

Nieve natal: The Poetic Language of Eugenio Montejo

From *Élegos* (1967) to *Fábula del escriba* (2006a), the poetics of Eugenio Montejo is concerned with loss: loss of the poet's childhood, its locales and those who populated it; loss, more broadly, of an essential – and poetic – contact with nature, symptomatic, amongst other things, of the move towards ever greater industrialisation in the second half of the twentieth century, not least as experienced in Venezuela itself; loss of a sense of poetic and national traditions. More than just a bemoaning of the inevitable passage of time, however, Montejo's poetics reveals that language is intimately bound up with this process of loss and of our experience of it. Language is, in short, a problem. Such is disclosed in several key references in *Élegos*, Montejo's first major collection of poetry following the earlier *Humano paraíso* (1959) (a collection which has yet to receive the critical focus required of the first poetic work of such an important poet). In 'Tan ululante vuelve y no verídica', he talks obliquely of 'la ceniza de un vano parloteo' (1967: 13), a line in which, not least given Montejo's stated attraction to Quevedo's work, it is hard not hear echoes of the latter's famous 'Amor constante más allá de la muerte', with its final lines 'serán ceniza, mas tendrán sentido; | polvo serán, mas polvo enamorado' (1995: 507). Montejo's verse, then, ties language to this poetic discourse of death, doing so, moreover, with nothing of the affirmation found in the Quevedean sonnet, but with a tone and a focus of degradation and finitude. Similarly, when, earlier on in the collection, Montejo asks 'De quién es esta casa que está caída | de quién eran sus alas atormentadas' (1967: 12), the juxtaposition of 'es' and 'eran' does, as Américo Ferrari notes, '[abre] toda la perspectiva de la incesante confrontación de la presencia y la ausencia, del presente y el pasado, de la vida y la muerte' (1988: 15). But it also shows the inevitable slippage into death which language itself effects: no sooner is the house named than it is made

past. Language, that is, is understood as the cause of loss, as that which renders absent or dead the very things which it pretends to (make) present. It is, to be sure, a portrayal of language that chimes with a distinctly Derridean understanding of how the latter serves to efface or to absent the essence of that which it names.

Yet, along with loss, Montejo's poetics is also consistently concerned with poetry as the potential means by which what is lost might be restituted, and through which future loss might be guarded against. As the depiction of language outlined above intimates, such a poetics would necessitate a (re)new(ed) language, a poetic language that somehow escapes the deathly effect of its more mundane counterpart. What is more, just as the loss depicted in Montejo's work is often centred around the specific ways in which person, national, and ontological loss has been found and experienced in Venezuela, both by the poet himself and beyond, so too is there a concomitant need for the poetic language sought to be a poetic language of and that speaks for Venezuela and, more generally, the tropical habitat from which Montejo writes. And it is, I shall contend, around the central leitmotif of snow that just such a poetics is constructed.

One of the most striking aspects of Montejo's use of snow, and, given the setting of the Venezuelan tropics, also one of the most logical, is that it appears predominantly as a lack, and it is this lack of snow in Venezuela and the tropics generally with which Montejo is primarily concerned, coming to occupy a central thematic in his work which burrows its way through his poetry like a trail of absence: in *Algunas palabras* we are told that 'No conocen la nieve nuestras casas' ('Nuestras casas' (1976: 25), for example, and in *Trópico absoluto* (1982) the Ávila mountain which provides the backdrop to Caracas is twice described as 'sin nieve' ('El Ávila',

(1982: 25)). It also emerges as a particularly central motif in *Partitura de la cigarra* (1999), not least in the opening poem ‘Tal vez’, which begins:

Tal vez sea todo culpa de la nieve
que prefiere otras tierras más polares,
lejos de estos trópicos.
(1999: 9)

Quite what the blame is for, here, is never made entirely clear. Montejo suggested in interview that when he talks in this poem of how:

Nuestro viejo ateísmo caluroso
y su divagación impráctica
quizá provengan de su ausencia,
(9)

he is referring to the ferocity of the heat leading to a harsher view of the world, less ready to hold religious beliefs and less prone to forgiveness.¹ But it is the following three lines which prove most illuminating, suggesting that what is at stake is the fall into loss and the absence of the past:

de que no caiga y sin embargo se acumule
en apiladas capas de vacío
hasta borrarlos de pronto los caminos.
(9)

The lack-of-snow, piling up, accumulating *like* snow, symbolises and describes the break between the present and the past, as is also suggested in the earlier poem ‘Visible e invisible’ from *Adiós el siglo XX* (1997), which talks of those who are dead or absent as being ‘aislados por la nieve del camino’ (1997: 44). The lack-of-snow covers the paths back to what the poet seek to re-present. Indeed, a similar image is also found further on in *Partitura de la cigarra*, in ‘La puerta’, where the erased path

of ‘Tal vez’ and ‘Visible e invisible’ is supplemented by the image of the blocked door:

Nada de nieve en esta puerta,
sólo calor [...]
[...]
...Y la puerta atascada
de tanta nieve no caída
que siempre sigue no cayendo
hasta que este calor se vuelve frío.
(1999: 19)

These late poems speak, then, of a complete break, a nothingness or vacuum which absolutely cannot be traversed: progression is impeded, and a return to from where one has come is prevented.

Notable in Montejo’s use of lack-of-snow both as a description of the Venezuelan tropics and as a symbol for the separation between past and present (or its apparent re-presentation) is the extent to which it is depicted in terms which show it acting like snow: in ‘Tal vez’ the lack of snow piles up layer upon layer and in ‘La puerta’ it turns the tropical heat cold. Its coldness is also made explicit in the earlier poem ‘Hombres sin nieve’ from *Trópico absoluto*. On the one hand this poem affirms the lack-of-snow as equating to a lack of cold, stating that:

Sobre estas tierras no ha nevado en muchos siglos,
esquiamos en la luna, desde lejos,
con largavistas,
sin helarnos la sangre.
(1982: 8)

But it then goes on to describe how:

Aquí el invierno nace de heladas subjetivas
lleno de ráfagas salvajes;
depende de una mujer que amamos y se aleja,
de sus cartas que no vendrán pero se aguardan;

nos azota de pronto en largas avenidas
cuando nos queman sus hielos impalpables.
Aquí el invierno puede llegar a cualquier hora,
no exige leños, frazadas, abrigos,
nos [*sic*, 'no']² despoja los árboles,
y sin embargo cómo sabe caer bajo cero,
cómo nos hacen tiritar sus témpanos amargos.
(8)

The lack of snow and winter in the tropics is linked with a coldness which is even more pernicious, apt to strike at any time, not following the yearly cycle of the seasons. It is felt not with the arrival of physical snow or cold winds, but precisely with loss: a loved woman who goes away and from whom no letters will come, as all possibility of contact is erased. It is a coldness, an ice, and a snow synonymous with the sense of absence, as the ubiquitous loss of Montejo's early poetics is here crystalised as an essential and profound coldness. As with the poems from *Partitura de la cigarra*, the abiding image is one of layers of cold nothingness, of absence, separating forever the speaker from what is past.

