

Caballos y café: Poetic responses to time and death in the poetry of Eugenio Montejo.

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Introduction

Much of the poetry of Eugenio Montejo is characterized by a deep concern with and description of loss on a variety of levels: poetic, ontological, and experiential,¹ with the effects of the passing of time constituting a central topos from his earliest works until at least the poems of *Partitura de la cigarra* (1999).² Amongst the most recurrent examples of these effects is that of time's changing the alive into the dead. His poems, in particular in the early collections *Élegos* (1967),³ *Muerte y memoria* (1972),⁴ and *Algunas palabras* (1976),⁵ are replete with references to 'los vivos' and 'los muertos', with the latter often referred to as 'los ausentes', thus drawing implicit attention to the dead and the alive as defined by their absence and presence respectively. It is a distinction which, as the most obvious and frightening effect of time's passing, is also one that Montejo's poetics works to annul and represents Montejo's most explicit thematic area in his poetic attempt to retrieve what is lost and ultimately to end the process of loss.

The purpose of this article is to examine the way in which Montejo's poetics uses and develops two central personal and national motifs, the horse and coffee, as it attempts both to describe and poetically to overcome this distinction between the dead and the alive.

Caballos

One of the most consistent characteristics of Montejo's earlier verse is his presentation of both life and death either as a journey on a horse, or in a more abstract

manner as both themselves being a horse. In the case of life, this alignment emerges explicitly in *Muerte y memoria*'s 'Caballo real'. Here Montejo talks of his father when alive as 'Aquel caballo que mi padre era | y que después no fue' (*Muerte y memoria*, 40), and it is in these equine terms that the poem depicts the arrival of Montejo, the son, as he joins his father:

Sé que vine en el trecho de su vida
al espoleado trote de la suerte
con sus alas de noche ya caída. (*Muerte y memoria*, 40)

From this birth moment on, the son is portrayed as riding with his father, which is made clear when Montejo describes his father's death as the moment when the latter set him down, before disappearing into death ('y aquí me desmontó de un salto fuerte, | hízose sombras' [*Muerte y memoria*, 40]).

But the death of the poet's father does not imply the death of the horse of (his) life. His father may be described as being one with the horse, but the end of the poem shows how this oneness ends upon his death:

y aquí me desmontó de un salto fuerte,
hízose sombras y me dio la brida
para que llegue solo hasta la muerte. (*Muerte y memoria*, 40)

The horse, that is, is life in an abstract sense, and the father's setting down of the young Montejo is concomitant with the end of his own identification with and as the horse of life, whose reins it is now the son's turn to take up. It is a cyclical image, a repeated journey from birth to death recalling that of the horses of Helios pulling the sun across the sky from dawn (birth) to dusk (death), as the poem ends with the image

of the son now alone on his own journey of life, a journey like the father's that can only lead to death.⁶

It is notable, however, that this final image is one of the son riding the horse rather than being the horse, in contrast to the father during his life. This may appear to be a stark contradiction in the poem's internal logic, but it is precisely the play between these two descriptions of the same journey that is central to its power: on the one hand, the use of both metaphors points to the indivisibility of the person embarked on the physical journey of life from the abstract 'life'; but more importantly the description of the father as inseparable from the horse and unable to halt or deviate its progress towards (his) death also serves to highlight the latent irony in the notion of the son—or father's—agency in the journey of life found in the reference to the bridle which is passed from father to son. Similarly, it is significant that Montejo should choose to revert here to the strict sonnet form for the first time since *Humano paraíso* (1959),⁷ the strictness and predictability of the metre, number of lines, organization of the four stanzas, and of where it will end mirroring the ineluctability of the journey and destiny of the horse.

Within Montejo's *oeuvre*, however, 'Caballo real' by no means stands alone in its depiction of life as such a journey. On the contrary, the piece echoes and develops an earlier poem from *Élegos* entitled 'Piafa y me ausculta a cada hora'. The opening lines of this poem suggest a similar alignment of life with riding on a horse, which is then passed onto the son:

Piafa y me ausculta a cada hora
aquel caballo en que mi padre
llegó hasta mí. (*Élegos*, 7)

And like ‘Caballo real’, this identification of the horse contains within it the inevitable move towards death. In ‘Caballo real’ the horse is described as being where ‘calla | su filiación fatal [del padre] en la quimera’ (*Muerte y memoria*, 40), indicating that the father’s death is inscribed in his son’s life, even as his son’s life is his chimeric hope of eternalization. Likewise, in ‘Piafa y me ausculta a cada hora’ the horse of life is depicted as an eternal cycle of life (‘La herradura combada a un límite de obsesiva eternidad | donde todo venir es volver’ [*Élegos*, 7]) and yet concomitantly, as Juan Medina Figueredo has noted,⁸ is also an augur of death:

Piafa y orejea su capa de murciélago
modula un relincho de dádivas oscuras
y aletea magro de toda fatalidad
siempre con esa víspera en los ojos
listo para llevarme en su trote sin fin. (*Élegos*, 7)

Alongside this schema, however, death is itself frequently referred to by Montejo as a horse as well, with the being of the dead depicted as a journeying on a horse, mirroring the presentation of life we have been discussing, in the same way as the journeying of the horses of Helios in Greek myth is mirrored by that of the black horses of Pluto. This is most explicit in ‘En los bosques de mi antigua casa’, which ends with the line ‘los muertos andan bajo tierra a caballo’ (*Élegos*, 5). It is a line which resonates throughout much of Montejo’s poetry, informing, as several critics have noted,⁹ the opening poem of *Muerte y memoria*, ‘Cementerio de Vaugirard’, which describes the ‘muertos’ that dominate the poem as also ‘bajo tierra a caballo’ (*Muerte y memoria*, 7). Indeed, the horse *per se* is a strikingly recurrent presence in *Muerte y memoria*, with the link between horse and death being made explicitly in poems such as ‘Constelación’, where Montejo, engaging with the classical models to which we have already referred, talks of

el caballo jorobado
que a lo largo del cielo,
toda la noche,
arrastra la carreta de la muerte. (*Muerte y memoria*, 36)

In other poems the link is more implicit: in ‘Salida’, for example, the poet refers to the ‘cascos del viejo caballo’ that pulls his own funeral hearse (*Muerte y memoria*, 23).

