

# INHABITING THE POETIC IN THE WORK OF EUGENIO MONTEJO

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*Much of Eugenio Montejo's work is pervaded both by a sense of loss of 'authentic' habitats of the past and by a concern for the poem as a quasi-architectural construct. These two topoi are inextricably intertwined. The habitats Montejo mourns are those of the poet's childhood casa and the Venezuelan city of the past. In fact, both these habitats are inseparable in Montejo's work from an essential poetic loss, to the extent that both the casa and the city being mourned are revealed as poetic habitats, poetry as 'authentic' habitat both on a personal (casa) and on a societal (city) level within Venezuela. In contrast, the nature of the 'inauthentic' habitats the poet and the country are left with is 'plain', unpoetic language: a linguistic prison. Montejo then seeks to (re)create the poetic habitat for his countryfolk, constructing a poetic city with poetic words as the essential building blocks, and turning the language-prison into a poetry-home. In the process, however, Montejo slips into describing this attempted (re)construction as the (re)building not of a city, but of his personal casa. The only one whom this construction allows to inhabit the poetic is thus revealed to be the poet himself.*

Poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building.<sup>1</sup>

In this quotation from Heidegger we see encapsulated the way in which Eugenio Montejo conceives of and defines habitat. Critics who have written on the Venezuelan poet and essayist, born in 1938, have noted how he writes of a deep concern for the loss of romanticized past habitats, often ciphered in his poetry around the personal example of his native Venezuela. They have also commented at length on how his poetics focuses increasingly on the question of the poem as an architectural construct.<sup>2</sup>

Taking Heidegger's quotation as my starting point,<sup>3</sup> I shall show how these themes can properly be understood only when each is seen as informing the other, exploring how the lost habitats mourned by Montejo are inseparable from an essential poetic loss: as Heidegger suggests, the loss of poetic creation underscores the loss of habitat about which Montejo writes. I shall then turn to Montejo's emerging concern for the poetic building, both act and product, and how this move represents a response to that loss of habitat, as the poet seeks to reconstruct a habitat for himself and for his country from and through poetry. It is the nature of Montejo's potentially redemptive poetic habitat that I shall then explore.

Montejo's first major collection of poetry, *Élegos* (1967),<sup>4</sup> is shot through by a sustained sense of loss of the poet's childhood and family in Venezuela. Consistently this mourning is

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centred around the loss of the *casa* in which the poet spent his infancy. Now alone, the poet is figured as staring out on to all that is left: the ruins of the *casa*:

deshechos acometidos por el azar  
 escombros inflados en su perecimiento  
 un hervor una dinastía incesante  
 han vencido la casa.  
 ('Un poco de polvo invencible' (Montejo 1967: 36))

His childhood home 'está caída' ('De quién es esta casa que está caída' (Montejo 1967: 12)), and, indeed, such is the magnitude of this sense of loss that at times not even the shell appears to remain, but just an empty space:

ese espacio abolido  
 donde se doblan las setenta costillas  
 de la casa y cae sol a las piedras ausentes.  
 ('Gira todo vivir por mi reloj ya calvo' (Montejo 1967: 9))

The image of the empty space filled with absent stones, coupled with Montejo's reference elsewhere in the collection to all that is left as being 'un poco de polvo invencible' (Montejo 1967: 36) recalls Derrida's work on cinders: all that remains is the irreducible presence of the absence of the house.<sup>5</sup>

Such a sense of solitude continues in many of the collections following *Élegos*, as Montejo, whilst continuing to talk of the lost *casa*, increasingly makes a move beyond the more personal ambit of the house out into the social area of the city, the Venezuelan city, identified on at least one occasion specifically as urban Caracas.<sup>6</sup> Here too the poet mourns the loss of a habitat:

Están demoliendo la ciudad  
 donde tanto viví,  
 [...]  
 Están derrumbando sin tregua sus muros.  
 ('Están demoliendo la ciudad' (Montejo 1978: 40))

The quasi-rural city of the past is gone, with the modern urbanization of the present merely serving as a marker for the loss of what Montejo depicts as a more 'authentic' habitat, as he explains in his essay 'Poesía en un tiempo sin poesía':<sup>7</sup>

Lo que nombramos con la palabra ciudad significa algo completamente distinto antes y después de la aparición del motor, al punto que tal vez no resulte apropiado lingüísticamente homologar, si deseamos llamar las cosas por sus nombres, la urbe moderna con la apacible comarca de otras edades.

