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Eduardo Milán

Selected Essays

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Selected Poems

Eduardo Milán

Selected Essays

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Writing Without Alibis: The Essays of Eduardo Milán

William Rowe

The temptation of myth, the temptation of pity, and the temptation of culture: these lie in wait for the essayist and by the same token are means by which the literary essayist defines his/her present. Though all three seek to elude the writer's consciousness, the first two have a known face. The temptation of myth was exposed by the historical avant-gardes: Milán mentions among others T.S. Eliot, whose poem 'The Waste Land' reveals 'the emptying of the symbolic universe' which occurs in the contemporary world. As for the temptation of pity, which has to do with history, i.e., with the human atrocities of the twentieth century, there is the work of César Vallejo, or of Raúl Zurita, with their sense that what is at stake is not relief from horror but attainment of messianic redemption ('to kill death', in Vallejo's phrase). But the temptation of symbolic capital, which is now called culture, is less easy to expose. There is also the temptation of philosophy, i.e., of the theorization of literature, but that has been overtaken in the last decade or two by the lure of cultural capital. Although Pierre Bourdieu can be credited with the extension of the term, capital, to the realm of the symbolic economy, he does not provide a critique of the effect he is describing only of its uneven distribution. This is where Guy Debord's notion of the spectacle becomes necessary, as something whose function is to bury history in culture. The spectacle, moreover, looks back at us, constitutes the collective subject, the one whose function it is to consume its own alienation from history.

It is the desire of the poetic word, Milán writes, to 'differentiate itself from its own myth'. Here a whole narrative—in fact the dominant one—of Latin American poetry falls. From Octavio Paz to Eugenio Montejo and others, it is the territory of

myth, its promise of the overcoming of time, failed or not, since what is at issue is the territory not the outcome, this is what has dominated statements about poetry, whether in literary essays or in poetry's own comments about itself, its metalanguage. But poetic language, Milán makes it quite clear, can no longer rest within the myth of poetry: a different necessity presses upon it, producing 'the desire to locate itself inside appearance, desire to belong to time and its flow, to define itself concretely in a historical space.' This is the place from which Milán writes, both as poet and as essayist.

But not in order to suppress the desire of the full—timeless, infinite—word, in the name of some post-modernist vision where poetic forms, emptied of their relationship not only with transcendence but also with history, are recycled indiscriminately in a type of low-level parody. Instead, the essays traverse the terrain of Latin American poetry with the urgency of finding not a canon but those moments where its energies, like Walter Benjamin's 'dialectical image', break into the present. In order to do this, they continually interrogate the writing itself, its possibilities and its limits, so that there is always an outside to the poem, i.e., history, but also an inside, the real possibilities of poetic language. Thus, in order to accede to the full meaning of Viel Temperley's *Hospital Británico*, there is the need to have traversed Benjamin's commentary on Paul Klee's painting 'Angelus Novus', where the angel seems, as he gazes at the past, 'as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating… he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage.' Milán comments that 'in the face of this there is little the poetic word can do in terms of the activation of memory.' By the mid-twentieth century, the relationship between poetic language and the hope of social transformation had become impossible to sustain. But here Milán refuses to abandon the terrain: the poem still is a capability of language not to be found elsewhere and not simply the empty shell of what was once a sacred place now become simply cultural capital. Thus for him poetry is not words to fill an inherited space—marked out by recognizable forms (rhetoric, metaphors,

rhythms, typography, etc.)—but the poetic word that must arise out of an interiority, an inner life, and then create, as it becomes externalized into the poem, the form it needs.

The gaze of the angel, who cannot turn away from the image of historical catastrophe (the image is dialectical, since the angel is also held by 'a storm… blowing from paradise'), is supplemented, in Milán's essays, by another gaze, this time mythological: that of Orpheus, who turns back, an act of disobedience to the gods, because he does not want to lose his wife, and in so doing loses her. This makes song itself 'a lost "place"', Milán writes: 'the mythopoetic substance was not 'filled' by the unfolding of history, nor even by the rationalist negation of myth as a whole.' The place remains: historical reason has not been able to fill it. The movement from myth to desire to the unformed present is a recurrent one for Milán. Hence his interest in Lezama Lima, whose writing embodies a fascination with how the invisible, the unknown, becomes image, something that cannot be known in advance and emerges only in the image itself.