This ambiguous presentation of the horse as a cipher for both death and life is not, of course, unique to Montejo; he is following a well-established poetic tradition, dating back at least as far as Greek mythology. This double nature of the horse in human culture and history is described in some detail in Luis Alberto Crespo’s preface to the book *El caballo en la poesía venezolana*, co-edited by Montejo himself:

Dador de vida y dador de muerte, el caballo ha sido identificado por el hombre con las fuerzas del bien y del mal. Los caballos del Apocalipsis galopan para asolar al mundo como los corceles de Atila, al tiempo que tiran del carro del sol y celebran con su desenfreno la vida, abren los ojos del visionario y el profeta. Ambiguo, mitad ángel, mitad demonio, cercano e inalcanzable [*sic*], el caballo es el enigma, la más pura claridad y la más cerrada tiniebla. [...] La muerte fue siempre ese potro rápido y negro que nos cruza la mirada o el sueño, en cualquier llanura de la tierra, en cualquier extensión o comarca donde solemos perdernos mientras dura la zozobra o la pesadilla. La vida fue ese otro, como un ciervo en el salto, un galgo en la pista del hipódromo o el que se convierte en centauro en la fiesta del coleo.¹⁰

What is more, as the title of this book implies, Venezuelan poetry itself is notable for the prominence of the horse as a poetic symbol, thus revealing Montejo’s own concern for the horse as being part not just of a general poetic and cultural tradition, crossing boundaries of time and place, but of an ongoing national poetic tradition.¹¹ The same ambiguities are still found in this tradition, but with the added meaning acquired by the horse as a symbol, because of its place in Venezuelan history, specifically as the instrument of both conquest and liberation:

También entre nosotros subsiste aquella doble naturaleza que los antiguos acordaron al caballo. La hazaña de la conquista tinta en sangre, cruel, espantable, convirtió al caballo en criatura de la muerte y el horror. El indio identificó al español con el centauro. La guerra de Independencia, la campaña libertadora, devolvieron al caballo su otra imagen, la de la libertad y el coraje. Bolívar y su cabalgadura conforman una unidad en el mito y en la historia de nuestro destino donde vemos encarnada la simbología del caballo y el hombre como cuerpo único de lo sublime.¹²

In general cultural terms, in specifically Venezuelan cultural terms, and in Montejó's poetry the horse cannot just be life or just be death, positivity or negativity. In this respect, Montejó's use of the horse as a symbol of both (the journey of) life and death goes hand in hand with his interest in Eastern thought, representing a particular formulation of the yin/yang symbol of Taoism.¹³ Just as in this symbol neither the black nor the white is wholly black or white respectively, each containing a spot of the other, so too is the symbol of the horse never purely life or death: the other meaning cannot be escaped, it is always there, implied, felt.

There is, however, one vital difference between Montejó's poetics of the horse and the yin/yang. As Montejó points out in his essay '*I Ching, el libro de las mutaciones*', the symbol of the yin and the yang, as with the thought behind the *I Ching*, is based on the consideration of 'estos opuestos alternos no como cifras separadas [...] sino como parcialidades de una totalidad cíclica',¹⁴ where each leads into the other. Along similar lines, in *El caballo en la poesía venezolana* Crespo describes the horse as 'la representación de lo absoluto [...] lo eterno',¹⁵ and as a symbol of 'el principio de la *unidad*, la montura iniciática' for both 'el santo y el chamán',¹⁶ highlighting the dual European and Indigenous American tradition which feeds into Montejó's poetics here, alongside the Taoist elements, and hinting at the religious transcendence which the attaining of such a cyclical totality would represent.

The journeys on horseback described in Montejo's poetics, however, do not both lead into each other, forming a unified cycle: that of life leads to death, but there is no return to life for the dead horsemen. In 'Llueve en el fondo del caballo' from *Élegos*, for example, the dead attempt to return but cannot then remount the horse of life: 'allí donde regresan a galope los muertos | donde no queda nada de caballo' (*Élegos*, 19).

Nevertheless, as is made clear in *El caballo en la poesía venezolana*, in engaging with the symbol of the horse, Montejo's poetry does affirm the potential for 'el principio de la *unidad*', even as it bemoans the inevitable and one-way movement of life into death. As the failed attempt at return in 'Llueve en el fondo del caballo' indicates, it is by following the Taoist schema and leading the horse of death back into life that this potential can, it is hoped, be realized, bringing together (the horse of) death and life into one whole, a cyclical whole, rather than two distinct entities. Such a reading of the two horses in question is explicitly pointed to by the later poem 'Visiones II' in *Adiós al siglo XX* (1997),¹⁷ where the two horses of the earlier poetry find themselves now as a single horse, with half of it above ground and half below: 'Sólo medio caballo para tanto horizonte | y lo demás dormido, bajo tierra' (*Adiós al siglo XX*, 64).

Returning to the earlier period, it is this notion of and desire for a leading of the horse of death back into life which must inform our reading of the opening poem in *Élegos*, 'En los bosques de mi antigua casa'. Here, as he stares out onto his childhood homestead, hearing 'el jazz de los muertos' (*Élegos*, 5), the poet writes:

Atisbo a la mudez del establo
la brida que me salve de un decurso falible
palpo la montura de ser y prosigo
cuando recorra todo llamaré ya sin nadie
los muertos andan bajo tierra a caballo. (*Élegos*, 5)

From within the stables of the house of the past, identified throughout the collection as the place of the dead, and, specifically, of the poet's now-dead family members,¹⁸ Montejo glimpses a bridle. This is not the bridle of the horse of life of 'Caballo real', but that of death, the 'brida muerta' (*Élegos*, 12) of the poem 'De quién es esta casa que está caída'. And it is this bridle that Montejo here envisages taking up and taking out of the house of the past. The result of such a move would be the avoidance of a 'decurso falible', life as a fallible journey which leads inevitably to death, and by implication the attainment of an infallible path (which can be understood as the Tao or in biblical terms). In short, in the reading I am proposing, the retrieval by the living poet of the horse of this place of the dead can be seen as an act of restitution of wholeness, wiping out the difference between (the horse of) life and (the horse of) death and hence the one-way movement from the former to the latter. The 'montura de ser' that the poet envisages touching (and, one infers, mounting) at such a moment is not a reference to life in contrast to death, but one that corresponds to a wholeness or unity of being ('ser'), with the dead and the living brought together. Read thus, the 'dádivas oscuras' (*Élegos*, 7) offered up by the horse of death in 'Piafa y me ausculta a cada hora' now come to be seen as the potential gifts of both life and death together ('Dador de vida y dador de muerte'¹⁹), the gift of the eternal, of complete being without loss, which it is the poet's task to attain.

In this way, I should like to suggest, the poetic quest revealed in this opening poem of Montejo's first major collection to touch, bring out, and mount the bridle of the horse of death can be seen to insert itself into the poetic tradition, described in *El caballo en la poesía venezolana*, of the search for 'la proyección totalizadora de aquella posesión órfica que permitió al hombre acercarse al caballo, *tocarlo* con su voz, con el lenguaje y encantarlo, poetizarlo para apoderarse de su esplendor'.²⁰ The

poeticizing of the horse is this act of touching and appropriating the bridle, incorporating the horse into the poem which thus embraces both death and life. Indeed, the poet goes on to imagine himself in just such a totalizing position, with there being no ‘outside’ of his sphere (‘cuando recorra todo’ [*Élegos*, 5]), and hence no one to whom he may call (‘llamaré ya sin nadie’ [*Élegos*, 5]). The implication of Montejo’s totalizing poetic quest is that, with no longer any dead or lost, there would be only subject, with no ‘other’ outside the totality of the unified horse-self. There would be no more ‘no one’ (‘ya sin nadie’ [*Élegos*, 5]), that is, no ‘nothingness’, as the music of the dead (‘el jazz de los muertos’ [*Élegos*, 5]) and the silence of their locale (‘la mudez del establo’ [*Élegos*, 5]) are incorporated into the language of the poem in front of us. What is being imagined in this envisaged recuperation of the past is the ending of absence, an achievement whose realization is immediately postponed by the final line’s insistence on the dead who despite the poet’s efforts ‘andan bajo tierra a caballo’ (*Élegos*, 5).