(Montejo 1996: 13)

At this juncture, then, Montejo's concept of the lost, 'authentic' habitat seems to vacillate between the personal and the collective, the *casa* and the city. But Montejo's work, in fact, draws these two together in representing both as inseparable from a poetic loss. Following the above quotation from 'Poesía en un tiempo sin poesía', Montejo affirms, with regard to the lost city, that:

Hoy podemos advertir, tras la pérdida de ese espacio, de qué modo resulta imprescindible la relación del hombre y la ciudad para explicarnos las obras que nos legaron los artistas del pasado. [...] El París de Baudelaire, la Alejandría de Cavafy, la Lisboa de los cuatro Pessoa, se nos tornan inseparables de sus logros artísticos.

(Montejo 1996: 13)

Similarly, in the poem 'Materias del destino' from *Trópico absoluto* (1982), referring to the relationship between poetry and the *casa*, Montejo asks:

¿Quién en sus muros grabó mi poesía,  
antes de ser ésta mi casa?  
(‘Materias del destino’ (Montejo 1982: 49))

Montejo is suggesting that the collapse and demolition of the old habitats, on both a personal and a collective level, leads to a loss in poetic creation.

But at this point we must, once again, recall Heidegger's affirmation that it is poetic creation 'which lets us dwell' (Heidegger 2001: 213), not a dwelling which lets us create poetically. Indeed, the appeal to Heidegger's thought here finds its motivation within 'Poesía en un tiempo sin poesía', Montejo's most explicit essay on the theme of the loss of poetry and poetic habitats, where he makes direct reference to the German philosopher (Montejo 1996: 12–13). Holding Heidegger's claim in mind, our reading of both the passages just cited changes radically.

In the case of Montejo's question as to who inscribed poetry into the walls of the house before it was his *casa*, our critical gaze, guided by Heidegger, becomes fixed on the word 'antes'. Poetry precedes the *casa*. It is what allows the walls to be seen as the 'authentic' habitat which was his childhood *casa*. Poetry is not lost, then, as a result of the loss of the house. Rather, the *casa* is lost because poetic creation has ceased.

However, when we turn our attention to the first quotation regarding the city, the effects of such a Heideggerean rereading are even more radical. The question is whether Montejo's reference to the Paris of Baudelaire, the Alexandria of Cavafy and the Lisbon of the four Pessoa concerns the actual cities in which these poets lived, or, whether, in fact, it is a reference to the cities which are found in and produced by their poetry. Read in this way, the quotation now seems to describe how the artistic achievements of these poets are inseparable from the way in which their poetry creates the *poetic* habitats 'Paris', 'Alexandria', and 'Lisbon'. The achievement in question, then, is precisely the construction of a poetic city, a poetic habitat.

This, of course, suggests more than the simple reversal of the relationship between poetry and the mourned habitats of the past posited by our rereading of 'Materias del destino'. It indicates that the 'authentic' city whose loss Montejo mourns is itself nothing but poetry. There is no physical city here. There is only a poetic one.

What is more, this is a reading which applies not just to Montejo's concept of the city but also to his concept of the personal habitat of the *casa*. This is made clear when Montejo's poetry on the lost *casa* is read alongside one of his earliest essays 'Aproximación a Ramos Sucre',<sup>8</sup> concerning the poetry of José Antonio Ramos Sucre, the Venezuelan poet of the early twentieth century whom Montejo generally seems to consider to be Venezuela's last great national poetic figure. In this essay, Montejo cites a number of lines from Ramos Sucre's poetry which bear a striking resemblance to many lines and images from Montejo's verse in *Élegos* regarding his old *casa*, as can be seen in the table below:

**Ramos Sucre:**

“Unos *jinetes* bravíos me escoltaban durante la visita al país de las *ruinas* legendarias. [Nos detuvimos a maravillarnos los arabescos y perfiles de un puente de arcos *ojivales*.]”

(Cited in ‘Aproximación a Ramos Sucre’ (Montejo 1974: 80). Continuation of the poem, entitled ‘El error vespertino’, (not cited by Montejo) in square brackets. Italics mine.)

“*recorro* sin descanso los aposentos de *mi casa antigua*, rescatada en la esquivez de una sierra.”

(Cited in ‘Aproximación a Ramos Sucre’ (Montejo 1974: 80–81). Italics mine.)

**Montejo:**

‘De quién es esta *casa que está caída*  
[...]

Y el *jinete* de sombras  
que transpuso en la *ojiva* su ser.’

(‘De quién es esta casa que está caída’  
(Montejo 1967: 12). Italics mine.)

