

The Joyous Excess of Eugenio Montejo's Heteronymy

Throughout the writing career of Eugenio Montejo, spanning some forty years – nearly fifty if we include the early and largely disowned *Humano paraíso* [*Human Paradise*] (1959) –, the figure of Orpheus is a constant. This is hardly a novel observation; numerous critics have commented on the importance of Orpheus to Montejo's poetry: its aims, its emphasis on harmonious, lyrical construction, and its belief in the possibility of the Poet's return in these poetically bereft times all point towards and are rooted in this cipher for the ultimate lyric voice. Sporadically, the figure makes a titular appearance, be it in the manifesto-like "Orfeo" ["Orpheus"] from the 1972 collection *Muerte y memoria* [*Death and Memory*], the mid-period "Orfeo revisitado" ["Orpheus revisited"] from *Alfabeto del mundo* [*Alphabet of the World*] (1988), or "Máscaras de Orfeo" ["Orpheus's Masks"] in Montejo's final collection of poetry, *Fábula del escriba* [*The Scribe's Fable*] (2006), which looks back over the poet's work, themes, and motifs. But name-dropping is not necessary, for the figure is a latent presence throughout Montejo's verse, captured in the image of the poet working away by lamplight while the broken world of a broken humanity sleeps, an image which overarches and umbrellas Montejo's entire corpus. In Orphic fashion, the poet of Montejo's poetry is charged with the task of awakening humankind through his lyrical production, nourishing it spiritually and emotionally with his verse. It is an image and a task steeped in the personal, in Montejo's memories of his father, a baker, in the essay "El taller blanco" ["The White Workshop"] from the 1983 collection of the same name, working before dawn to make the equally life-giving breads to greet and sustain those rising from their slumber. Montejo often reiterated his perception as a child of those

breads – lined up on their shelves in his father’s bakery – as letters, words forming lines of flour-covered bread-poetry.

Orpheus, however, is not Montejo’s only permanent travelling companion on his long poetic journey. In interview with Antonio López Ortega in 1999, Montejo confirmed that his primary heteronym, Blas Coll, had accompanied him in his thoughts since the late 1960s, even if he did not appear in print until 1981. Given that Montejo’s first major collection, *Élegos* [*Elegies*], was published in 1967, this apocryphal figure can be said to constitute, like Orpheus, a constant presence along the length of Montejo’s career. My contention is that it is, in fact, precisely the cohabitation of these two characters that anchors and defines Montejo’s entire work.

Heteronymy, or heteronymic writing, is the practice of writing under other (invented) authorial identities (as opposed to pseudonymy, which is merely the employment of other names). Antonio Machado and Fernando Pessoa are probably its two most well-known practitioners, and Montejo appears to have been inspired to go down this literary route by these two writers, and in particular by Pessoa, about whom he spoke and wrote with both frequency and evident respect and fondness. It is an influence, moreover, that is strongly implied in the physical description we are given of Coll, whose oval-shaped face, felt hat, and gold-rimmed spectacles offer a more than adequate summary of how Pessoa appears in the most iconic images that we have of him. But if the surface suggests an identification with the Portuguese modernist poet, then, as with Montejo’s use of the term oblique voices rather than the Pessoaan “heteronyms” to refer to Coll and the rest of his apocryphal voices, Blas Coll’s biography sets itself apart from its literary precursors. A typographer, as well as philosopher and linguist, Coll is, we are told, possibly, even probably (though not definitely) from the Canary Islands, having arrived by boat in the small (and fictitious) Venezuelan coastal town of Puerto Malo, where he set up a printing press. According to Montejo, following his death (he is either buried in Puerto Malo or set sail to die elsewhere), Coll left behind a notebook of fragmentary comments, aphorisms, and musings, many of which have to do with his position that Spanish should be adapted to the tropics and also, more generally, made far more efficient, there being no excuse for any word to exceed two syllables. One syllable is far better. None at all would be perfect.

In fact, like his origins, Coll's philosophy and thoughts are ranging, diverse, even seemingly aleatory at times; the nature of his writings elusive, despite the description of them as comprising simply "a notebook". And therein lies the clue to the central – and key – paradox of Blas Coll. A singular figure, whose driving force is the reduction of language to its smallest, most concentrated form, everything about him exudes and leads to proliferation and excess. Montejo selects fragments and passages from Coll's notebook to publish (translated from *Colly*, Coll's personal, invented language), but the nature of this publication is endlessly expansive: six separate editions of *El cuaderno de Blas Coll* [*Blas Coll's Notebook*] (1981; 1983; 1998; 2005; 2006; 2007) were published, each of which contains new (additional) pieces and snippets that Montejo has mined from the typographer's notebook. There is no reason, moreover, to think that this process of textual growth would not have continued had Montejo not been taken from us so early. Besides this, it is striking to what extent Coll's writing itself exceeds the limits of his apocryphal notebook, as we learn of fragments of text etched on leaves crammed in between the book's pages, and then of other, apparently supplementary, almanacs and booklets, a private dictionary he wrote, a translation into *Colly* of *The Bible* and *The Odyssey*, both much reduced in length as a result, a wall decorated with his scribbled papers, and even a brief engraving on a palm trunk used as a lintel in the entrance to his rustic cabin.