One thing of note regarding the desired recuperation described in Montejo’s early poetry is that for all its philosophical and ontological implications and resonances it is firmly rooted in the familial and the personal. As we have seen, the poems concerning the (horse) journey of life frequently focus on the poet’s father, and those describing the (horse) journey of the dead, the ‘muertos [que] andan bajo tierra a caballo’ (*Élegos*, 5), invariably centre around those family or community members from the poet’s childhood who have since died and are the former inhabitants of and visitors to his ‘antigua casa’, the past homestead that is the setting for most of the poems in *Élegos*. Montejo populates the poems of both this collection and to a lesser extent the later *Muerte y memoria* with numerous family members, in addition to the

unnamed dead. Aside from the poet's father, a constant presence in both collections, we are also introduced in *Élegos* to the 'bizca tía' of 'Mi ayer es una bizca tía' (named further on in the poem as Aunt Adela), as well as to the figure of the mother, sister, and brother in the poem 'Elegía a la muerte de mi hermano Ricardo'. And throughout both collections there is a pervasive emphasis on the remembrance of the poet's past and familial, homely scenes from the quasi-rural homestead in which he and his family lived. The concern in the early poems for a recuperation of the dead, ciphered in the potential recovery of the horse of death which would bring life and death together into one totality, is played out specifically in this familial and personal context.

And yet, as the importance of the horse as a national cultural and literary symbol suggests, over and beyond the recovery of this personal past, Montejo's poetry is also concerned with a national recovery, one where the wider setting of Venezuela assumes an important role. Following the particularly personal characteristics of *Élegos* and *Muerte y Memoria*, this underlying preoccupation for the national begins to emerge more explicitly in the later *Algunas palabras*, specifically in the poem 'Un caballo blanco'. The poem concerns a horse that the poet seeks to capture and describe in his writing. Whilst not explicitly associating itself with Montejo's personal quest for the bridle of the horse of death, and thus complete being, of 'En los bosques de mi antigua casa', the poetic nature of the search described in 'Un caballo blanco' clearly aligns it both with the poetic tradition we have been outlining and with the existing equine discourse of Montejo's poetics. The 'caballo blanco' represents, then, a possible identification of the horse of Montejo's earlier poetry, the horse which he wishes to incorporate into his poetry, or *poetizar*:

Sentí el deseo urgente de anotarlo
 en mi cuaderno,
 no sé con qué palabras (es lo que indago),
 no estoy seguro de que lo haya visto,
 hablaba, perseguía unas imágenes
 con sonidos de cascos en la hierba
 pero errantes, de paso.

El bulto aéreo de su cuello
 y las sombras detrás de los celajes
 me desviaron tal vez, iba a alcanzarlo,
 iba a palpar el aleteo
 de su visión o casi,
 el fuego en un caballo blanco! (*Algunas palabras*, 73)

Crucially, however, the ‘caballo blanco’ in question here, read within a Venezuelan context, cannot but recall one horse in particular: Simón Bolívar’s horse Palomo. The personal and the national meet in these verses as the recuperation of a national past is tied up inextricably with the poetics of the personal horse of the dead from Montejó’s earlier poetry, the connection between the two being emphasized by the recurrence of the verb ‘palpar’ in the description of the poet’s attempt to attain the horse both here and in the distinctly personal ‘En los bosques de mi antigua casa’. The loss which Montejó describes himself as feeling in *Élegos, Muerte y memoria*, and beyond, imbued in the personal, is thus seen as symbolic of a wider national loss felt by Venezuela and Venezuelans: the mourning of the dead of the nation, of the great man of the nation. Indeed, there is an interesting juncture here between Montejó’s poetry of the family ‘muertos [que] andan bajo tierra a caballo’ (*Élegos*, 5) and the Venezuelan national coat of arms, where Bolívar’s white horse is depicted in the lower portion, below both the ears of corn, which stand as symbols of the earth, and the standards, which are suggestive of battles fought on land by man and horse during the fight for independence. The national horse of the past, then, is similarly ‘bajo tierra’, and as on the personal level, where for example the poet is seen to carry



The Venezuelan Coat of Arms²¹

around his ‘muertos que andan bajo tierra a caballo’ as a constitutive part of himself on his journeys to Paris in the poem ‘Cementerio de Vaugirard’ (*Muerte y memoria*), so too is this national loss inscribed into the very being of the nation in its inclusion in the national coat of arms. The loss or lack synonymous with death and the passing of time is inescapable in any definition of the life or being both of the individual and of the nation. Montejo’s poetry is concerned not just with an attempted recovery of (the horse of) death and loss, then, but with the consequent move into an ontological wholeness on both the personal and the national level that such a recovery would herald.

What is made clear in ‘Un caballo blanco’, however, is that the task of the poet, both here nationally and also personally as described in ‘En los bosques de mi antigua casa’, is impossible to effect. Despite the affirmations of the latter poem to be touching ‘la montura de ser’ (*Élegos*, 5), it is always envisaged, always only a potential, as indicated by the use of the subjunctive (‘la brida que me salve’ [*Élegos*, 5]). Similarly in ‘Un caballo blanco’ the continual use of the imperfect tense (‘iba a palpar el aleteo’ [*Algunas palabras*, 73]) underlines the failure ever actually to achieve the goal of a whole being, to ‘alcanzarlo’ (*Algunas palabras*, 73). Underlying

this preordained failure is the basic fact that the horse which needs to be brought back to life is that of death: the first step of the poet—that of reaching and attaining the horse—is thus also his last in being synonymous with the end of his life.