Thus poetic writing is never complete, always 'faltada', as Milán puts it, always missing or lacking, making but also unmaking. And unformed or invisible—or pre-ontological—does not mean immaterial: 'the lack (*falta*) in modern poetic writing is not an ethical lack, it is a material lack, it materiality lacking in its sense.' Here, in this core statement, the essays fulfil Ezra Pound's definition of seriousness: a man standing by his own word. Milán stands by his own poetic practice. This, which is shown in his poems, is stated briefly in the essays as a poetics of the signifier, i.e., 'texts which unfold through the phonic contagion of words,' whose genealogy includes Guillaume de Poitiers and Góngora, as well as the twentieth-century avant-gardes (Oliverio Girondo, Haroldo de Campos, etc.). A phonic materiality which becomes a material 'degree zero' and can become itself the te of the poem. Phonic drift or *derive* which is also a drive or pulse so that desire remains and is not captured by the spectacle ('La Libido/ marcha sobre la tierra bella y desconsiderada,' to quote Rodolfo Hinostroza). The materiality of phonic drift escapes the symbolic economy, which would have words consumed

and their material disappear or be ejected as a useless residue, and which under globalized neo-liberalism now penetrates into everything—international English turning the tongue of Joyce into a spectacular disease.

Once the poet is left with the spoken language as 'the only material available for making poetry,' other consequences follow. Among them 'the mythology of the poet as an exceptional being… The mythical place granted to the poet by the Western tradition, a tradition that stretches… from classical antiquity to the avant-gardes of the twentieth century.' Thus a moment, that of Nicanor Parra in the nineteen-fifties, delineates a condition of the now, where the necessity—the drive—is to show its constitutive moments. Hence the need to go back through another moment, 1897, the year of the publication of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*, in order to locate the present, to say what it is: 'what has failed… that 'shipwreck' that the text insists on, is the ordering of rhetoric and of the network of symbols, the poetic 'enterprise' undertaken from ancient times, immemorially.' So that what Milán gives us is a temporalization of poetry, an account of where it has got to in terms of its own possibilities. There are only two options: either to return to a place of anteriority, before any utterance, and re-enter the word from there, or find the possibility of poetry within the spoken language. What we are given is neither a genealogy of poetry as such, excluding history, nor a 'history of poetry' (subordinating it to a historicist temporality), but the relation of poetry to its outside, where the outside is constituted by poetic language itself. Actually stating what is the inheritance the contemporary poet must abandon, makes it impossible to turn back—except to see the loss—and thus there can be no alibis: 'poetic modernity and its inheritance allow no halfway houses.' After Parra there's 'no mythology except everyday experience'. But that does not mean denying the past, for the sake of a linear idea of development. The past is present in its transformation. That which fails is not lost; the commodity, fathered by capital, is, as Benjamin puts it, 'failed material'; symbolic capital is work that has become dead; the Mallarméan desire remains, 'to give a purer sense to

the words of the tribe'; what has changed is that the words are others.

The alibis are those of the poetic establishments that want to inherit cultural capital. For example, there's their interest in a language which speaks as if for the first time, invoking a 'utopia of speech', but which actually means erasing the traces of history from the word: trading in the mythical inheritance of poetry, as if Mallarmé, Parra, Vallejo, Girondo, had never existed. Or there's their promotion of 'conversational' poetry, as if the work of Parra were not a critique of conversation. Not to subordinate poetry to any programme of ideas, to speak of its real possibilities, yet without returning to the past—whether in the shape of the autonomy of poetry as conceived by romanticism, or the transcendence of poetry identified with myth, or the simple identity of aesthetic and social revolutions—this is the difficult task that Milán sets himself.