‘En los bosques de *mi antigua casa*  
[...]

cuando *recorra* todo.’

(‘En los bosques de mi antigua casa’  
(Montejo 1967: 5). Italics mine.)

No critic has noticed these parallels before, yet they provide the key for understanding Montejo’s concept of habitat. It becomes clear that what is being mourned is, as in the case of the city, not the loss of an actual house, but the loss of a poetic house, a house built by and out of poetry, in this case the poetry of Ramos Sucre.

In short then, on both the personal and the collective levels, Montejo mourns the loss of what he sees as a poetic past, a time in Venezuela when poetry was the habitat, and a time when the poet played the central role as the one who gave himself and his people a place to be at home. ‘Authentic’ habitat, then, for Montejo, is poetic: it is poetry. And his work attempts to describe this sense of loss of such a habitat from the perspective of both the society as a whole and the potentially Orphic poetic figure himself, ciphered in the images of the city and the *casa* respectively.<sup>9</sup>

And yet at the same time, such a poetic habitat and such a past when the poet and poetry were at the heart of dwelling — to use a Heideggerian term — are revealed as never having been. Talking specifically about the poetry of Ramos Sucre, Montejo refers to the way in which the poet’s verbs ‘se encuentra[n] casi siempre en presente, en un presente mítico’ (Montejo 1974: 78). The very poetic habitat which Montejo seeks to return to, to make ‘present’, then, is described as mythical. Indeed, Montejo himself talks in the poem ‘Nostalgia cósmica’ from *Trópico absoluto* of how the nostalgia of which he writes is a nostalgia for what has not been, for what has not happened:

Es la nostalgia de no acercarme a cada puerta  
[...]

La cruel nostalgia de no mudar mi peso en aire.  
(‘Nostalgia cósmica’ (Montejo 1982: 26))

For Montejo, ‘authentic’ dwelling — whose loss he mourns — is both poetic and mythical, poetry and myth. He writes, that is, of the loss of something which never was in the first place.

Of course, in defining ‘authentic’ habitat as poetry, Montejo’s work raises the question of what constitutes the ‘inauthentic’ habitat in which the poet and modern Venezuela find themselves. Is it something more than just the modern urbanized cities such as Caracas

alluded to in many of Montejo's poems? Certainly, our reading of the mourned 'authentic' habitat as being poetic suggests that, likewise, Montejo's concept of the 'inauthentic' habitat is, ultimately, not going to be physical in nature. And this is indeed what we find.

In his heteronymic work *El cuaderno de Blas Coll* (1998),<sup>10</sup> Montejo tellingly refers to 'la casa del habla' (Montejo 1998: 31), and describes language as 'la verdadera piel del hombre' (Montejo 1998: 40).<sup>11</sup> Language, then, is our house, that which we inhabit. Yet this house is simultaneously described as our 'cárcel alfabética' (Montejo 1998: 105). (Alphabetic) language often gives us the 'ilusión de que somos sus dueños, o los herederos de sus ilusorios inventores' (Montejo 1998: 105), but in fact 'la lengua nos habla como la música nos baila' (Montejo 1998: 36), recalling Heidegger's assertion that 'man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man' (Heidegger 2001: 213). In short, Montejo's concept of the 'inauthentic' habitat, ciphered in the images of the modern, urban city and the lack of the childhood *casa*, is that of a being caught in language as a prison, the 'prison-house of language'<sup>12</sup> to borrow a term from Fredric Jameson, and, ultimately, Nietzsche. Caught inside it, Montejo tells us, its walls 'nos tapien el mundo' ('Final provisorio' (Montejo 1982: 66)). This is 'inauthentic' dwelling for Montejo, and stands in stark contrast to poetry, to *poetic* language. It is to this poetic language, then, that Montejo seeks to 'return', transforming the prison of language into the poetic home once more.

Accordingly, on the level of the collective — the city — Montejo's response is not to promote the reconstruction of an actual bricks-and-mortar dwelling, but to construct a poetic city, a city made out of poetic language. 'Escribo para fundar una ciudad' (Montejo 1978: 61), Montejo declares in 'Una ciudad' from *Terredad* (1978). In effect, following on from the Paris of Baudelaire, the Alexandria of Cavafy, and the Lisbon of the four Pessoa's, Montejo seeks to create the Caracas of Montejo: a poetic habitat for his countryfolk, where the poet is 'el arquitecto por excelencia' (Montejo 1996: 14), searching for:

la arquitectura subjetiva  
de puentes, columnas, catedrales  
creada en palabras nuevas  
con el abecedario de las formas fuertes.  
(*'Una ciudad'* (Montejo 1978: 61))

What is more, by referring to the words which are to make up this poetic city as 'palabras nuevas', Montejo once again draws attention to the fact that his supposed project of recuperation of a lost poetic language is underscored and undercut by the realization that such a language never was. In short, just as we have identified the lost 'authentic' habitat as never having been, so here Montejo's own language reveals that the poetic words which are to constitute the new 'authentic' dwelling are located not in the past, but always in the future, in the yet-to-come.

