as a prime example, with the trees of its title placed in a wind-swept, rural *paisaje*, linked to the ‘antigua casa’ in its description as itself being ‘antiguo’:

Estremecidas como naves  
acacias emergidas de un paisaje antiguo  
y no obstante batidas en su fuego  
bajo la negra luz de atardecida  
yo miro yo asisto  
a este mínimo esplendor tan denso. (*É*, 31)

The scene is dark and lugubrious, the metaphor of the ships being blown to and fro in a storm emphasising the elements out onto which the poet is looking, as well as hinting at the Romantic sensibilities which prove constant in Montejo’s work. And yet the acacias are captivating and magical even in the darkness, as Montejo gives this rural location an aura of splendour and mystery.

Further conveying this setting’s rural nature is the frequent mention of animals, including the dog which belonged to the poetic *yo* ‘en mi año séptimo’ (‘Mi perro ateo mi perro de talento obsesivo’, *É*, 8), and which is linked forever with this period of infancy (‘enrazado de infancia y tiovivo’ (8)). But the specifically rural character of the animals of this early collection emerges in relation to the *casa* itself, with the house being supplemented by a stable in the opening ‘En los bosques de mi antigua casa’, before being fused with a horse in the pivotal ‘De quién es esta casa que está caída’, where the poet talks of its ‘puerta con ojos de caballo | y flancos secos en la brida muerta | de su aldaba’ (*É*, 12). Moreover, Montejo employs the same technique in ‘Mi casa clueca en el invierno’, this time depicting the house as a hen:

Mi casa clueca en el invierno  
mi casa corva en su potencia animal  
tía de unos huevos ya sin nacer  
gravita su mudez empolla aquel tacto doméstico  
con que escarba en la tierra para nosotros. (*É*, 15)

hogar’ (Ferrari 1988: 15) in *Élegos* echoes a similar focus in several poems from *Trilce* (1988: 159–272).

Here, then, the house is not just described in terms which fuse it with a country animal, but becomes a living being which forms, gestates, and cares for those who emerge from it, that is, the poetic *yo* and his family.

Underlining the persistence of certain thematic threads and leitmotifs in this early collection, a similar image to that of ‘Mi casa clueca en el invierno’ is also found two poems later in ‘Mi ayer es una bizca tía’, where Montejo begins with a statement defining in explicit terms the past of the poetic *yo* being set out before us:

Mi ayer es una bizca tía  
y una casa emplumada donde los muertos  
hacen café. (*É*, 17)

The house appears as central and, once again, with a veiled reference to the previous ‘mother hen’ identification. Likewise, the dead people of the house from ‘En los bosques de mi antigua casa’ are once more present in the remembrance of the poet. Significantly, however, they are also linked with the preparation (and, by implication, drinking) of coffee, a process which recurs persistently in both *Élegos* and *Muerte y memoria*. In ‘Otra lluvia’ (*MM*), for example, Montejo presents an image of the poetic *yo* as a child returning home with other children, possible siblings, to ‘Quienes a nuestra vuelta hacían café | y nos secaban’ (*MM*, 30), and in ‘En los bosques de mi antigua casa’ (*É*), immediately after referring to the music of the dead, Montejo describes how ‘Arde en las pailas ese momento de café | donde todo se muda’ (*É*, 5). The making and sharing of coffee emerges from these two collections, then, as an integral part of this past, rural home scene, constituting what I shall term a ‘communional rite’, that is, a ritual and familial moment of rural domesticity which grants a sense of community to those who share in it.<sup>3</sup>

The presence of the ‘coffee moment’ also signals the importance of the family *per se* in Montejo’s construction of the past homestead, and Montejo populates these early poems with numerous family members. Aside from the ‘bizca tía’, who is named further on as Aunt Adela (*É*, 17), the figure of the poetic *yo*’s father is a constant presence in the two collections, providing the central focus of poems such as ‘Mi padre regresa y duerme’ and ‘Había una vez un padre y yo era su hijo’ from *Élegos*, and ‘Levitación’ and ‘Caballo real’ from *Muerte y memoria*, and thus recalling, once more, Vallejo’s ‘Canciones del hogar’.<sup>4</sup> Beyond this, there are the nameless ‘muertos’ from this past

<sup>3</sup> Gutiérrez Plaza, in an article which offers, amongst other things, a useful gloss of the central symbols in Montejo’s work, has also commented on his use of coffee as ‘un elemento que evoca una suerte de rito ancestral’ (1994: 552).

<sup>4</sup> Montejo’s ‘Mi padre regresa y duerme’ (*É*), for example, incrementally echoes Vallejo’s ‘Los pasos lejanos’, which begins ‘Mi padre duerme’ (1988: 110).

home, as well as the figures of the mother, sister, and brother in the poem 'Elegía a la muerte de mi hermano Ricardo' (*É*), with many of these family figures resurfacing some twenty years later in the poem 'Álbum de familia' from *Alfabeto del mundo* (1988).