The use of lack-of-snow as synonymous with and, as evident from the poems cited, possibly both the cause and effect of, the irretrievable absence into which everything falls, suggests that snow itself is, potentially, the opposite to this: capable of preserving the past, that which is dead or distant. One of the earliest mentions of snow and the related ideas of ice and the coldness of winter occurs in 'Cementerio de Vaugirard' from *Muerte y memoria* (1972). Here, we are given a scene where what is described is not the absence of snow, but its presence in the 'tierras más polares' of France. What emerges, however, is far from a eulogy on the substance whose lack is felt so painfully in Montejo's work. The poem begins with Montejo talking of 'Los muertos que conmigo se fueron a París' (1972: 7), who 'vivían en el cementerio

Vaugirard' (7). He then goes on to describe this cemetery where the 'muertos', who have been a focal point of his poetics since *Élegos*, were 'living' in Paris:

En el recodo de los fríos castaños
donde la nieve recoge las cartas
que el invierno ha lacrado,
recto lugar, gélidas tumbas, nadie, nadie
sabr  nunca leer sus epitafios.

(7)

The snow, then, *is* linked to preservation, in the twin images of letters gathered up by the snow, preserved intact by a lacquer of cold, and the tombs of the dead: frozen, covered, we imagine, with a layer of encasing ice. But this preservation, far from signifying a presencing of what it preserves, in fact serves both to effect and mark its loss: the letters are sealed off by the cold, just as the layer of ice on the tombs prevents any possibility of even reading the epitaphs, let alone getting to the body inside. In effect, the *presence* of snow and cold is shown to lead to and symbolise exactly the same move into absence and loss as the *lack* of snow and cold. Indeed, both are depicted in the same terms, with the description of the lack-of-snow and winter in 'Hombres sin nieve' as full of 'r fagas salvajes' and 't mpanos amargos' (1982: 8) being anticipated in the description of the 'helado aguaviento' in 'Cementerio de Vaugirard' as 'soplando sobre amargas r fagas' (1972: 7). Montejo bemoans the lack-of-snow, then, but snow itself is shown to be nothing but (a marker of) loss and absence. Put simply, what is being lamented is the absence of (an) absence, the lack of (a) lack, as, no sooner is snow apparently made present, than it is no longer capable of being the presence or 'presencing element' it was imagined to be. The lack can only potentially be filled; it can never actually be filled.

But the importance of the use of snow/lack-of-snow as a motif only really becomes clear once we see that Montejo uses the lack-of-snow in Venezuela and the

tropics more widely not just as a cipher for the process of loss, of time passing and leaving people and places behind forever, but, as the title of ‘Hombres sin nieve’ indicates, to define both the region and its people. In interview in 2002 Montejo is explicit in bringing out the centrality of snow-as-lacking in determining both Venezuela and what it is to be Venezuelan, at least insofar as this is synonymous with being from the tropics.³ He states that:

Para el hombre de los trópicos la nieve es algo con cuya carencia, sin resignarse del todo, se acostumbra desde niño a dialogar, pues no son pocos las leyendas y cuentos infantiles donde ella es parte esencial del paisaje. Ese diálogo prosigue a lo largo de la vida, aunque ella falte en nuestra geografía, pues constituye un apócrifo complemento de nuestro imaginario.

(Gutiérrez 2002)

Snow, that is, is at the heart of the formation and understanding of the self in Venezuela. In other words, it is bound up with an ontological questioning, and one concerned explicitly with being in Venezuela and as a Venezuelan. Two important elements emerge from Montejo’s words here. The first is that the *formación del ser* described is centred around precisely what is absent in Venezuela, whose *paisaje* is immediately conceived of by the growing Venezuelan as lacking: ‘Venezuelan ontology’ is built, then, upon a central lack. Secondly, this ontological hollowing out in the Venezuelan tropics is also tied up with the idea that the absent past and the dead are a constitutive part of the (present) self, in that the lack-of-snow in Montejo’s verse is a cipher for just such a loss or absence of the past.

However, what is crucial here, both for an understanding of the nature of the Venezuelan self thus formed and for an appreciation of what is at stake in the snow/lack-of-snow symbolism more generally, is the fact that Montejo should locate the earliest and formative encounter with snow in literature or story, and describe both the initial and the ongoing ontological process as a dialogue. These references

disclose the centrality of language in Montejo's engagement with snow, and, taken together with the notion of the lack-of-snow which needs to be filled, point up what is a highly resonant and revealing alignment of Montejo's snow with the Derridean supplement. For Derrida, there is a lack at the heart of language which one needs constantly to supplement. Put simply, each signifier's meaning is never fully contained within itself, but is endlessly deferred down the signifying chain, needing, that is, to be supplemented by other signifiers as its meaning is sought. In short, this lack constitutes the very nature of language itself: it is (the condition of) language. Within Montejo's poetics, the attempt of filling the lack(-of-snow) (which 'behaves' like snow) by snow (which 'behaves' like the lack-of-snow) mirrors precisely the workings of Derrida's supplementarity, in that, as Robert Bernasconi puts it, 'what is added to take the place of a lack or default is itself a lack' (1992: 145), that is, the supplement is merely another signifier shot through by absence. More pertinently, given Montejo's declarations above, the implication is that being is hollow, made possible and defined by lack, because, put simply, being is language.⁴ Indeed, this is what Montejo appears to be saying when he describes the Venezuelan self as being formed and maintained through dialogue.