And then there is the fact that from this figure were born the multiple other oblique voices, all poets, that make up Montejo's heteronymic coterie, all of which Montejo defined as being disciples of Coll, or *colígrafos*: Sergio Sandoval, hailing from a remote village in the Venezuelan *llanos*, writing with heavy influence from an eclectic range of sources, but particularly influenced by Far Eastern thought as he attempts to write "la voz natural de su pueblo" ["the natural voice of his people/nation"]; Tomás Linden, born in the Venezuelan coastal town of Puerto Cabello to a Venezuelan mother and a Swedish father, and brought up in Sweden before returning to Venezuela to reconnect with his mother tongue and land; Eduardo Polo, who ended up leaving Puerto Malo to dedicate himself to music and marine archaeology elsewhere in the Caribbean; Lino Cervantes, who tries to put Coll's ideas of language reduction into poetic practice; Jorge Silvestre, a mysterious figure who accompanies Montejo in his final three collections. There are numerous other shadowy characters who could be seen as oblique voices of sorts, most of which are found scattered amongst the brimming and accumulating pages of *El cuaderno de Blas Coll*. There are also rumours that a further voice, Pedro Tranca, would have emerged if Montejo had been given more time on his poetic journey. But the proliferation does not end there. Aside from the ever-expanding *number* of voices, the written work of each of them is characterized by continual updating, additions, new works, and the persistent editorial message that Montejo is giving us but a sample of a

far more extensive corpus, to say nothing of the sheer variety of types of writing involved, from the Venezuelan *coplas llaneras* of Sandoval to the classical sonnets of Linden (and one of the most wonderful short stories it has ever been this reader's pleasure to read), from the children's poetry of Polo to the inverted triangles of Cervantes's poetic creations, each one paring away to a single syllable. In every conceivable way, wherever one looks, there is boundless, brimming, febrile excess.

And yet the presence of Montejo as that editor, as the figure who determines the textual selections, writes the prologues to these figures' works, controls what is published, and, in the case of Coll, transcribes and translates the originals, points back to that other poetic constant in Montejo's production: Orpheus. The centripetal and the centrifugal coexist in Montejo's poetic universe. More than that, they demand to be taken together, inseparable; and they demand this in every aspect of his poetics.

I will take four key elements of Montejo's poetics as cases in point. The most obvious one to start with might be the self, that is, the poetic I as the self. For Montejo, cast into and faced with the modern world in which there is no time for contemplation, in which the yesteryear connections with nature and community are lost, the notion of the central, robust, and whole (Romantic or Petrarchan) self crumbles and fragments. Instead, all we have are masks; the self is, as Montejo often put it, a multi-I (*poliyó*). Oscar Wilde once said, "give [a man] a mask, and he will tell you the truth"; Montejo, in an essay on heteronymy entitled "Los emisarios de la escritura oblicua" ["The Emissaries of Oblique Writing"] from *El taller blanco* [*The White Workshop*] recasts this line, exchanging the definite article for the indefinite: if a mask leads to *a* truth, then the revelatory possibilities of many masks are tantalising. Perhaps even more so if those masks are heteronymic in nature. In the essay "Tornillos viejos en la máquina del poema" ["Old Screws in the Machine of the Poem"] from *La ventana oblicua* [*The Oblique Window*] (1974) Montejo foresaw the nature and instant search facilities of the internet; might his concept of the heteronymized self not be seen as prescient forerunner to the avatars of modern online existence?

Moving away from the more general, human implications of Montejo's work for a moment, and advancing to the second aspect of his work that I wish to address, we might draw attention to the fact that Montejo's verse often plays out on a distinctly Venezuelan stage: his early poetry is frequently preoccupied with his past in the Venezuelan cities of Valencia and Caracas in particular, and later collections often focus on the natural sounds, visions, and rhythms of the Venezuelan tropics, a focus that comes bound up with a desire to (re)discover a more authentic sense of being and place in the country of his birth. Here too his oblique voices bring themselves to bear, asking us to understand that any such (re)discovery of Venezuela must be undertaken from

myriad angles, embracing the different strands of the nation's postcolonial, (post)industrialized, postmodern character in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This is the message to take from Blas Coll's seafaring passage from the Canaries to Venezuela, from the half-*criollo* Tomás Linden's return from Sweden to his (literal) motherland, from Sergio Sandoval's goal of unearthing the true voice of the Venezuelan land and its people via the most heteroclit, global literary journal imaginable. Just as this is also the message to take from the fact that Montejo's heteronyms all write of, about, or for Venezuela, its places, and its people through a dazzling array of styles and genres: Coll's invented-language fragments, Sandoval's *coplas*, Linden's sonnets, Polo's children's rhymes, Cervantes's novel poetic construction. In Montejo's poetics, Venezuela must be approached continually and multiply, in time, space, language, and literary form.