Yet there is a further and more complex reason behind this failure, which emerges from the poem ‘Uccello, hoy 6 de agosto’, also from *Algunas palabras*. The poem concerns a reading of the events of Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 and a painting by the fifteenth-century Italian painter Paolo Uccello. Although which painting is being referred to is never made clear, there is reason to believe that the work in question is the three-panel piece *Battle of San Romano*,²² since the poem centres around a comparison between the shocking annihilation of Hiroshima and the ‘mapa de la guerra | arcaico’ depicted in this work:

Uccello dejó un mapa de la guerra
arcaico, con armas inocentes.
No dibujaba aviones ni torpedos,
desconocía los submarinos,
su muerte iba del gris al rojo, al verde. (*Algunas palabras*, 21)

Underlining its place amongst what we might term Montejo’s horse poems, and inserting itself more narrowly into the existing Montejian discourse of the horse and death (and the horse as death) the poem begins: ‘En el cuadro de Uccello hay un caballo | que estuvo en Hiroshima’ (*Algunas palabras*, 21). The painting *Battle of San Romano* is in fact replete with cavalry horses, horses that are linked with death and destruction, and the reference would seem to suggest that a similar horse of death was present at Hiroshima in a symbolic sense. But the poem ends by disclosing that the horse of Hiroshima to which Montejo refers in the opening lines is not any of the visible horses of the painting. Rather, it is ‘present’ as a hidden entity:

Es un caballo torvo, atado a un árbol,
 siempre listo en su silla.
 Uccello lo cubrió con capas de pintura,
 lo borró de su siglo,
 y hoy aguarda en el fondo de la cuadra
 con los jinetes del Apocalipsis. (*Algunas palabras*, 21)

The horse in question, then, is not represented by the images on the canvas. Quite the contrary they act merely to cover it up, as Uccello's painting is portrayed as mirroring the effect of Montejo's attempt to describe, touch, and attain the horse of death in the poems 'Un caballo blanco' and 'En los bosques de mi antigua casa'. (The reference to the horse waiting 'en el fondo de la cuadra' echoes the latter poem's depiction of the poet glimpsing the bridle of the death-horse in the 'mudez del establo' [*Élegos*, 5].) Desiring to bring the horse of death, and thus all that is dead or lost (back) into life, both poetry and art in fact fail to do so, writing the elision of the horse even as they seek to present it. And what 'Uccello, hoy 6 de agosto' indicates is that this is not linked simply to the death of the poet (or artist) implied in such a move, but to a resultant widespread annihilation, as we are told of the horse of death present in Hiroshima: 'sus patas llevan en la noche | a la desolación del exterminio' (*Algunas palabras*, 21).

But what is at stake in this annihilation is also more complex. Significantly, in depicting the horse in this way Montejo's poem recalls and echoes Jacques Lacan's famous reading of Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*.²³ Lacan's account focuses on the stretched, distorted, and unsettling form which appears at the bottom of Holbein's work. When viewed from a very oblique angle, this form is revealed to be a skull, an image 'hidden' from the onlooker when not viewed in this unorthodox way, what Lacan describes as an anamorphic object. The skull as such symbolizes the inescapable 'presence' of death which pervades all life and awaits us all, and its

revelation acts as a moment of *frisson*, when we are brought face to face with an object which ‘reflects our own nothingness’,²⁴ in other words ‘something that is simply the subject as annihilated’.²⁵ The hidden horse in Uccello’s painting, like the elusive horse of death in Montejo’s poetry, is just such an object.

The key to understanding its necessary elision in both the painting and poetry is found more precisely in the particular way in which this anamorphic object is understood by Lacan. In Lacanian terms, the skull—or in Montejo’s case the horse—is associated with the real, lying beyond both the imaginary and the symbolic, that is, outside of signification and the signifier. In short, the skull/horse threatens to dissolve the subject, should he or she ever attain it, in that this object is concomitant with a move outside of language and symbolization. This is why any attempt to name or represent such an object in poetry or art, that is, in language, in the widest sense of the term, works as an ineluctable avoidance or covering of it. This avoidance serves the interests of the work of art itself in that, with the revelation of the object would come the loss or dissolution of the poetic or artistic representation. Thus in Holbein’s painting the skull is elided and can only be seen at the moment when the rest of the painting is blurred or lost to the sight of the person gazing at it; in Montejo’s reading of Uccello’s painting the horse of death is hidden from sight and would only be glimpsed by the wiping out of the layers of paint, of representation; and in Montejo’s own poems the horse of death is likewise always elided, alluded to but never attained within the language of the poetry on the page. Moreover, even the appearance of the object, as in Holbein’s painting, is finally a representation which can only afford a glimpse of ‘our own nothingness’,²⁶ to use Lacan’s terms once more, without constituting an arrival at such a beyond of representation.

Read in this way, in Montejo's poem 'Uccello, hoy 6 de agosto', Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 represents the consequence of the irruption of the real into the world in the form of the horse of death. It is a moment in human history where the horse of death was glimpsed ('un caballo | que estuvo en Hiroshima' [*Algunas palabras*, 21]), dissolving being and the layers of representation which had covered it, layers which had acted not as a way of bringing the horse into presence but of shielding us from it and the nothingness, the 'desolación del exterminio' (*Algunas palabras*, 21) which its presence would bring. Such a reading underscores the central paradox that Montejo's poetry comes up against here. In bringing out the horse of death, Montejo sees a potential for an end to the difference between life and death, an end to the irrecoverable fall into absence, with Lacan's presentation of the real suggesting such a collapsing of the absent/present binary would indeed be the result: as Dylan Evans, citing Lacan, states, 'unlike the symbolic, which is constituted in terms of oppositions such as that between presence and absence, "there is no absence in the real"'.²⁷ But any ending of the difference between death and life, thus ending the fall into loss and death brought about by time, would itself signal an end to life as much as it would an end to death, to presence as well as to absence, to extend Lacan's assertion. In Montejo's work, poetry, like art, may be seen ineluctably to hide and/or elide the horse of death, thus ensuring the separation between the absent and the present, the dead and the living. But in so doing, in bolstering the symbolic and the imaginary, poetry acts to bolster what we know and perceive as life as well as its own existence. In just such a way, and despite its pretensions to the contrary, Montejo's attempt to incorporate the horse of death into his verse likewise serves merely to buttress and assert the side of the living, that is, language and the self: that which is deemed to be

present. Montejo's poetry most desires what it most fears and works to avoid, and that which as poetry and as representation it can finally only elide.

Café

Despite the apparent impossibility of the quest constructed around the symbol of the horse, Montejo's poetics continues to attempt to achieve, or at least to present, a potential way in which the dead might be brought back together with the living in a process which would once and for all do away with the move into loss and death which the passing of time effects. Central in this regard is the motif of coffee, recurrent (like the horse) in Montejo's early poetry, but which is only developed fully in later works, as he attempts to move beyond the *impasse* implied by the symbolism of the horse.

An early indication of the direction in which Montejo takes his quest is found in the trance-like ambience of the poem 'Sobremesa' from *Muerte y memoria*, which offers up a very different approach and methodology to that of the recovery of the bridle and horse of the dead. In this poem, Montejo describes a scene where the dead and the living come together around a table to converse. It is a nebulous scene, lacking a firm sense of time or place, and where no one—dead or alive—can see anyone else:

A tientas, a nivel de la niebla
que cae de los remotos días,
volvemos a sentarnos
y hablamos ya sin vernos.
A tientas, a nivel de la niebla. (*Muerte y memoria*, 27)

As the poem progresses, a quasi-religious atmosphere is built up: adding to the fog, there is now reference to 'el aire', 'el sueño', and, crucially, 'vapores de café', which

act both as incense, adding reverence and mystery to the scene and also as an invocation of the dead ('los ausentes') to make their presence felt:

Sobre la mesa vuelve el aire
y el sueño atrae a los ausentes.
Panes donde invernaron musgos fríos
en el mantel ahora se despiertan.