The specific role and identification of 'snow' in this schema becomes clear when one looks at how the fundamental lack in language is conceived of by Derrida as that of the 'transcendental signified', an anchoring 'centre' whose meaning is fully present and outside of the play of *différance*, or the chain of supplementarity, and whose absence thus 'étend à l'infini le champ et le jeu de la signification' (1967: 411), that is, makes (the play of) meaning possible. For Derrida, the only way of stopping the play of *différance* is by attaining this transcendental signified. But this is an illusion: it is never knowable outside of language. Indeed, the point is that it can only

be referred to as language: it is the ‘*présence centrale [...] qui a toujours déjà été déportée hors de soi dans son substitut*’ (1967: 411), be this substitute the term God, transcendence, existence, or whatever other word one wishes to use. In Montejo’s poetics, ‘snow’ is the term used as this substitute. As with Derrida’s ‘transcendental signified’, what is lacking is knowable only as a name (‘snow’), since the snow which is ‘ever-present’ in the literature is, of course, precisely not ‘present’; it is a word or signifier, a substitute, which, as such, is hollow, shot through by the absence of what it seeks to represent. Moreover, the fact that the Venezuelan child only perceives the lack when (s)he sees it named or represented in texts – and, significantly, in myths of origins (‘*leyendas*’) – underscores that the lack(-of-snow) has indeed ‘*toujours déjà été déportée hors de soi dans son substitut*’ (Derrida 1967: 411), that is, into the word ‘snow’. In sum, it is not just that the Venezuelan child sees his or her world as lacking because of an essential difference between it and the world of the literature (s)he reads, but that the literature represents the child’s ‘becoming’ as a linguistic being.

By using (lack-of-)snow as the metaphor in which such ontological lack is played out in his work, and thus engaging with the Derridean theory of the supplement, Montejo, as we have seen, announces the ineffectiveness of simply replacing the lack-of-snow by snow, of adding the lacking supplement. Yet there is also a crucial difference between Montejo’s and Derrida’s schemas, and it lies in the relationship between Montejo’s choice of symbol (snow) and the geographical concerns and specificities in which it is placed in his work. Forking off from Derrida’s line, the ineffectiveness of the supplemented snow in bringing about an end to the lack is accompanied by an important caveat: the supplemented ‘actual’ snow which does not work is a European snow. In ‘*Cementerio de Vaugirard*’ the snow whose presence merely leads to the same sense of a closing off of and from the past is

that of colder climes, the snow of Paris. *This* snow, Montejo's work reveals, ultimately offers no solution to the ontological and linguistic problems of loss and lack in the tropics of Venezuela. But that does not mean that the search for a snow which *can* preserve without preserving as loss, a snow which can (keep) present is abandoned. Rather, Montejo seeks to move beyond both this simple process of filling the lack with what is lacking and the appeal to the sort of snow found in places like Paris which this implies, refusing to 'resignarse del todo' (Gutiérrez 2002).

Quite how he attempts to do this is disclosed in 'El ángel indeciso', from *Terredad* (1978). Here, Montejo offers a review of his poetry and its dominant thematics, pointing out many of the apparent contradictions it contains. The 'ángel' in question appears as a sort of poetic superego guiding Montejo's thoughts and work. It is significant, then, that Montejo declares that this 'ángel' 'busca la nieve de los trópicos' (1978: 66). It is a crucial line in Montejo's poetics of snow. Rather than the snow of 'tierras más polares' (1999: 9), which seems often to be what Montejo works towards, here he makes it clear that his poetry is ultimately a search for a *tropical* snow. The inability of the snow of Paris to be the potential snow he seeks, a preserving and presencing snow, is inextricably linked, then, to its not being a snow of and for the place from which Montejo is writing his poetics centred in and around the experiences of Venezuela in general and of himself as a Venezuelan.

The question then arises as to what the nature of such a tropical snow is; how it is different from other snow; and just how it preserves as presence, thus restituting linguistic and ontological wholeness. It is a question addressed in 'Islandia', from *Algunas palabras*, where Montejo talks of:

Esta contradicción ecuatorial
de buscar una nieve
que preserve en el fondo su calor,

que no borre las hojas de los cedros.
(1976: 41)

What is described here is the need for a snow which *does* preserve, like the snow in ‘Cementerio de Vaugirard’, but which does not seal off or freeze that which it envelops. Rather than being synonymous with death, it is a snow which uses its cold to retain and preserve what I shall term the ‘life-heat’ or ‘heat of being’ of that which it covers, the same ontological heat which Montejo presents as lacking in Venezuela in poems such as ‘Hombres sin nieve’. What is more, that such a snow is precisely the desired ‘nieve de los trópicos’ (1978: 66) is made clear in the way that these lines do not just represent a description of a snow which preserves the life-heat in abstract terms. Rather, the ‘calor’ which is preserved is also the very *calor tropical* of Venezuela. In other words, the snow of ‘Cementerio de Vaugirard’ not only seals off and freezes past lives, but, in the process, announces itself as diametrically opposed to the heat of the tropics. In Venezuela, and in Montejo’s ‘Venezuelan’ poetics, the ‘authentic’ snow sought acts both to halt loss, to make present and whole, and also to preserve the nature and identity of Venezuela, as an authentic and whole being is inextricably tied up with the place of being of the people in question, its climate and topography.

Given the intricacies of this engagement with snow and heat, it is perhaps unsurprising that Montejo should give us an ambiguous, if not contradictory, presentation of heat and coldness in his work, where he both *laments* the burning heat (for example, in ‘El sol en todo’ from *Fábula del escriba*) and talks of ‘la falta que nos hace [la nieve]’ (‘Tal vez’, 1999: 9) and yet elsewhere proudly *affirms* the heat of Venezuela and declares that ‘[a nuestras casas] no les hace falta [la nieve]’ (‘Nuestras casas’, 1976: 25). Clearly, the ambiguity and seeming impossibility of the task the

poet has given himself are concordant with Derrida's thought. But the focused development of the snow leitmotif, not least in terms of the valorisation of a tropical snow, also represents both a greater willingness to persist in the search for a beyond of the problematics of *écriture*, and a deliberate refusal to be bound by the European, either in terms of the meaning and use of symbols, or in terms of the philosophical and poststructuralist strands brought into play in the course of his quest for an end to loss and lack. What is more, this dual engagement and rejection of *lo europeo* is made particularly evident in the alignment of Montejo's snow with another of Derrida's formulations for the workings of language, namely cinders (recalling, in addition, the 'ceniza de un vano parloteo' found in *Élegos* (1967: 13)). And it is in this alignment that we see the extent to which European theoretical models are alluded to in Montejo's work in order both to aid the thinking of what is at stake and to serve as examples of what must be rejected in favour of autochthonous metaphors and formulations.