And what of the poet him or herself? Here, too, the proliferation found in Montejo's heteronymy makes its presence and importance felt. The poem "La terredad de un pájaro" ["The Earthdom of a Bird"], from 1978's *Terredad* [*Earthdom*], in distinguishing between the bird as a species and the bird as an individual member of that species, can be read as implying that Orpheus – equatable with the former – can exist only as a composite of potentially innumerable individuals. Put another way, Orpheus is never and can never be definitively identified or bounded, just as in the poem "El canto del gallo" ["The Rooster's Song"] from *Alfabeto del mundo* each individual poet is likewise comprised of innumerable poetic song-moments: a poet's work is never completed.

Finally, as the fourth of the central aspects of Montejo's work with which I am concerned, there is the language, words, the word. It often seems, as mentioned earlier, that Montejo's aim is for poetry to be that pure, harmonious, sacred Word that might awaken humanity from its fallen state. The figure of Orpheus is key here, with his potential power to cross the barrier of life and death, and to retrieve and rescue what is lost. But, to return to the start of this essay, the implied portrayal of the poetic product as a nourishing bread that might rouse humankind from its slumber is just as important, emphasising an alignment of the poetic Word with the Eucharistic host, with, that is, (the body of) the Word of God. Noting, in passing, that Blas Coll's notebook was supposedly given to Montejo by an apocryphal baker who had rescued the volume following Coll's disappearance, we might also highlight Coll's own linguistic goal of reducing all language to the simplest of forms, to a single syllable or even to silence, a philosophy that recalls not only Rimbaud's poetic silence, but the fact that this is precisely the aspect of Rimbaud's work that Montejo foregrounds at the end of his 1966 essay, "Rimbaud Rey" ["King Rimbaud"], published in *La ventana oblicua*, on the

French symbolist poet. Montejo's and Coll's work thus points to silence and to the Word, two concepts brought together in their both evoking a desire to move beyond language. But, of course, Coll leads in every way to anything but silence, to anything but a unique, divine Word. Rather than a single Eucharistic bread-word, the cascade of words and beings that the strange typographer initiates signals, rather, a multiplying of that singular (loaf of) bread. The poet's role for Montejo is not, after all, about silent, religious isolation, but about forging that lost connection between people and nature in and through the sacredly poetic.

Montejo's heteronymy, that is, infuses every aspect of his work. It is not just that "Eugenio Montejo" has to be seen as, in fact, another oblique voice, one that happens to have the biography of the flesh and blood author, though this is doubtless the case, but that the nature of Montejo's engagement with heteronymy is about excess, is excessive, and exceeds its own bounds, spilling over into his central themes, questions, and poetic aims.

There is, however, one final aspect of Montejo's heteronymy that must be mentioned. And that is that above all it is fun and it is funny. From Blas Coll's complaint that *socorro* is a quite ludicrous word for any language to impose on one of its speakers when they find themselves in urgent need of assistance, to the humorous wordplay of Eduardo Polo's verses, from the distinctly cheeky snippets of tittle tattle and opinion from residents of Puerto Malo regarding their typographer neighbour, to the intricate and complex 'play' of its ever-expanding web of voices, the oblique writing of Eugenio Montejo showcases a writer who is simply enjoying himself in an exuberantly ludic fashion. And that brings us to his final Orphic poem, "Máscaras de Orfeo". As its title suggests, it is the locus where, finally, Orpheus and heteronymy meet head-on. It is a poem that tells of Orpheus and all the masks by which he is and has been known in Montejo's poetry; the heteronyms are not named, but are present nonetheless, as are the bird, the cicada, the toad, all of which have their place in Montejo's corpus as ciphers for the poet. It is a poem that, in its mention of jazz, engages overtly and explicitly with the very first poem from *Élegos*, "En los bosques de mi antigua casa" ["In the Woods of My Old House"]. And it is a poem that leaves us with the image of the poet, in the guise of the toad, splashing around, wallowing in the mud of time and space as he forms and distorts his poetic harmonies. Montejo's heteronymy may constitute a provocative, complex undermining of univocalizing, centrifugal pulls, of (a simplistic understanding of) the Orphic, but it is also something that is joyous and playful.

A final thought. In his verse Montejo described life as this time we have between two nothings. Our life is a book between the two covers of our birth and our death; before it we were nothing; and after it, that is what awaits. But if that is indeed all we have, then,

Montejo's work implies, let us make a game of it, a fun, baffling, challenging game. And what a game his oblique writing is. For, just as he did with the limits of Blas Coll's apocryphal notebook from which he drew endlessly, so too, in his proliferating, exuberant heteronymy, did Montejo mock the limits that those covers sought to impose on his own particular book, exceeding them gloriously.

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