Yerran vapores de café
y en el aroma, reavivados,
vemos flotar antiguos rostros
que empañan los espejos. (*Muerte y memoria*, 27)

The dead are raised, as are even the 'panes' which harboured 'musgos fríos' on the table cloth, a further hint at the religiosity of the scene, specifically at the Christian symbolism present in the poem's overall resonances with the Last Supper.²⁸ Now gathered, 'comenzamos a hablar | sin vernos y sin tiempo' (*Muerte y memoria*, 27). Time is no longer, as the loss effected by the passing of time is reversed and the poem ends with an affirmation of the end of the differentiation between life and death:

A tientas, en la vaharada
que crece y nos envuelve
charlamos horas sin saber
quién vive todavía, quién está muerto. (*Muerte y memoria*, 27)

As we shall see, 'Sobremesa' pervades and supports much of Montejo's later poetry in which he tackles this notion of the bringing together of the dead and the living, and the aroma of the coffee is a particularly significant element in its claims to have made the two indistinguishable.

The meaning and power of coffee as a motif, and the underlying reason for Montejo's recourse to it here, are suggested in numerous poems from this early period which make reference to coffee. In these poems, coffee is associated with the past and

with the poet's familial past in particular, coming to stand as a symbol of a lost 'homeliness' and of the now absent family members to which I referred earlier:

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

Likewise, in 'Otra lluvia' from *Muerte y memoria* Montejo presents an image of the poetic *yo* as a child returning home from the rain with other children, possibly siblings, to 'Quienes a nuestra vuelta hacían café | y nos secaban' (*Muerte y memoria*, 30). In each of these poems the people from the childhood past connected with coffee are now dead, but the memory of the making and drinking of coffee remains, appearing as a past and familial ritual.

Much like the horse, however, coffee as a personal and poetic symbol is also in a Venezuelan poetics inseparable from its wider meaning as a national symbol. In the same way as the white horse of Bolívar represents the birth of the nation, so too is coffee, which was first cultivated in Venezuela c. 1779, linked with this moment of national incipience. Writing in 1952—when Montejo was a child—on the place of coffee in the national mindset, the celebrated Venezuelan essayist Mario Briceño-Iragorry describes how 'el café aparece en nuestro país coincidiendo con la revolución comunera y con el propio nacimiento de la venezolanidad integral'.²⁹ He goes on to describe coffee in terms which underlie Montejo's own understanding of coffee as a personal custom, when he instructs Venezuelans: 'tomemos como símbolo de nuestros valores vernáculos, el aromoso café; tomémoslo hasta con un valor de rito sagrado'.³⁰ On both levels, coffee is understood by these writers as a sacred, communional rite, signalling familial and national 'wholeness', an identification which lies at the heart of Montejo's use of it in the trance-like religiosity of

‘Sobremesa’ and which enables the poem’s final affirmation of success in bringing together and conflating the living and the dead.

In this respect it is significant that both in Montejo’s personal poetics and in Briceño-Iragorry’s depiction of it as a national symbol, coffee does not just appear as an element of and from the past. Rather, the emphasis is placed on the coffee ritual as a more general act of welcoming or communion which does not just take place *in* the (now) past but *between* the past/dead and the present/living. This is the case in ‘La silla’ (‘A veces un hombre de otro siglo | baja de su carreta, | llega por una taza de café’ [*Muerte y memoria*, 21]) and ‘Casa agreste’ (‘Morada detenida en ausencia | donde la noche nace del café | que me sirven sus dueños’ [*Algunas palabras*, 39]), and culminates most powerfully in ‘Sobremesa’. Similarly Briceño-Iragorry talks of how ‘al regustar el licor de nuestro criollísimo fruto, estamos comulgando con la tierra de nuestros padres, estamos respirando el aire que en nuestros campos acarició las rojas bellotas’.³¹ On both the personal and the national level, then, coffee is figured as effecting a bridging between the past and the present, the dead and the alive, just as the horse of the dead upon being touched and mounted by the poet is also envisaged as being that of a combined life-death horse which does away with both terms of the binary. In this way, when Montejo talks in ‘En los bosques de mi antigua casa’ of hearing the jazz of the dead and how ‘Arde en las pailas ese momento de café | donde todo se muda’ (*Élegos*, 5), it is uncertain whether this moment is one remembered from the past or is when the poet is now looking out onto the absent scene, or both. It also underscores that the poem itself is—as in ‘Sobremesa’—a potential ‘momento de café’: through the poem there can be a glimpse in the present of this moment from the past, uniting for one brief instance the dead remembered and the living poet and reader.

It is the beautiful poem ‘Café’ from the later collection *Alfabeto del mundo* (1988) that finally brings together these strands and lays out explicitly the reading I have been suggesting, as well as deepening and developing the significance of coffee as a symbol in Montejo’s poetics. From the very beginning of the poem it is clear that the aroma, taste, and subliminal yet companionable rituals involved in the preparation and drinking of coffee are intimately bound up with the aims of Montejo’s verse:

Al dibujar cada palabra,
detrás de su color, ritmo, latido,
siempre soñé dejar llena, secreta,
alguna taza de café
que se beba entre líneas. (*Alfabeto del mundo*, 162)

The poem then goes on to describe in more detail the signification of this coffee and in so doing reminds us explicitly of ‘Sobremesa’ and the end of the life/death separation. It is

Café con el aroma de las horas
y la mesa en el aire
donde al primer hervor los vivos y los muertos
levitemos. (*Alfabeto del mundo*, 162)

In addition, Montejo reiterates its link with both homely scenes of rural family life and the dead when he describes the coffee as

café del alba, amargo, recién hecho,
que nos trae a la cama
algún canto remoto de gallo.
[...]
el café sin café de los ausentes
dormidos en nuestra sangre. (*Alfabeto del mundo*, 162)

As this last line suggests, the poem also taps into the place of coffee within the national sense of identity and belonging, referring to it specifically as ‘café natal, sentimental’, the ‘café de las ciudades fugaces, imprevistas, | que sabe a las voces de su gente, | al rumor de sus ríos imaginarios’ and ‘el café azul del pájaro, | el verde inmenso de los soleados platanales’ (*Alfabeto del mundo*, 162).