Having thus established that the poetic language out of which the 'authentic' city is to be built is, in fact, projected rather than recuperative, the question still remains as to how this envisaged poetic language and habitat is to escape from being 'plain' language, the prison-house. Crucial in this respect is the persistent recurrence in Montejo's poetry of *piedras*, stones. We have already seen how he focuses on the 'piedras ausentes' ('Gira todo vivir por mi reloj ya calvo' (Montejo 1967: 9)) when talking of his lost childhood *casa*, and, likewise,

in 'Están demoliendo la ciudad' from *Terredad*, Montejo makes explicit mention of the stones of the city that he is watching being demolished and made absent before him:

Me duele cada golpe de las picas,  
cada estruendo,  
ahora que mis ojos son las últimas piedras  
que le quedan.

(Montejo 1978: 40)

In short, both types of 'authentic' habitat are constructed from stones, and it is the loss and absence of these essential building blocks which lies at the heart of Montejo's poetics of the loss of 'authentic' poetic habitat.

Indeed, Montejo's essay 'Las piedras de Lisboa'<sup>13</sup> further underlines the centrality of such a conception of *piedras* in the poet's understanding of habitat. Here, Montejo depicts Lisbon as the sort of 'authentic' habitat which he feels is now gone in Venezuela, focusing on how stones are used in its streets and buildings. These stones are 'signos con los que algo sabido o no sabido viene a decirse' (Montejo 1996: 137, italics mine). And they are, in Montejo's eyes, to be aligned with the use of the third person *o senhor/a senhora* in Portuguese to refer to the second person, in that they grant 'una zona neutra, un ámbito indefinido [...] menos concreto' and 'cierto atributo intemporal' (Montejo 1996: 138). The stones used in the construction of this 'authentic' city, then, are linked with the unknown and an unlocatability in both space and time. In short, they are mythic in character, just as we have identified the 'authentic' poetic dwelling to be for Montejo. They are, I would suggest, to be seen as the stones, or letters, out of which God created the world according the kabbalic tradition of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, or *Book of Creation*:<sup>14</sup> they are originary, essential, and prior to form in things or language. This, then, is the nature of the stones whose absence and collapse Montejo describes when he talks of the lost, poetic *casa* and city. And this is the nature of the stones which must be used in the walls of the new poetic city, stones which, being the building blocks of a poetic habitat, we can identify as poetic words. What is more, they are stones — or words — which stand in sharp contrast to those found in the modern city in which the poet currently finds himself. Here, all that lies before the poet are just plain stones, 'que se amontonan en altos edificios' ('Final provisorio' (Montejo 1982: 66)), a cipher for the plain words out of which our prison is constructed.

In the poetic habitat which Montejo seeks to build, then, words are to be stones in the construction process, but not with their originary essence silenced as now, no longer just 'plain' words, but essential, originary stones, as Montejo comments explicitly in the poem 'Escritura' from *Alfabeto del mundo* (1988):<sup>15</sup>

Alguna vez escribiré con piedras,  
[...]  
Estoy cansado de palabras.  
[...]  
Con piedra viva escribiré mi canto.  
( 'Escritura' (Montejo 1988: 179))

Nevertheless, as the use of the future tense in these lines shows, such a poetic construction is still very much depicted as envisaged. The poems we have before us describe what is sought, rather than claiming to be that desired poetic habitat. Indeed, more than this, in

the poem 'Las sombras' from *Trópico absoluto*, Montejo depicts his writing of poetry — the very poetry we are reading — as leading not to the sought-after 'authentic' habitat, but merely to a repetition of the imprisoning 'plain' language which the poet is attempting to replace and avoid:

No sé por qué ni para quién  
 sigo escribiendo.  
 Ya mi mano también es una sombra  
 y letra a letra me tapia entre murallas.  
 ('Las sombras' (Montejo 1982: 65))

The stones, or words, which are constructing Montejo's poetic habitat here are most definitely not the 'authentic' stones of which he writes elsewhere. The walls are those of a city ('murallas'), but it is ultimately the same prison-habitat, the same 'inauthentic' city as before: Montejo effectively portrays himself as unable to make the leap from 'plain' language to poetic language.