Derrida talks of cinders as a cipher for the workings of language in that they are the irreducible presence of what is absent, a sign of what once was, standing for its absence even as it stands for it: 'C'est là la cendre: ce qui garde pour ne plus même garder vouant le reste à la dissipation' (1991: 35), where, as Ned Lukacher puts it, 'cinder names [...] that burning within language. To hear, to speak, to write, is to feel the heat, the retreat of the fire as the cinder falls, yet again, to ash' (Derrida 1991: 3). The burning within language is written out *by* language, by the cinders which point to its absence. This, of course, echoes the coldness of Montejo's snow, which freezes or writes out both the life-heat and the tropical heat which it envelops. Turning to the poem 'El Ávila' from *Trópico absoluto*, we see this convergence of Montejo's snow and Derrida's cinders made explicit. Here, looking at a 'fotografía de nuestros padres'

(1982: 25) (in the generic, national sense, rather than a photograph of any one set of parents in particular) in which the snow-less Ávila forms an immovable backdrop, Montejo asks:

¿No será nieve esa lenta ceniza
que ahora cae de sus rostros?
Y ese frío que sentimos al verlos
entre los marcos clavados sobre el muro,
¿no es el invierno al que llegamos tarde?
(1982: 25)

These lines reaffirm what I have noted regarding the ‘heladas subjetivas’ of Venezuela, the coldness arriving not with an actual winter, but with the contemplation of an image of what is irretrievably in the past. And they also enact precisely the process Derrida describes, as the cinders, revealed as being snow by another name, fall from the faces of the now-dead as cold ash, as the irreducible mark of their absence.

This bringing together of Derrida’s cinders and Montejo’s snow is helpful in casting further light on what the latter tells us about the nature of language in Montejo’s poetics. Continuing the quotation above, Derrida states that ‘c’est là la cendre: ce qui garde pour ne plus garder, vouant le reste à la dissipation, et ce n’est plus personne disparue laissant là cendre, seulement son nom mais illisible’ (1991: 35). Cinders, that is, are both language and, in some sense, the lack of (legible or meaningful) language. And this is exactly what is seen in ‘Cementerio de Vaugirard’, where the snow seals the ‘cartas’ and the ‘epitafios’, making them, like Derrida’s ‘nom mais illisible’, illegible. Once again, we see Montejo defining lives as language, but we now come to see it as, in an essential sense, illegible language. Indeed, this is also the case in the poem ‘En las hojas’ from *Alfabeto del mundo* (1988), where the autumn leaves/lives are ‘llenas de nervaduras ilegibles’ (1988: 165). Lives are

language, leaves on which the being of the self is written. Yet this language is at the same time a crossing out of itself, a rendering of itself illegible. It is this move that Montejo's snow describes and enacts, naming that which cannot be read.

The question remains, then, as to what it is that language names unintelligibly; what is this 'inner burning', in Derrida's terms, or the life-heat in Montejo's poetics, which snow-language covers in an incomprehensible naming? The answer lies in a differentiation between this snow-language, language-as-we-have-it, and the idea of the *essence* of language. That is, if snow in Montejo's work is language *per se*, then the tropical and ontological life-heat comes to be seen as the *essence* of language (and, hence, being), Derrida's 'lacking presence', and that which language seeks to present, but can, as a supplement, only supplant. And it is here that Montejo's snow reveals its advantages over Derrida's cinders, on both a general, theoretical level and a local level. On the theoretical level, cinders, as language, are the remnants of a fire, but represent the turning cold of its essence. As such, they act as a symbol for the process of loss, of absencing which the movement into language effects. But Montejo's snow portrays more effectively and in a more consistent way the problematic nature of language and being I have been exploring in both Derrida and Montejo's work. Rather than standing for a conversion of essence into non-essence, as do cinders, in Montejo's snow formulation, language does not lose its essence. Rather, it never has it, which would seem to be more in line with Derrida's own thinking. Beyond this, Montejo's snow has the further distinction that it is not just a description of the process; it also describes an attempt at recovery, at preserving the heat which is – inevitably – lost. It is a crucial shift in focus, which emphasises the role and nature of language not just as a move into the endless deferral of *différance*, but as a repeated – if vain – attempt at overcoming that move. In this way, we see how snow serves as

an advance on cinders not just on a local level, in being a symbol whose lack in the tropical *paisaje* underscores its nature and effects, but also as an intellectual advance, in being a representation both of the process of loss in language and of how that process can be viewed simultaneously as an attempted overcoming of itself, just as Montejo views it in poems such as ‘Islandia’. Indeed, it is notable that in ‘El Ávila’ Montejo affirms in anticipatory fashion the primacy – and advance – of his particularly Venezuelan formulation over Derrida’s (European) one, as he asks: ‘¿No será nieve esa ceniza?’ (1982: 25). Montejo’s snow, that is, supersedes cinders both locally and theoretically.

The effect of this use of (tropical) snow as a symbol is, then, to highlight that Montejo’s quest is not just generally for a type of snow, or language, which will be an authentic, whole language, escaping the problematics of the hollow, lacking language which we have now and in which we find our being, but that it is a search more accurately described as being for a new, ‘authentic(ally Venezuelan) language’, which would bring about the recovery of the past and the halting of the slide into absence as experienced within this locus, and which, in the process, would remove tropical Venezuela and its people from the inauthentic or ‘hollow’ being in which they find themselves.

But there is one further implication to be drawn from the contrast between Derrida’s cinders and Montejo’s snow. Cinders, as I have noted, mark the difference between (essential) heat and (linguistic) coldness, and do so through the metaphor of a one-way process of decomposition: the irreversible breaking down of the essence, the ‘unnameable thing’, as its own heat reduces it to cinders and ash. Snow, however, constitutes – chemically and physically – a tight and ordered structure, enabling us to see how Montejo’s poetics hints at the idea of a more affirmatory view of language,

accentuating its cohesiveness rather than any process of disintegration. Moreover, whilst snow can be melted or broken down, it can just as well be reformed. In short, Montejo's formulation is neither irreversible nor is it a disintegration into less order or cohesion. By presenting the search for a new language as a search for a new (tropical) snow, then, Montejo's work not only announces a refusal to be inscribed in a theoretics of language where there is no possibility of a recovery of loss/what is lost, thus affording itself a glimmer of hope, but also points to the new language as ordered and constructed, signalling that this quest is to be an active construction of a new language in and for tropical Venezuela, a construction in which the poet will be central.