For Montejo, this communal, quasi-religious, and salvational coffee, working on both the personal and the national level, is always there, offering itself up to be smelt and consumed, an ‘amable duende que nos sigue por el mundo | con densas vaharadas’ (*Alfabeto del mundo*, 162). The question is whether the poem can successfully evoke its aroma, and in this regard the poem moves towards greater affirmation. Whereas at the beginning of the piece there is a questioning uncertainty as to whether the poem can produce this coffee ‘entre líneas’, indicated by the use of the subjunctive (‘que se beba’; ‘donde [...] | levitemos’), by the end this has shifted to a reassured sense of repeated success:

Sólo para avivar su aroma escribo a tientas
al dictado del fuego.
Sólo para servirlo siempre dejé oculta
alguna taza que se beba entre líneas,
detrás de mis palabras. (*Alfabeto del mundo*, 162)

Montejo paints himself as always having left coffee between his words, with the uncertainty now placed onto whether the reader will be capable of sharing in this communal cup, as the coffee assumes its religious charge once more, both Christian, as a cup of divine coffee served up to other mortals to partake of, and pagan, as an offering to the gods, for them then to accord the poet in return the divine gift of a bringing together of the dead and the alive. (Such an image is conjured up explicitly in the poem ‘Ulises’ in the same collection, as Montejo writes in the first person of

how ‘llevo un poco de café para los dioses | que nos prometen un viaje propicio’ [*Alfabeto del mundo*, p. 182].) ‘Café’ underscores that it is the poet’s task to serve up the potential for bringing together the dead and the alive, for ending the loss effected by the passage of time, and that it is the poet who must create the scene and the opportunity for the coming together described earlier in ‘Sobremesa’. In this respect, it is worth noting that these two poems, ‘Café’ and ‘Sobremesa’, are linked by their use of the phrase ‘a tientas’: the blind act of writing such poetry in ‘Café’, relying on touch, on feeling, intuition (‘escribo a tientas’ [*Alfabeto del mundo*, 163]), is inseparable from the creation of the scene in ‘Sobremesa’ (‘A tientas [...] volvemos a sentarnos | y hablamos ya sin vernos’ [*Muerte y memoria*, 27]).

Most significantly, ‘Café’ also reveals a crucial problematic of the quest and schema proposed by these ‘coffee poems’. For whilst it may appear as an element that enables a communion between the past and the present, the coffee which the poem seeks to serve up—and of which Montejo’s early poems speak—is essentially that of the dead, of the past, and of the poet’s childhood (‘el café sin café de los ausentes’ [*Alfabeto del mundo*, 162]). The poem’s evocation of the coffee and/or its aroma effectively repeats the idea of the horse of the dead being made present, with both figured as ending the separation between life and death. The implication of the similarity between the two, however, is that, as with the horse, so too would the recovery or presentation of the coffee of the dead work to annihilate both the present and the poem itself. And this is precisely what emerges in ‘Café’, where the coffee cannot be expressed in the symbolic: the description ‘el café sin café de los ausentes’ elides and eludes ‘café’ as both signifier and signified. It is in its essence absence and silence, and it is the poet’s task to attempt to make this absence and silence of the dead present, but without falling into the trap of annihilation, without actually writing

it, since such writing would be the end or death of writing. In its focus on the need to make the coffee present ‘entre líneas’, ‘Café’ thus represents a move beyond ‘Sobremesa’ in showing the naivety of the earlier poem’s attempt to do—and claim to have achieved—in words (‘charlamos horas sin saber | quién vive todavía, quién está muerto’ [*Muerte y memoria*, 27]) what can only be done *behind* them and *between* them.

It is this naivety which in the light of ‘Café’ is then explored in the poem ‘De sobremesa’, also in *Alfabeto del mundo*. As a secondary meaning of its title suggests, it is effectively a reading of and commentary on the *Muerte y memoria* poem ‘Sobremesa’. The poem describes a similar scene to that of the earlier poem, although on this occasion the poet is looking on rather than actively participating in the conversation. As before, the poem begins by suggesting that we are in a timeless scene, in that it takes place ‘cuando relojes zurdos | vuelcan intacto el cofre de sus horas’ (*Alfabeto del mundo*, 202). But the tone of the poem is soon very different. Far from the nebulous, aethereal ambience of ‘Sobremesa’, here the conversation is portrayed first and foremost as ‘billaresca’:

siento rodearme la billaresca charla
de voces que rebotan contra el tiempo
y se repliegan en un rumor de sombras. (*Alfabeto del mundo*, 202)

The voices or words (‘voces’) of those sitting at the table reverberate around, with time being imagined as the cushions of a billiard table. They are now exact and precise, rather than ghostly:

Leves, fugaces, se siguen, se persiguen
en una extraña, perfecta geometría
con ángulos de tazas o de copas.

La billaresca charla de las voces
que trae el viento de no se sabe dónde... (*Alfabeto del mundo*, 202)

The scene also marks a change from that of the earlier poem, in the lack of people. For all its focus on the fact that those who were there were speaking ‘ya sin vernos’ (*Muerte y memoria*, 27), ‘Sobremesa’ at least talks of ‘antiguos rostros’ brought back to life. ‘De sobremesa’, however, is bereft of such mention. When the poem finally does refer to ‘alguien’ it is the start of a series of four lines which signally negate the very idea of any people or faces being present:

Alguien habla por sombras o por ecos,
alguien desde ninguna silla dice un nombre
que al instante ya es otro o tal vez nadie,
un nadie más, sin rostro, sin persona. (*Alfabeto del mundo*, 202)

The unknown ‘alguien’ in question is a total non-existence: it speaks in shadows and echoes, sits in no chair, and says a name which immediately changes, slips into something else, cannot be fixed, so much so that it is essentially meaningless: it refers to no one at all, ‘un nadie más’, suggesting that all there is is *más nadies*. That this is set up in direct opposition to ‘Sobremesa’ is implied by the specific reference to the ‘nadie más’ being ‘sin rostro’ (cf. ‘vemos flotar antiguos rostros’ [‘Sobremesa’, *Muerte y memoria*, 27]), and made particularly evident in the two earlier lines where we are told that

Sobre el mantel ruedan insomnes las palabras,
desenterradas pero anónimas. (*Alfabeto del mundo*, 202)

These lines act as a counterpoint to the parallel lines in ‘Sobremesa’:

Panes donde invernaron musgos fríos
 en el mantel ahora se despiertan. (*Muerte y memoria*, 27)

In so doing, they deny the earlier poem's idea of actual physical and individual resurrection: the focus in 'Sobremesa' on the biological ('musgos fríos') and on the bread waking up (an image which, especially in the context of the rest of the poem, has connotations of the Eucharistic bread becoming the living body of Christ at the sacramental moment) is now rejected, as the later poem insists that the only thing brought back from the underworld, the 'bajo tierra' of Montejo's 'muertos', are words, words devoid of a speaking subject, not tied to any person: 'anónimas', a long way from the individual 'antiguos rostros' present in 'Sobremesa'.