The distinctly personal nature of Montejo's poetics and of his construction of the homely scene of the past is underlined in this insistence upon the familial. But it also reveals how far the past scene that Montejo lays before us has autobiographical bases. Montejo himself lived the first few years of his life in Caracas, a city which was, at that time (late 1930s/early 1940s), a long way from the bustling metropolis of the end of the twentieth century. Following this, most of his childhood and youth was spent in the provincial cities of Valencia and Maracay, cities which, during this period (1940s and 1950s), were relatively small and rural, or semi-rural, in nature, much like the scene described in these early collections.<sup>5</sup> And in interview in 1982, he laid bare that the preoccupation with death in *Élegos* and *Muerte y memoria* was due to his experiences whilst writing these poems. On the one hand, there was his sentimental adherence to the political *guerrilleros* of the 1960s in Venezuela, where 'tantos y tantos murieron de los que yo vi' (Szinetar 2005: 101) (and we might add that the political climate of repression during the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship (1952–8) no doubt contributed to a similar awareness of death in this earlier period).<sup>6</sup> But Montejo also points in this interview to the death of his brother Ricardo in 1961, when Montejo was in his early twenties, that is, at the very end of this period of youth. The importance of this event underscores that it is in the family names and concerns that the most explicit autobiographical identifications are to be found, with the most striking of these being the references to Ricardo, who is the subject of the elegiac 'Elegía a la muerte de mi hermano Ricardo':

Mi hermano el Rey Ricardo murió una mañana  
 en un hospital de ciudad, víctima  
 de su corazón que trajo a la vida  
 fatales dolencias de familia. (*É*, 23)

<sup>5</sup> See Chirinos (2005: 58–9) for the reasons why this was the nature of Venezuela's cities as a whole in this period. The fact that rapid growth came to Valencia, for example, only towards the end of the 1950s is evident from State censuses (see Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales, Universidad de Los Andes (2008)). It should be noted that there is some confusion as to where Montejo spent his childhood years. Most sources, including interviews with Montejo himself, speak of Valencia, though without specifying exactly when the author was living here. Other sources close to Montejo have referred, in private correspondence, to Maracay as the locale where much of his childhood was spent. What is important for the present discussion, however, is that both cities were to a large extent rural or semi-rural in nature during the period in question.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the largely rural guerrilla movement of the 1960s in Venezuela, see Guevara *et al.* (1997: 217–25).

Aside from its stark, bare descriptions telling of child mortality, the poem underlines the centrality and solidity of the family unit in Montejo's depiction of the past. It also points once more to the Vallejian concerns and tone found in Montejo's verse, dialoguing with Vallejo's poems 'A mi hermano muerto ...' (1988: 148) and 'A mi hermano Miguel' (1988: 111), which, likewise, concern the death of a brother whilst still young. (Indeed, the overall emphasis in *Élegos* on what appears as a distinctly personal nostalgia focused around infancy has distinctly Vallejian antecedents.<sup>7</sup>) Montejo here portrays the family coming together in the face of this tragedy, united around the central figure of the mother,<sup>8</sup> as we are told that 'Todos lo amamos, mi madre más que todos, | y en su vientre nos reunimos en un llanto compacto' (*É*, 25). It is an image of the family enclosed within the womb of the mother which echoes both the description of the house as a mother hen in 'Mi casa clueca en el invierno' and the opening lines of the poem 'Oscura madre de mis élegos', also from *Élegos*:

Oscura madre de mis élegos  
tú que gravitas tú que anteces  
calma central en el vacío de la casa. (*É*, 6)

In the enjoining of these three poems, then, the rural, the mother (familial), and the central space of the *casa* are fused, as Montejo both strengthens the familial, nurturing, and communal nature of the past rural homestead which he creates in this early poetry, and, in 'Oscura madre de mis élegos', explicitly affirms it as the inspirational origin of these poems.

Yet, despite the seemingly positive attributes conferred on the homestead scene, far from a joyous affirmation of the past being laid before us, the poetry of both *Élegos* and *Muerte y memoria* is, as the titles suggest, laden with sadness and melancholy: the past childhood homestead being described is presented in and from the time of the poetry's writing, where this past and all that is associated with it is now gone. It is presented, that is, primarily as absent, as dead. The house, for example, is mentioned only in terms which underscore its collapse over the years, as the poet progressively heightens the extent of the loss: from the opening poem 'En los bosques de mi antigua casa', where the poet surveys the ruins of his past home, suggesting a building

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Mariátegui on Vallejo's 'nostalgia de ausencia' (1979: 204). In Vallejo's case, in particular in the poems of 'Canciones de hogar' from *Los heraldos negros*, the poet places himself in the figure of the child of the past, a technique which, for the most part, contrasts with Montejo's positioning of the poetic voice as the adult remembering.

<sup>8</sup> Once again, the echoes of Vallejo's 'A mi hermano Miguel' make themselves felt, with the mother appearing here as a similarly central presence.

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