Flour: 'nieve natal'

In this search for an authentic (Venezuelan) snow, capable of preserving as presence, Montejo settles on one key possibility: flour. This identification is worked through in two key pieces: the poem 'La cuadra' from *Trópico absoluto* and the title essay of the collection *El taller blanco* (1996), first appearing in 1983 (1996: 127-34). In the latter, Montejo talks about his childhood, during which he spent a great deal of time in the 'taller blanco' of his father's bakery, watching the bread being made during the night. It is 'el taller que cobijó buena parte de mi infancia' (130), in which are grounded 'mi arte y [...] mi vida' (130). Moreover, it is, for Montejo, an example of the infancy which has slipped into absence:

Hablo de una vieja panadería, como ya no existen. [...] Ya no son necesarias las carretadas de leña con su envolvente fragancia resinosa, ni la harina se apila en numerosos cuartos de almacenaje. ¿Para qué? El horno en vez de una abovedada cámara de rojizos ladrillos, es ahora un cuadrado metálico de alto voltaje.

(130-1)

Evidently these lines reflect Montejo's Romantic sensibilities as they allude to the move into ever greater industrialisation and urbanisation in twentieth-century Venezuela. What is most notable, however, is that already here the importance of the 'harina' of this scene is being hinted at, and this is taken up a few lines later, as he declares that 'la harina es la sustancia esencial que en mi memoria resguarda aquellos años' (131). These lines contain the suggestion that the flour is the essential substance Montejo invokes so frequently in his work, preserving and presencing this scene for the poet. Indeed, that this is precisely what is implied here is confirmed and stated explicitly in the parallel poem 'La cuadra', where Montejo begins:

El tacto de la harina en las manos nocturnas,
nuestra humilde nieve natal
que Dios nos manda.
(1982: 20)

Flour is the 'nieve natal', the snow of Venezuela, that is, the tropical snow that I have identified as constituting the enigmatic centre of Montejo's poetics of loss.

Yet there are problematic resonances here. The way in which the flour works to 'resguardar' the scene as memories is strikingly similar to the description of the lack-of-snow covering all in 'La puerta' or 'Hombres sin nieve', or to that of the snow in 'Cementerio de Vaugirard', in that 'su blancura lo contagiaba todo: las pestañas, las manos, el pelo, pero también las cosas, los gestos, las palabras' (1996: 131). Indeed, not only is it portrayed as covering all, but it is specifically mentioned to be covering words, echoing the encased and sealed off 'cartas' and 'epitafios' of those poems. In short, the flour here is in danger of being seen as the same (lack-of-)snow-language bemoaned by Montejo. Like language, the flour covers that which is gone, keeping it in the memory, but keeping it as language: the shapes of the objects are perceptible underneath the blanket of flour or language, but the things themselves are not, as the

actual past is sealed off, silenced. Indeed, in the essay itself all we have left is linguistic memories which inscribe what is remembered in loss and absence, a fact highlighted towards the end, as Montejo laments: ‘Ya no veo, es verdad, a los panaderos ni oigo de cerca sus pláticas fraternas; en vez de leños ardidos me rodean centelleantes líneas de neón’ (1996: 133). Echoes of Mallarmé are strongly felt here. The repeated use of snow and flour – images of whiteness – recalls Mallarmé’s more prevalent use of white in images of snow, swans, icicles, sails, paper, not to mention the white spaces of the page in poems such as ‘Un Coup de Dés’ (1945: 457-77), and the idea of the (white) flour covering all, tracing its outline, resonates with how, in Mallarmé’s verse, ‘language [...] surrounds the immediate, a zone whose contents are always slipping away’ (McCann 1996: 396). So does this mean that flour, despite its affirmation as the ‘nieve natal’, is to be rejected as yet another failure to preserve without loss and to grant wholeness?

The answer to this question lies in seeing that the flour by itself does not and cannot constitute the desired language and being. Rather, it is the potential for it, (ful)filling the *theoretical* gap and need as Venezuelan, tropical snow. And it is poetry which is charged with turning this potentiality into actuality, as Montejo reveals at the end of ‘Tal vez’:

Sí, tal vez la nieve,
tal vez la nieve al fin tenga la culpa...
Ella y los paisajes que no la han conocido,
ella y los abrigos que nunca descolgamos,
ella y los poemas que aguardan su página blanca.
(1999: 9)

As these lines show, the snow is the page on which poems are to be written, providing, that is, a workable symbolic foundation for poetry to be the solution (the ‘authentic’ language) that Montejo envisages it as being. The image of the *taller*

covered in a layer of white flour, then, comes to be seen anew. It is now the white page covering the entire scene, covering every object, word, gesture, with the poet's task being thus to write on it, bringing out what is covered. In effect, we return to the need both to preserve and to bring out the essence or life-heat of language and things. But we can now firmly identify this task as the poetic task: the 'authentic', tropical snow is the symbolic potential for poetry to be the desired presencing language. Indeed, from his earliest essays, Montejo conceived of this as the poet's task, his engagement with snow bringing out new resonances in his affirmation in 1966 that 'revivir el ardor: he allí el punto más alto del velamen con que parte el poeta' (1966: 21). To bring the life-heat back to life is, then, to write on the white page of this flour-snow, bringing out what it preserves.

Yet, once again, we find that there are shortcomings in this proposal. As with the image of the (lack-of-)snow-language, whose preservative capabilities depend on a freezing of this 'ardor', likewise with flour the very act of writing on it writes over its whiteness, erases its essentiality and that which enables it to be the poetic potential. The logical conclusion is that we are left with just language, just the (lack-of-)snow-language from which Montejo wants an escape. In short, it would seem that, whilst providing the most enlightening and hopeful vista on the problem, flour ultimately falls short: one is left either with the image of a perfect whiteness, finally the 'snow' Montejo has been searching for, the potential page for the writing of the authentic language, but silent, communicating nothing, or with the image of the poet writing on the flour, using it as its base, as its grounding, yet in doing so writing out that which makes it authentic, and ending up once again as (lack-of-)snow-language. Poetry, then, is either silent or it is language. Either way, there is loss and absence.