But if Montejo considers the poetic city a construction which he has not yet realized, he also, crucially, feels it as potential. Whereas in *Élegos* Montejo bemoans the 'piedras ausentes' ('Gira todo vivir por mi reloj ya calvo' (Montejo 1967: 9)), by the time of *Alfabeto del mundo*, he talks of the envisaged construction as one which persists in and as absence, where 'queda una ausencia más fuerte que las piedras' ('El edificio' (Montejo 1988: 203)). In other words, the absence of the stones is what makes them essential, what enables them to go beyond themselves. This is the key move: from viewing absence as a sign of loss, to viewing absence as the essential characteristic of 'authentic' stones, as being what makes stones, or words on the page, poetic. The poetic city in Montejo's work, then, is ultimately envisaged as one of absent structure, of structure without structure. Indeed, in this sense, Montejo both echoes Heidegger's affirmation that poetry is not 'building in the sense of raising and fitting buildings', but 'the primal form of building' (Heidegger 2001: 224–25), and also provides us with his own definition of this 'primal form of building': it is, paradoxically, a form of building prior to, and without, form.

However, it is important to emphasize here that this engagement with the theory of the nature of an 'authentic' poetic construction and the concept of 'authentic' or kabbalic stones does not indicate a move away from the specificity of the loss at hand. In fact, quite the opposite is the case. Montejo frequently reminds us that the stones of which he talks, the stones from which he seeks to construct his poetic city are very specifically the essential, originary stones of Venezuela. In 'Mi país baja al mar' from *Alfabeto del mundo* Montejo emphasizes that he is concerned with the 'antiguas piedras' of 'mi país', where 'ninguna [de las piedras] es jónica o corintia, nunca fueron a Grecia,/ detestan los viajes' (Montejo 1988: 190), and in *El cuaderno de Blas Coll* the author declares that his countryfolk's habitat is to be a *casa* 'hecha con las piedras del lugar' (Montejo 1998: 35, italics mine). Montejo's concern throughout his engagement with, and theorizing of, *piedras*, then, is still very much for the construction of a Venezuelan poetic habitat.

Yet what this last quotation also reveals is a certain blurring of terms evident throughout Montejo's poetics of habitat and loss. On the one hand Montejo writes of the construction of a poetic city for the collective society of twentieth-century Venezuela. But on the other hand he cannot help but slip into referring to this city as a *casa*, 'la casa de todos' (Montejo 1998: 35), as he declares in *El cuaderno de Blas Coll*.

Certainly, in his depiction of the collective habitat as determined by a national Orphic poetic figure, a Ramos Sucre figure, Montejo goes some way to suggesting how his search for a personal poetic habitat might relate to this collective poetic construction: the building of the poetic city is inseparable from the construction of the *casa* of Montejo — the poetic figure himself — in that, without the poet being at home in poetry, and thus at home *as* poet, there can be no wider poetic construction. But it is two poems which appear one after the other in the collection *Algunas palabras* (1976)<sup>16</sup> which hold the real key to seeing both how Montejo conceives of his personal poetic *casa* being created and how he attempts to link such a construction to the wider question of the collective habitat.

The first poem, 'Las nubes', describes how:

Las nubes me dispersan por el mundo,  
 [...]
 Las horas de mi infancia fueron nubes  
 entre los árboles de un patio,  
 el resto se me pierde en sus estelas.  
 [...]
 Yo que me las soñé fijas en casa  
 esa mañana vi que derivaban  
 ya muy lejos de mis cuatro paredes.  
 ('Las nubes' (Montejo 1976: 63))

The fixity and seeming timelessness of the poetic childhood *casa* are now gone, replaced by a wandering far from this ordinary home, which is now lost in the wake of the dispersing clouds. The following poem, 'El otro', however, describes how an Orphic-like poetic figure reverses this process:

Llama a todas las casas de la tierra,  
 cambia dolor por compañía,  
 hastío por inocencia,  
 y de noche se acerca a mi lámpara,  
 escribe para que las nubes amanezcan  
 más al centro del patio,  
 junto al país que nos espera.  
 ('El otro' (Montejo 1976: 65))