Rejecting thus the physical and individual in 'De sobremesa' Montejo effectively rewrites the poem from *Muerte y memoria*, revealing the *actual* result of the latter's attempt at bringing together the dead and the living both in the language *of* the poem and in the language of the scene referred to *by* the poem ('hablamos'; 'charlamos' [*Muerte y memoria*, 27]). Rather than bringing the two into communion with each other in a timeless place which is neither life nor death, 'De sobremesa' discloses that the earlier poem merely revives and repeats words and that we are not in a timeless realm without a difference between dead and alive, absence and presence; we are in a realm constituted by nothing but language, with the dead left in absence as they are reduced to anonymous, bodiless signifiers, firmly in the realm of the symbolic within a logic and structure of oppositions. Moreover, the last two lines of 'Sobremesa' lay bare that the poem is an act of inscription within precisely the oppositions of dead/alive, absent/present from which Montejo seeks to escape even as they claim to affirm the contrary, with the poet declaring that 'Charlamos horas sin saber | quién vive todavía, quién está muerto' (*Muerte y memoria*, 27).

To understand what is at stake in this rewriting of 'Sobremesa' and the particular importance of coffee in these poems, we need to consider that, as the resonance with the Christian Eucharist in 'Sobremesa' suggests, Montejó's 'coffee poems' are also a commentary on the value of ritual itself. And it is this commentary that helps us see why the ritual of 'Sobremesa' fails, falling into language, as well as disclosing the reason why the coffee Montejó seeks is repeatedly portrayed as that of a mythic Golden Age of infancy and one which is elided by language, rather than simply coffee *per se* or the coffee of the present. The communal ritual of coffee, like that of the Eucharistic wine with which it is identified in 'Sobremesa', both in being coupled with bread and in the reverential and quasi-religious atmosphere found in the poem, serves as a symbolic repetition of an originary, transcendental communion. But, as a symbol and ritual, the preparation and drinking of coffee points only to the absence of that which it pretends to repeat and make present, acting like words in a distinctly Derridean understanding of language.³² In seeking a past mythic coffee, outside of language, as in 'Café', Montejó's poetry underscores the insufficiency both of the (current) rite of coffee and of the poem which attempts to convey and be such a rite in its language, and affirms the need for an originary coffee, an originary communal moment before its repetition as ritual and as language if the timeless, communal state to which he aspires *through* his poetry is to be attained.

It is thus significant that, just as 'Sobremesa' discloses the ineluctable inscription of the communal scene it portrays in language and its dialectical terms, so too does it reveal the poet engaged in the representation of such a scene to be incapable of escaping temporal references. As Montejó's heteronym Blas Coll later states, language is inherently tied up with 'la estructura lineal presente-pasado-

futuro’,³³ and the move into it implies a concomitant move into this linear temporal structure. Accordingly, and as ‘De sobremesa’ suggests when it refers to the ‘voces que rebotan contra el tiempo’ (*Alfabeto del mundo*, 202), far from creating and describing a timeless realm, beyond the effect of loss, the language of ‘Sobremesa’ abounds with references to repetition (‘volvemos a sentarnos’; ‘vuelve el aire’ [*Muerte y memoria*, p. 27]) and sequential time (‘ya sin vernos’; ‘retornarán más tarde’; ‘comenzamos a hablar’; ‘quién vive todavía’ [*Muerte y memoria*, 27]).

To locate the most succinct and most explicit précis of this effect of an attempted bringing of the dead and the living into communion in the words of the poem, however, we must turn to the last two lines of ‘De sobremesa’, where the poet affirms that the scene described—which is that originally evoked in ‘Sobremesa’—is ‘como si tanta ausencia viniera a decir algo | que la vida convierte en otra cosa’ (*Alfabeto del mundo*, p. 202). The dead, the absent, that which is past, are figured like the Lacanian real as exerting pressure on the symbolic and the imaginary: in Montejo’s terms, on the world as we know it, temporal and linguistic. Yet any attempt to allow the absent to burst forth in the world, to express itself, hence annulling the loss effected by time, and despite its assurances to be evincing a timeless, oppositionless realm, is inevitably a drawing of the dead and the absent *into* the world of the living and the present, *into* time and language, the imaginary and the symbolic, thus losing the essence of what they are: an extra-linguistic absence. Their essence is not maintained together with that of life, that which is present, in a quasi-religious limbo. Rather, it is converted into language and made temporal. It shows merely how the poem which seeks to make present in language the apparent moment of communion offered by the sacred personal and national rite of coffee is—like rite and ritual itself—a cycle of a repeated loss, a repeated failure to recover the dead without converting

them ‘en otra cosa’. We have the same inevitable—and necessary—reassertion of language as found under the symbol of the horse, where the effect of the poet’s attempt to incorporate the jazz and silence of the dead into the language of the poem ‘En los bosques de mi antigua casa’ was the same continued elision of these figures.

Conclusions: an Orphic failure

Within this attempted recovery of the dead and the past in Montejó’s poetry, ciphered in the motifs of both coffee and the horse, it is impossible not to perceive the latent figure of Orpheus. This is suggested by the idea of the poeticizing of the horse as being a ‘posesión órfica’,³⁴ and is emphasized in particular by the centrality in Montejó’s work of the poem ‘Orfeo’ from *Muerte y memoria*.³⁵ The engagement with the Orphic must finally inform how we conceive of Montejó’s poetics here: like Orpheus, Montejó, as poet, is involved in a desperate quest to end loss, to recover that which is dead. But the fruit of his quest is the inevitable, continued loss of ‘los muertos’: his Eurydice. Maurice Blanchot, writing on the Orphic descent, comments that ‘he can descend towards it [the ‘point’ of Eurydice]; he can [...] draw it to him and lead it with him upward, but only by turning away from it. This turning away is the only way it can be approached’.³⁶ And this is the problem faced by Montejó which emerges from his engagement with both *caballos* and *café*. As ‘De sobremesa’ shows, the poem as language can only bring out the dead from their place ‘bajo tierra’—the Montejian Underworld—by changing them into words and the temporal, by once more effacing them ‘under a name that hides [them] and a veil that covers [them]’,³⁷ just as the horse of the dead is hidden in Uccello’s painting. The words of the poem, an attempted rescuing of the dead, act instead as handfuls of earth thrown on their coffins, ensuring they remain on their journey ‘bajo tierra a caballo’.³⁸

¹ On the dominance of the theme of loss and nostalgia in Montejó's verse see, for example, Nicholas Roberts, 'Inhabiting the Poetic in the Work of Eugenio Montejó', *Romance Studies*, 22:1 (2004), 51-62, and Miguel Gomes, *El pozo de las palabras* (Caracas: Fondo Editorial Fundarte, 1990), 107-13.

² Eugenio Montejó, *Partitura de la cigarra* (Madrid: Pre-textos, 1999). This is the most recent collection comprised of wholly new material to be published under Montejó's own name.