But that is not the end of the matter. A key aspect of the scene depicted in both ‘El taller blanco’ and ‘La cuadra’ is that it is not just a scene from a now-absent place and time from the past which can potentially be made present through the ‘sustancia esencial’ (1996: 131) of flour. It also acts as a model for how the poet can proceed, in that it itself is imagined as *being* a place and time without the absenting and incomplete nature of language and being:

Son los seculares procedimientos casi medievales, más lentos y complicados que los actuales, pero más llenos de presencias míticas. [...] En el taller blanco tal vez quedó fijado para mí uno de esos ámbitos míticos que Bachelard ha recreado al analizar *la poética del espacio*.

(130-1)

The allusions to the medieval period signal that the *taller* was in tune with what Montejo sees as a more poetic, alchemic, and sacred time, when, as he says of the Middle Ages in *La ventana oblicua* (1974), ‘los metales, el fuego, los caballos y el sentido de las palabras, parecían a diario reavivarse en su contacto con la divinidad’ (1974: 137). Montejo, that is, casts this locale of and from his childhood as a somehow more ‘authentic’ space and time than the industrialised present. One way in which this might be understood is through Montejo’s frequent presentation of infancy and childhood more generally as a time when one was not aware of time, that is, when one is immune from the loss that time effects (‘Antes poseía las horas, | me gustaba flotar en sus nieblas’ (‘Deshora’, 1976: 87)). The key to understanding what enables such a presentation of childhood lies in the etymology of the word *infancia*, coming from the Latin *infans*, literally: speechless. Whilst the childhood period described here and elsewhere in Montejo’s verse and essays is certainly not that of him as a baby, that is, in a time of literal speechlessness, the fact that he uses the term *infancia* on repeated occasions as he looks back on this period underscores that childhood appears

as a timeless time because it is, in some essential sense, seen as prior to speech, or, more accurately, prior to language. In other words, it is seen as being prior to (the problems of) language as a marker of loss, as that which marks the absence of that which it seeks to re-present. And it is this idea of speechlessness, and, hence, timelessness, that predominates here, with the *taller*'s identification as a site beyond (the effects of) time and (ordinary) language being foregrounded in the emphasis placed on its mythic characteristics. Montejo announces the *taller* as a poetic space, beyond (historical) reality, as indicated by its alignment with the poetic 'ámbitos míticos' described in *La poétique de l'espace* (1958 [1957]), where Gaston Bachelard comments of this (re)creation of childhood spaces in (poetic) memory, that 'c'est sur le plan de la rêverie et non sur le plan des faits que l'enfance reste en nous vivante et poétiquement utile' (33). This is the plane on which the *taller* is found in Montejo's work, as it aligns itself with Bachelard's description of the space of the 'maison onirique, une maison du souvenir-songe, perdue dans l'ombre d'un au-delà du passé vrai' (33).⁵

Furthermore, it is also important to note that the scene found here is not poetic, or authentic, because of the way in which Montejo keeps it in his memory, that is, it is not the poetry we have before us which allows the scene to be poetic. Neither is it simply a result of its location in the period of childhood. Rather, it is also because of the scene itself: the work of the *panaderos* making the bread. In both 'El taller blanco' and 'La cuadra' Montejo focuses on how his father's bakery constitutes his poetic *taller*, and, underlining this role as an 'authentic' model for poetry, both pieces read as a paean to the bakers' *taller* as that which taught him everything he need know in order to carry out the poetic task:

Hablo de un aprendizaje poético real, de técnicas que aún empleo en mis noches de trabajo, pues no deseo metaforizar adrede un simple recuerdo. Esto mismo que digo, *mis noches*, vienen de allí. Nocturna era la faena de los panaderos como nocturna es la mía.⁶

(1996: 131)

The *panaderos* are figured as working at night to produce for the world the bread where, upon the completion of their work, ‘casa por casa el pan se repartió’ (‘La cuadra’, 1982: 20). The image is one of the production of a quasi-religious Eucharistic host for the world to commune with, in effect aligning the bread created in the *taller blanco* with a full, divine presence. This also ties in with the tone of Montejo’s writing here, which is one of religious reverence, the task being carried out by the bakers commanding deep awe and respect in the watching (and remembering) Montejo. And it is the task of the bakers itself which thus lends the entire scene its religious, poetic, and authentic character. Aside from the ‘técnicas’ and the nocturnal nature of the task, which Montejo did indeed take on in his poetic writing,⁷ we might observe that it is this sense of religious reverence, both on the part of the bakers towards their work and as what is evoked and produced by their *faena*, that Montejo sees as lying at the heart of the (authentic) *poetic* task. As at so many points in Montejo’s work, it is hard here not to perceive resonances with Heidegger, whose religious reverence towards both the poet and his task and the poetic product itself emerges, via Hölderlin, in his idea that ‘the speech of the poet is the intercepting of these signs [the language of the gods], in order to pass them on to his own people’ (1968: 311). But more about the Heideggerean elements revealed here later.

As an apprentice of the *taller*, then, the poet’s task is to repeat that of the *panaderos*. Indeed, Montejo sees himself, as poet, quite explicitly as the inheritor of the mantle of the *panaderos*. In ‘La cuadra’, whereas, initially, Montejo describes the *panaderos* as they ‘trabajan para el mundo que duerme’ (1982: 20), later, when he

turns to his own *faena nocturna*, we are told that ‘escribo para el mundo que duerme’ (20), a task from which he will not swerve (‘Siempre seré fiel a la noche’ (‘Sólo la tierra’, 1978: 11)). The *taller blanco*, now in the past, is no longer producing, and its quasi-divine bread, full *of* and full *as* presence is to be replaced, to be reconstituted by poetry and *poetic* production:

la cuadra ahora está llena de libros,
son los mismos tablones alineados, mirándome,
gira el silencio blanco en la hora negra,
va a amanecer, escribo para el mundo que duerme,
la harina me recubre de sollozos las páginas.
(‘La cuadra’, 1982: 20)