Turning once again to a Heideggerean framework, we see how, in these two poems, Montejo grants clouds a similar meaning to Heidegger in his reading of Hölderlin's 'Home-coming' in 'Remembrance of the poet'.<sup>17</sup> For Heidegger, clouds, hovering over the earth on which we dwell and below the sky to which they reach, are synonymous with the poetic moment: 'The cloud writes poetry', Heidegger declares (Heidegger 1949: 266). And in these poems by Montejo we see the same idea. The clouds are initially linked with the poetic *casa* of infancy, and their dispersal synonymous with precisely the move into unpoetic language which we have seen Montejo identify as the nature of the current 'inauthentic' habitat: all that is left of the past habitat, we are told, is the 'resto', or surplus, which is now lost in the wake of the clouds, the term 'estelas' referring to the wake of a ship which leads back, of course, not to origins, but just to the open expanse of the sea.<sup>18</sup>

Following this dispersal, Montejo portrays the envisaged return to the lost 'authentic' *casa* in terms of an Orphic-like poetic figure fusing with the poet working by lamplight and,



through him, writing to effect a return to the cloud lingering above the homely patio of the mythic and poetic *casa* of infancy: that is, a return to poetry. In effect, then, these poems point to Heidegger's assertion in the same essay, 'Remembrance of the poet', that 'it is in writing that the principal return home consists' (Heidegger 1949: 281): the clouds are both the potentiality and writing of poetic language, and that of which Montejo seeks the return. In short, the clouds are the *casa*, the 'authentic' poetic dwelling. Poetic writing is not just, as Heidegger declares, 'the actual homecoming' (Heidegger 1949: 281), but is shown in these poems to be the home itself too.

But Montejo goes further. In 'El otro', he describes the re-forming of the clouds or poetic *casa* as being synonymous with the homeless poetic figure rediscovering the poetic essence, becoming Orphic in nature and scope. Yet a closer reading of 'Las nubes' reveals that there is more at stake here than synonymy. In this poem, clouds and self are blurred: they disperse him, yet the childhood *casa* is lost in their wake, as if they were the ones who were being dispersed. Likewise, at the end of the poem, the clouds are described as being far from the site of the old *casa*, where initially it is he — the poet — who is scattered far and wide. More than synonymy, then, the poetic self is the clouds, that is, he is poetic writing. In short, the poet is revealed, in this loss of and return to poetry and to being an Orphic poet, as being one with poetic language, as being one with the 'authentic' poetic habitat.<sup>19</sup>

And this is the heart of Montejo's response to the loss of the personal *casa*. We have seen how Montejo describes 'plain' language as our skin, our house, and yet, equally, our prison. That is, we are trapped within the walls of language, the walls which 'nos tapien el mundo' ('Final provisorio' (Montejo 1982: 66)). For the figure of the poet, then, the change in habitat from language to poetry marks a shift from being inside the space contained by language to inhabiting the walls of language themselves. The poet no longer inhabits language in the sense of being bound and bounded by it. He — as poet — is not in the house any more, he is the house, the poetic house.

But, having signalled this poetic move into the walls of the house, we are also made aware that, in the poem 'El otro', Montejo then shifts the terms. From the concern with the personal *casa* of the poet in 'Las nubes', the envisaged return to the 'authentic' poetic habitat in the second poem talks of this being a matter for all the houses of the earth. The Orphic poet re-forms the clouds, reconstructs the poetic *casa* with its homely patio. But the house standing in this patio is now not that of the poet, but that of the country as a whole: the poet's poetic habitat or home is to be that of the collective, of the whole nation.

And yet, despite this affirmation of a poetic habitat accomplished, something is not quite right. Going back to our initial observations of the loneliness of the poet as he contemplates the lack of 'authentic' habitats both personal and societal, we see how the pined-after poetic habitat has always been one where Montejo '[se] reconozca menos solitario' ('Poema de la calle Quito' (Montejo 1988: 167)), where there is communion, with everyone 'partiendo juntos cada vez el pan' ('Terredad' (Montejo 1978: 17)). But, in fact, we are left with a poetics which remains pervaded by solitude, with much of his later work, in particular *El cuaderno de Blas Coll, Guitarra del horizonte* (1991),<sup>20</sup> and several essays from *El taller blanco*, being dominated by the image of the solitary poetic figure, often portrayed as living alone by the sea on the Venezuelan coast. This positioning of the poet is highly significant: his *casa* is the coastline of the country, its borders, its walls. That is to say, his poetic habitat, with which he is one, is also the *casa* of the whole nation, just as our reading of his poetry has suggested. It encloses the country, which thus lives within the poet's poetic walls.