³ Eugenio Montejó, *Élegos* (Caracas: Editorial Arte, 1967).

⁴ Eugenio Montejó, *Muerte y memoria* (Caracas: Dirección de Cultura de la Universidad Central, 1972).

⁵ Eugenio Montejó, *Algunas palabras* (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1976).

⁶ Luis García Morales, writing on 'Caballo real' in Luis Alberto Crespo, Eugenio Montejó, and Alberto Patiño (eds.), *El caballo en la poesía venezolana* (Caracas: Acapromo SRL, 1981), sees the schema of father, son, and horse acting as a 'trinidad simbólica sustentada por la sangre' (Crespo, 90). Certainly, the indivisibility of father and son from the horse of life would suggest just such a reading, where the horse would thus come to represent the Holy Ghost, the life-breath or *pneuma*. This reading would further support the prominence given to infancy by Montejó in its presentation as an Edenic time: it is here seen to be the time when all three (father, son and horse/Holy Ghost) are coexistent and indivisible. Nevertheless, I would question the role of blood proposed by García Morales, since it is not mentioned anywhere by Montejó with respect to the horse of life.

⁷ Eugenio Montejó, *Humano paraíso* (Valencia: Impresiones Clima, 1959).

⁸ Juan Medina Figueredo, *La terredad de Orfeo: Tensión constructiva del habla en la poesía de Eugenio Montejó*. (Valencia: Ediciones del Gobierno de Carabobo, 1997), 79.

⁹ See, for example, Medina Figueredo, 104; Américo Ferrari, 'Eugenio Montejó y el alfabeto del mundo', in Eugenio Montejó, *Alfabeto del mundo* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988), 9-28 (pp. 16-18); and Pedro Lastra, 'El pan y las palabras: poesía de Eugenio Montejó', *Inti: Revista de Literatura Hispánica*, 19 (1984), 211-28 (p. 213).

¹⁰ Crespo, 8.

¹¹ *El caballo en la poesía venezolana* includes poems by such figures as José Antonio Ramos Sucre, Juan Sánchez Peláez, Fernando Paz Castillo, Vicente Gerbasi, and Montejó himself. For a brief overview of the horse as a figure in the work of the poets included in the anthology see pp. 10-11. Beyond the poetic field, the horse is also a central figure in Venezuelan culture in general: Medina Figueredo mentions the existence of a number of popular legends centred around horses in Venezuela, naming the legends of 'el Caballo Encaramao, el Jinete Sin Cabeza y la Mula Manéa [*sic*]' (Medina Figueredo, 196), and it is also notable that arguably the most well-known popular song, both nationally and internationally, to emerge from Venezuela is Simón Díaz's 'Caballo viejo'.

¹² Crespo, 10.

¹³ The presence of Oriental thought, in the form of Taoism, is found as early as Montejó's 1966 essay 'Textos para una meditación sobre lo poético' in *Zona Franca: Revista de literatura e ideas*, vol. 3, no. 39 (November 1966), 20-22, and emerges again in the essay 'I Ching, el libro de las mutaciones' (Eugenio Montejó, *La ventana oblicua* [Valencia: Ediciones de la Dirección de Cultura de la Universidad de Carabobo, 1974], 101-09). Taoism is also an overt concern throughout the

heteronymic work *Guitarra del horizonte* (Sergio Sandoval, *Guitarra del horizonte*, preface and selection by Eugenio Montejo [Caracas: Alfadil Ediciones, 1991]) and is mentioned explicitly in the title poem of Montejo's recent collection *Partitura de la cigarra* (p. 53).

¹⁴ Montejo, *La ventana oblicua*, 108.

¹⁵ Crespo, 9.

¹⁶ Crespo, 10.

¹⁷ Eugenio Montejo, *Adiós al siglo XX* (Seville: Renacimiento, 1997).

¹⁸ This is exemplified in the poems 'En los bosques de mi antigua casa', 'Gira todo vivir por mi reloj ya calvo', 'De quién es esta casa que está caída', and 'Mi ayer es una bizca tía'. Aside from these specific alignments of the childhood homestead with the family dead, there is also an insistence on the death of family members in poems such as 'Elegía a la muerte de mi hermano Ricardo' and 'Había una vez un padre y yo era su hijo'.

¹⁹ Crespo, 8.

²⁰ Crespo, 8.

²¹ The Venezuelan coat of arms, along with the flag, was changed on 12 March 2006 by the government of Hugo Chávez. The new coat of arms has the white horse of Bolívar galloping towards the left rather than the right and with his head facing forwards. An African-American machete, an indigenous bow and arrow, and typical fruits and flowers have also been added to it. The government has decreed that the old coat of arms and flag may still be used for a further five years without penalty. Clearly, the new coat of arms maintains the location of Bolívar's horse as, as I have read it, 'bajo tierra'. It is the old coat of arms which I use here.

²² Uccello's *Battle of San Romano* is made up of three separate panels, all created c. 1454-1457. The left panel is located in the National Gallery, London; the middle panel in the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence; and the right panel in the Louvre, Paris. All three panels can be found at <http://www.abcgallery.com/U/uccello/uccello.html> [accessed 20 September 2005].

²³ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 74-93.

²⁴ Lacan, 92.

²⁵ Lacan, 88.

²⁶ Lacan, 92.

²⁷ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 159.

²⁸ In its focus on the breads which 'se despiertan', the poem 'Sobremesa' also appeals to pagan symbolism. The Christian form of the Eucharist is very similar to the ritual that was practised as part of the Greek Eleusinian Mysteries, in honour of both Ceres, goddess of wheat, and Bacchus/Dionysus, god of the vine. For a thorough discussion, see Robert Taylor, *The Diegesis: Being a discovery of the origin, evidences, and early history of Christianity, etc.* (London: E. Truelove, 1829).

²⁹ Mario Briceño-Iragorry, *Alegría de la tierra [pequeña apología de nuestra agricultura antigua]* (Caracas: Edición Especial de la Procuraduría Agraria Nacional, 1983), 38. In this work, Briceño-Iragorry dedicates two essays to coffee, 'Café' (31-34) and 'Una taza de café' (35-41). The citations used here are from the latter.

³⁰ Briceño-Iragorry, 41.

³¹ Briceño-Iragorry, 41.

³² The portrayal of ritual and language, and of ritual as language, in these poems by Montejo resonates with the disclosure of the iterability of every ritual—and speech—act in Jacques Derrida, ‘Signature Événement Contexte’, in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972), 365-93.

³³ Eugenio Montejo, *El cuaderno de Blas Coll* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Unidad Azcapotzalco, 1998), 33.

³⁴ Crespo, 8.

³⁵ See, for example, Francisco River, ‘La poesía de Eugenio Montejo’, in *Entre el silencio y la palabra* (Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1986), 38-58.

³⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1989), 171.

³⁷ Blanchot, 171.

³⁸ I should like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for their funding and support which enabled the research for this article.