And yet the tone in these lines is decidedly negative. The poet’s task may be synonymous with that of the bakers, but it has not been successfully carried out. The books aligned on the shelves are *like* bread, and yet they are not bread, they do not represent all the bread did, as Montejo muses in ‘El taller blanco’: ‘¿Cuántas veces, mirando los libros alineados a mi frente, no he evocado la hilera de tablones llenos de pan’ (1996: 132-3). The dawn is coming (‘va a amanecer’), and yet there is a sense that still the poem has not been made, has not been produced for the world. The reason for this lies, I would suggest, in that the bakers’ task was figured as being carried out in an authentic or poetic time, a time of childhood, of mythical presences and ‘un ámbito mítico’: a poetic task in a poetic time and space. In contrast, Montejo’s poetic task is a toiling in a time and space devoid of the poetic, a time and a space of loss and lack. In short, Montejo is unable to escape the problem of being in language and in the sequential time of adulthood, a fact ciphered in the image of the modern city in which he now finds himself, as he laments how ‘la furia de la ciudad nueva arrojó lejos a las cosas y al tiempo del taller blanco’ (1996: 133). Montejo may affirm the mythic scene and the recreation of the *taller blanco*, that is, but he is firmly

in the temporal and the linguistic. Indeed, this contrast between the two loci is conveyed by the fact that the essential silence of the flour-snow (the symbol not just of a pre-linguistic (or extra-linguistic) silence, or of the transcendental signified always already absent from language, but, concomitantly, of a timelessness, that is to say, the symbol and symbolisation of infancy itself) is present and defines the scene in the *taller* of old:

Es el silencio blanco en la hora negra,
(1982: 20, italics mine)

but is circling around and elusive in the present of the poem, as this line now becomes:

gira el silencio blanco en la hora negra.
(20, italics mine)

Moreover, it also explains why, at the end of the poem, the flour is a covering on the page ('la harina me recubre de sollozos las páginas' (20)), covering the poem there written, or, indeed, itself being the very language of that poem, once more just a sealing off and silencing of what it seeks to preserve and present. Like the snow and ice in 'Cementerio de Vaugirard', the flour once more serves as a symbol of mourning ('sollozos') for what is lost.

Despite this failure of the poetic task, however, a way forward is suggested by a closer examination of *how* the bakers carry out their task and make their product. In the model of language based around the symbol of snow, the idea of layers is dominant: the snow-language is seen as covering both the past and (concomitantly) the essence of language and being, both in Venezuela and on a more general philosophical level; likewise, the poetic task is seen as arising out of the potential

offered by the flour-snow which also acts as a cover, preserving what is underneath, for the poet then to write what is being preserved on top of it, adding another layer which, in this case, covers the essentiality (silence, whiteness) of the flour-snow. And this is why such a theoretic inscribes itself in failure. Looking more closely at Montejo's description of the bakers' task, we see that, rather than layers, what is at stake is a mixing of this essential silence in both the task and the product: the bread is made from and with the flour-snow, the silence of the pre-linguistic timelessness of infancy, the essential 'lack' or 'transcendental signified', through a process itself imbued with this silence:

Hay algo de quirófano, *de silencio* en las pisadas y de celeridad en los movimientos. Es nada menos que el pan lo que *silenciosamente* se fabrica, el pan que reclamarán al alba para llevarlo a los hospitales, los colegios, los cuarteles, las casas. ¿Qué labor comparte tanta responsabilidad? ¿No es la misma preocupación de la poesía?
(1996: 131-2, italics mine)

It is the same preoccupation, as is highlighted by both the title of the earlier poem 'Labor' from *Terredad* and its description of the lamps of poets working at night:

son pocas, pero cuánto resisten
para inventar la cantidad de Dios
que cada uno pide en sueño.
(1978: 63)

The bread produced by the bakers and demanded by the people ('que reclamarán al alba') is identical to the 'cantidad de Dios' produced – it is imagined – by the poets and requested by the people, as the identification of the bread is once more affirmed as the Eucharistic host.

And yet, despite the common concern of the poet and the bakers, the way in which the poet approaches his task through the notion of flour/snow is, as we have

just noted, at odds with that of the bakers. The appeal to the process of breadmaking, where the flour is mixed as part of the product, reveals that this flour is not simply a preserving covering, a white page on which to write the poem. The reason Montejo sees the flour as the type of snow he has been seeking is not just because it is linked with a poetic time and space, and with a familial and Venezuelan setting from his and the country's past, though these are all important elements. Rather, the flour is the potential silence sought because of how it was used by the bakers. The point is not the covering of the bread and the scene as a whole in flour: this is an effect of Montejo's memory, a keeping of the scene in memory by Montejo, that is, in language. The point is that the flour was used by the bakers as a part of the structure of their product: the bread is not laid out on a layer of flour, like words on a page, thus covering the flour's essentiality; and neither is flour laid on the bread, thus preserving it but covering it, sealing it off. The essential preserving silence, that is, is the structure of the materiality of the bread: in all, throughout all, guiding and structuring all, but without silencing. As Montejo later affirmed in his acceptance speech for the *Premio Octavio Paz*: 'en aquel ámbito el color impoluto de la harina [...] marcaba su presencia *en* todas las cosas' (2006b: 299, italics mine). It is thus that poetry, as the new breadmaking, is called not to try to balance or flip uneasily between silence and language, both of which represent a theoretical and a practical failure. Rather, Montejo calls the poet to produce a (poetic) language which combines both the materiality of language and the structuring of silence. This might be seen as what is implied in 'Café' from *Alfabeto del mundo*, where the absent coffee of the poet's infancy is the silent structure of the poem, there to be drunk 'entre líneas' (1988: 163), the poet thus bringing forth the silent, timeless, pre-linguistic, and quasi-religious essence of the mythic 'time' and 'space' of infancy, without seeking *either* to give

voice to it *or* to cover it up. Indeed, such a strategy is referred to by Montejo on several occasions in his writing, at times associating it with Taoist thought, as in the preface to *Guitarra del horizonte*:

Sirviéndose [Sandoval] de las nociones de vacío y plenitud que los orientales han reivindicado desde tiempos inmemoriales, llega a afirmar que la copla consta de 64 sílabas, 32 de las cuales son expresas y encarnan el volumen perceptible de los sonidos, en tanto que las restantes 32 conforman el vacío, es decir, el silencio de la estrofa,
(Sandoval 1991: 14)

Elsewhere, he cites the Cuban poet Eliseo Diego's declaration that "los espacios en blanco significan tanto para mí como las propias palabras" (2006b: 256). And, again, we cannot help but also think of Mallarmé's poetry. Derrida, writing on Mallarmé's images of white and also the white spaces of the page, refers to how 'le "blanc" marque chaque blanc [...], la virginité, la frigidité, la neige, le voile, l'aile du cygnet, l'écume, le papier, etc., *plus* le blanc qui permet la marque, en assure l'espace de réception et de production' (1972: 285), and focuses on 'le blanc comme blanc entre les valences' (284), which, again, appears to coincide with Montejo's structuring flour-snow as an 'in-between'.