Yet here is the essential problematic, and the reason for the tension between the personal and the collective habitats remaining unresolved: in the envisaged poetic construction, only the poet makes the move from the inside to the walls of the habitat itself, from being bounded by language to being one with poetic language. Montejo has sought to redefine his countryfolk's 'inauthentic' habitat, to poeticize it, but he can, finally, only describe a way of inhabiting the poetic on the personal level, for himself. Concerned with a mythical habitat, a habitat outside of time and physical space, he is ultimately unable to effect a change within the history and spatial reality of his country. Having contemplated the habitats he is faced with in modern Venezuela, the Orphic poet can merely construct his own house apart, and wait in vain for the rest to join him, condemned ineluctably to repeat the paradox of Orpheus himself of being both at home in the world and yet grounded in alienation:

Viene a cantar (si canta) a nuestra puerta,  
a todas las puertas. Aquí se queda,  
aquí planta su casa y paga su condena  
porque nosotros somos el Infierno.  
(‘Orfeo’)<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, "... Poetically Man Dwells ...", in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. with introd. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), pp. 209–27, p. 213.

<sup>2</sup> Almost all critics who have written on Montejo have paid attention to both these two aspects of his work. However, on the sense of nostalgia for what is lost, see in particular: Luis Eyzaguirre, 'Eugenio Montejo: Poeta de fin de siglo', *Inti: Revista de Literatura Hispánica*, 37–38 (Spring–Fall 1993), 123–32; Miguel Gomes, *El pozo de las palabras* (Caracas: Fondo Editorial Fundarte, 1990), pp. 107–13; and Francisco Rivera, 'La poesía de Eugenio Montejo', in *Entre el silencio y la palabra* (Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1986), pp. 39–58. On the poem as an architectural construction, see in particular: Américo Ferrari, 'Eugenio Montejo y el alfabeto del mundo', introduction to Eugenio Montejo, *Alfabeto del mundo* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988), pp. 9–28; and Consuelo Hernández, 'La arquitectura poética de Eugenio Montejo', *Inti: Revista de Literatura Hispánica*, 37–38 (Spring–Fall 1993), 133–43.

<sup>3</sup> My approach to Montejo's concept of habitat will focus on insights derived from my reading of the later works of Heidegger. Many other theoretical avenues, in particular structuralist ones, are possible and I shall be observing certain parallels with Derridean thought, though I shall not be exploring that path in detail in this article.

<sup>4</sup> Eugenio Montejo, *Élegos* (Caracas: Editorial Arte, 1967). Previous to this work, Montejo had published a small collection of sonnets under the title *Humano paraíso* (Valencia [Venezuela]: Impresiones Clima, 1959).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Cinders*, trans., ed., and with introd. by Ned Lukacher (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Many of the poems I shall be discussing in which Montejo reflects on the city as was and as is now are written very much with Venezuela as their setting, and often appeal specifically to the poet's own experiences, as we shall see. Whilst it is impossible to identify the city of which he is writing in his poems as being exclusively any one city in particular, the fact that he appears so frequently to speak from his own experience suggests a specific alignment with a city of Montejo's own past. This leads to the identification of both Caracas, the city in which Montejo was born and has subsequently spent a great deal of his life, and Valencia, the provincial city in which he spent a great deal of his upbringing. Both these cities are mentioned in his poetry: Valencia in the poem 'Valencia' (Eugenio Montejo, *Tropico absoluto* (Caracas:

Fondo Editorial Fundarte, 1982), pp. 32–33), and Caracas in the poems ‘Noche natal’ (Eugenio Montejo, *Terredad* (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1978), p. 50) and ‘Caracas’ (Montejo 1978: 55). Certainly, Caracas is the more prominent in his poetry, and the poem ‘Caracas’ explicitly links the Venezuelan capital with the theme of the changed city which I shall be exploring in this article. Moreover, Caracas is the example cited by Montejo in an interview with Rafael Arráiz Lucca when talking about precisely the way in which the habitat of the city has changed (Rafael Arráiz Lucca, ‘Conversación con Eugenio Montejo’, *Imagen* (*Artes, Letras, Espectáculos*. CONAC), 100–33 (septiembre de 1987), 3–5, p. 3).

<sup>7</sup> Eugenio Montejo, *El taller blanco* (Mexico: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Unidad Azcapotzalco, 1996), pp. 9–15. *El taller blanco* was first published in 1983, but subsequently revised and significantly enlarged with several new essays in 1996. This second edition is the one used here, but it is important to note that the essay in question, ‘Poesía en un tiempo sin poesía’, dates from the first edition.