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Premise

We do not know if Orpheus really existed. Yet a gesture from his legend, the gaze of Orpheus or Eurydice's disappearance, is to us more poetically electrifying and tragic than the particular details constructed around his possible existence. That moment, that passionate synecdoche where Blanchot situates the beginning of writing ('writing begins with the gaze of Orpheus'), is a splitting that acquires such mythical transcendence that it is capable of configuring the legend and inventing the biography of its hero.

Orpheus' gaze is a ritual gaze, like a myth in itself where the disappearance of what is loved becomes an essential condition for the birth of song. But it is not a myth in itself, the gaze that turns and disappears what was coming behind is the configuration of a literary space. With a turn on its axis, the gaze allows writing to begin. In opposite direction to the gaze, *immediately after*, the song begins to flow. The literary was not created by the myth, and it wasn't a continuation as a different form of the tale: the literary broke off from the myth. The temptation is to break the diachrony of the tale of Orpheus's possible existence and to see in Eurydice's disappearance the beauty of the singer's song, its power, and its mystery. But such a temptation is not real. Eurydice does not transmit energy to Orpheus as something that transmits energy from one pole to another. Orpheus was already singing before Eurydice disappeared. Blanchot accurately places the appearance of writing on the gaze that prompts disappearance, not on the interchange of powers. Not as if Eurydice, in her disappearance, impregnated Orpheus or his song with disappearance. Nevertheless, there is an impregnation of disappearance in writing in our modern and contemporary readings. There is a reading that overflows with disappearance. In the myth of the singer by antonomasia—Orpheus—there is a key situation: the hero's responsibility for the disappearance of the beloved. There is, perhaps, a wanting to know, an impatience, a stupidity—which is to say, a humanity—that informs the hero of loss, that makes him lose, and that loses him.

Is it not our need for tragedy that which reads in the situation a moment that is key yet normal and transforms it into a foundational event? We practice a cultural extraction; we absorb the extract of what is foundational for our culture, not for the myth. Loss and song, loss and writing are transcendent meanings for us, not for the myth. Among other functions that he performs, Orpheus is an agent of civilization, a transformer, a hero. Or is the episode of Eurydice's disappearance the core of tension that makes Orpheus's life's task educational? Orpheus is a wise character. To sing is to know. Above all the song that transforms nature is a song that belongs to the order of Apollo. Singing is beautiful for the Greeks. Beauty is action. That recklessness, that going against the grain of revelation, that hiding produced by recklessness or passion—that by which we get lost—creates rituals, orders, sects, 'mysteries'. But this is an extrapolation, outside the context of a reading that cannot be understood if it is not seen as the internal tension of a tale about an experience. Still, ever since its classical ascendance that inexplicable tension creates the hidden speech of Western poetry, the unsaid that is said because it is contained in what is said. It is an absence added to presence, not by subterfuge but by pregnancy of meaning, by radiance of meaning, and for us, by a need of completeness. I insist: the disappearance of Eurydice is a meaningful event but it is only part of the tale, a part that for us, as Western debtors to the tragedy, has completely impregnated song with meaning. In this disappearance that song suffers—in this operation Orpheus is the song—there is a model of need, as if the myth prefigured its own absence. What is absent—Eurydice—is converted in song as insufficiency and corresponds to a possible future absence of the myth itself. In other words, what went missing went missing because it had to happen, it was over-determined, or determined from above, we would like to say. And so Orpheus is a puppet of the gods, singing is also a foreseeable insufficiency, and so is beauty. Then the myth can indeed be understood as a setback, even that which is contained within the myth as an internal meta-language that would inform us, from its bowels, about the true dimension of beauty. Beauty

is an absence and it is what is absent, it is what we have a right to and what is constantly being subtracted from us. But it is also what is absent for order—a cosmos—to be complete. Beauty sacrificed in the name of equilibrium. And also love, which is 'madness'. Yet what is important is the instrument that generates the absence: the gaze. We must keep an eye on this: it is not blindness, which also has had its cultural prestige throughout time, that foretells what shall come, away from the world of things that clutter our sight. It is the gaze.

Translated by Antonio Ochoa