And yet there is a fundamental difference implied by the terms of Montejo's writing. Derrida talks of how 'le "blanc" marque chaque blanc' (285), but in Montejo's work the flour-snow of the *taller* marks everything, not just the images of whiteness: 'la blancura lo contagiaba todo' (1996: 131). This image does not just work against the idea of a simple covering, but also against the idea of an identifiable series of blanks or whiteness 'in-between', as does the model of the bakers' bread, where the flour is not discernible from the other ingredients in the final product. And this is what is finally brought out in 'Fábula del escriba', from the collection of that name, where the idea of the 'between spaces' is roundly rejected:

Recoge aquí cuanto estos signos puedan darte,
pero elude las voces de entrelíneas,
las mentiras del mundo.
(2006a: 18)

The flour-snow, the essential lack, is, then, envisaged in way much more akin to the later Heidegger than to Derrida or to Mallarmé through Derrida. Montejo does not seek to single out the lack, only to identify it as ungraspable, yet the basis on which meaning and language works, but affirms it as an integral part of the language of the poem, the essence of language which can be implied by poetry without naming it or seeking to extract it, what Heidegger referred to as the ‘noiseless ringing of stillness’ (1971: 420) which is *in* words, not behind or between them.

But what enables poetry potentially to work like the bakers and produce such a poetic ‘bread’? The difference between Heidegger and Derrida is revealing here. As the alignment with the former implies, Montejo’s poetics underscores the primacy of poetry – with which Heidegger was most concerned – over prose, suggesting that it is in the ‘voicing’ of poetry that the flour-snow can be incorporated. And this is what Montejo’s final ‘snow poem’, ‘Algo más sobre la nieve’ from *Fábula del escriba*, suggests, as it describes the falling snow:

Y cuanto cae es más que pensamiento,
cae la memoria de las cosas
y sobre todo esa *materia sónica*
de menudas *partículas melódicas*.
(2006a: 16, italics mine)

The snow is not voiced by being named, but through the musicality of poetic language. In short, Montejo’s engagement with snow ends in this poem by foregrounding something akin to Heidegger’s chiming ‘ringing of stillness’ or Paz’s

focus on poetry's rhythm (1967: 49-97) in *El arco y la lira*, and, as is implied by Paz's title, by sending us back to the figure of Orpheus and his lyre, so central to Montejo's poetry, as many critics have noted. What is more, towards the end of his life Montejo himself spoke of poetry's musicality in exactly this way, affirming it as the essence of poetry which cannot be separated or picked out from the (language of the) poem as a whole:

Creo que el poema debe partir de una música que [...] guíe la significación de las palabras, que interfiera en el significado de éstas y lo modifique hasta crear una representación distinta. [...] El aporte musical de un poema ha de ser parte indiscernible de su hallazgo, al punto que no se pueda hablar de una música y un significado en solitario, sino que ambos resulten ser, por obra del poema mismo, una misma cosa.

(Lozano Tovar 2006: 25)

Finally, though, we must bring our discussion back to the central image of the flour in the *taller blanco*. For it is not just that the breads laid out in the *taller* represent the potential way forward for the poetic task, but that they speak specifically of the way forward for Montejo's poetic task as a Venezuelan, as a man from the tropics. I have argued that they imply an engagement in Montejo's work with the sort of thought found in Paz or Heidegger. But it must be stressed that the essential, silent, structuring element of the poetic language sought here is identifiably Venezuelan in its symbolisation ('nuestra humilde nieve natal' ('La cuadra', 1982: 20)) and in the mythical infancy it comes both to evoke and invoke (the *taller blanco* of Montejo's childhood). It is *this* flour-snow which is to act not as a foundation or base to be built upon, but as the all-pervading structure of the poetic language that Montejo sought in and through each of the poems that he has left us.

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¹ See Cruz (2006: 369-71).

² In subsequent publications ‘nos’ is corrected to ‘no’ (see, for example, 1988: 137).

³ The question as to how far Montejo is referring to the tropics generally here or to Venezuela as a tropical country more specifically is often left hanging. Certainly, given the specificity of references to ‘nuestras casas’ (1976: 25) and the Ávila (1982: 25), at the very least Montejo seems concerned with Venezuela as a specific case in point of a wider tropical reality. This ambiguity should be borne in mind throughout the following analysis.

⁴ We might also recall here Lacan’s understanding of the signifying chain. As Evans puts it, ‘no matter how many signifiers one adds to the signifying chain, the chain is always incomplete; it always lacks the signifier that could complete it. This “missing signifier” [...] is constitutive of the subject’ (1996: 96).

⁵ As these quotations indicate, Montejo’s early focus on the childhood *casa* can be seen to reflect an interest in Bachelard’s emphasis on the childhood house in this work. Medina Figueredo has touched upon the parallels between Montejian and Bachelardian thought (1997: 45-59), as has Chirinos (2005: 167-8; 175-6), though an in-depth study of Montejo’s work from a Bachelardian perspective remains a potentially fruitful area demanding future attention.

⁶ Montejo is insistent throughout his *œuvre* on the night as the poetic time, the time in which he is invariably figured as wrestling with his work, trying to bring it to fruition (see, for instance, ‘Nocturno al lado de mi hijo’ (*Algunas palabras*), ‘Los gallos’ (*Terredad*), ‘Labor’ (*Terredad*), ‘La noche’ (*Trópico absoluto*), ‘Medianoche’ (*Alfabeto del mundo*), ‘Canción oída a medianoche’ (*Alfabeto del mundo*), ‘Medianoche’ (*Partitura de la cigarra*)).

⁷ In interview with Szinetar in 1982, for example, Montejo states that ‘Esa disciplina, esa responsabilidad del panadero con el alba [...] es culpable de que mi ritmo de trabajo sea nocturno’ (2005: 100). Similarly, he stresses the importance of a sense of fraternity in poetry when talking about the *taller blanco* in his acceptance speech for the *Premio Octavio Paz* (2006b: 299), thus resonating with the ‘fraternidad de nuestra antigua sangre’ (‘La cuadra’, 1982: 20) which characterised the *panadería*.