<sup>8</sup> Eugenio Montejo, *La ventana oblicua* (Valencia [Venezuela]: Ediciones de la Dirección de Cultura de la Universidad de Carabobo, 1974), pp. 67–84. Montejo’s first published article on the work of Ramos Sucre (Eugenio Montejo, ‘El laúd del visionario’, *Imagen*, 45 (15–31 marzo 1969), page reference unknown) appeared some three years before ‘Aproximación a Ramos Sucre’ was written (1972). Unfortunately, the relevant copy of the journal *Imagen* is currently missing from the archives of the Biblioteca Nacional in Caracas. Montejo also published a further essay on Ramos Sucre entitled ‘Nueva aproximación a Ramos Sucre’ (Montejo 1996: 29–39). This essay dates from the first edition (1983) of *El taller blanco*.

<sup>9</sup> The figure of Orpheus pervades Montejo’s work, and in particular his poetry, both on an explicit and an implicit level. Considerations of space do not allow me to go into detail here about this important aspect of Montejo’s work, and so, inevitably, part of the resonance and signification of the term ‘Orphic’ as I am using it in this article will not be evident. Nevertheless, the basic meaning of the term as used in the field and study of poetry provides a general framework for its understanding with regard to Montejo. For an introduction to the figure of Orpheus in Montejo’s poetry see Rivera 1986: 39–58.

<sup>10</sup> Eugenio Montejo, *El cuaderno de Blas Coll* (Mexico: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Unidad Azcapotzalco, 1998). *El cuaderno de Blas Coll* was first published in 1981. It was subsequently revised and significantly enlarged in both 1983 and 1998. The edition used here is the largest and most recent.

<sup>11</sup> The presence of Heidegger in the development of this image of language as our *casa* or dwelling is made particularly explicit in the pre-preface to *El cuaderno de Blas Coll* entitled ‘Liminar’ (Montejo 1998: 5–7). Here, the reference made in the text to language as the ‘piel del hombre’ is immediately aligned with ‘esa casa maravillosa que el filósofo Heidegger nos dijo que no habitábamos, sino que nos habita’ (Montejo 1998: 5).

<sup>12</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

<sup>13</sup> Montejo 1996: 135–42.

<sup>14</sup> See Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, trans. by J. Fentress (London: Fontana Press, 1997), pp. 28–32, for relevant extracts from the *Sefer Yetzirah* and comments on the nature of the stones/letters of this tradition.

<sup>15</sup> The publication *Alfabeto del mundo* brings together an anthology of Montejo’s poetry up to and including *Trópico absoluto* and the previously unpublished collection *Alfabeto del mundo* itself. This collection is dated 1986, although the book of the same name, in which it first appears, was first published in 1987. The collection *Alfabeto del mundo* was subsequently amplified with several additional poems and republished in a new edition of the anthology *Alfabeto del mundo* in 1988. It is this later edition which is being used here.

<sup>16</sup> Eugenio Montejo, *Algunas palabras* (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1976).

<sup>17</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘Remembrance of the Poet’, trans. by Douglas Scott, in *Existence and Being*, with introd. by Werner Brock (London: Vision Press Ltd, 1949), pp. 251–90.

<sup>18</sup> This is an image which strongly recalls Derrida’s concept of the origin, whereby any attempt to return to the origin or centre proves impossible. The origin, for Derrida, is always already absent, and any search for it merely leads back to the play of *différance*, of language, alignable with the notion of unpoetic language in Montejo’s work. On Derrida’s concept of the origin, or centre, see, for example, Jacques Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, in *Writing and Difference*, trans. with introd. and notes by Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2001), pp. 351–70.

<sup>19</sup> Whilst this return to poetry is portrayed as an Orphic process, it is worth noting that there is a sense here in which the poetic figure is Orphic not just in the rediscovery and re-formation of poetry/clouds, but also in the scattering apart and dispersal of the poetic self/clouds in ‘Las nubes’. This latter image repeats the

radical dislocation and dismemberment of Orpheus by the Maenads, enabling us to see 'Las nubes' and 'El otro' as a reworking of the Orpheus myth, where, following his dissemination, Orpheus would somehow enact a return and re-formation as the poet at — and as — one with the world and thus truly at home.

<sup>20</sup> Sergio Sandoval, *Guitarra del horizonte*, prefacio y selección de Eugenio Montejo (Caracas: Alfávil Ediciones, 1991). Sergio Sandoval is one of Montejo's heteronyms.

<sup>21</sup> Eugenio Montejo, *Muerte y memoria* (Caracas: Dirección de Cultura de la Universidad Central, 1972), p. 19.