Skyquake

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Vicente Huidobro

Skyquake
Temblor de cielo

Translated from Spanish by
Tony Frazer

Shearsman Books
The Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro (1893-1948) is one of the most important figures in 20th-century Hispanic poetry and, along with César Vallejo, one of the pioneering avant-gardists in Spanish literature. Like Vallejo, he lived for many years in Paris but, unlike his Peruvian contemporary, he participated fully in the city’s various artistic movements. Influenced initially by Apollinaire, whom he met within weeks of arriving in the city, Huidobro fell in early with forward-looking French writers such as Blaise Cendrars, Jean Cocteau and Pierre Reverdy, as well as with the Spanish expatriate artists’ colony, which included Picasso and Juan Gris.

Originally from an upper-class Santiago family, Huidobro was fortunate to have the means to support himself and his family while he found his artistic way, and—after an early phase in his native country writing in a quasi-symbolist style, influenced by Rubén Darío—he threw himself into the Parisian artistic milieu with a passion, quickly becoming a notable figure. He also wrote in French, sometimes translating his own works into French, sometimes composing in both languages. His early forays in French were somewhat uncertain and the manuscripts show handwritten interventions by Picabia, Reverdy and Gris, among others. It would seem that some of the early French poems were in fact largely translated by these friends.

Octavio Paz referred to Huidobro as *el oxígeno invisible* (the invisible oxygen) of Latin American poetry, reflecting the fact that his influence was felt by poets right across the continent; in fact he was probably the major link between the European avant-garde and progressive literary circles in Latin America.

He was also a successful novelist: *Mio Cid Campeador*—published in English translation in 1931 as *Portrait of a Paladin*—created a stir, and his novella *Cagliostro*—published in English, also in 1931, as *The Mirror of a Mage*—won a $10,000 prize from the League for Better Motion Pictures as the best candidate for movie adaptation, but was never made into a film, no doubt because of the arrival of the talkies shortly afterwards. Then too, he was an inveterate polemicist—a writer of artistic manifestos and founder of the Creationism movement (*Creacionismo*), a politician (sometime member of the Communist Party, he also ran for
the Presidency of Chile as leader of the Youth Party, which he himself had founded), and a journalist, including a stint as foreign correspondent in World War 2.

Huidobro was a restless soul and an artist of the very highest calibre. Today he is probably most revered for his extraordinary long poem *Altazor*, apparently written over a period of some 12 years and finally published in 1931. (There is an excellent translation of this work by Eliot Weinberger available from Wesleyan University Press.) Less known is the long prose poem *Temblor de cielo*, published the same year and written in 1928. Huidobro regarded the two works as his artistic testament, and the summation of his work up to that point.

*Altazor* is the archetypal modernist Big Poem and belongs with other titanic efforts such as *The Waste Land* and *Trilce*. It is fragmentary and alludes to the glories of the future, symbolised by flight, but also shows language breaking down under the onslaught of the new. The prose-poem *Temblor* is more apparently unified, although this might owe more to its style of delivery, as well as its rapid composition, an ecstatic outpouring of words that largely revolve around the themes of love, sex and death. The Isolde to whom much of the poem is addressed is an idealised feminine figure—part goddess, part idealised beloved; part Isolde from Wagner’s opera (another ecstatic outpouring on the themes of love, sex and death) and part Ximena Amunátegui, the young woman who had become the poet’s second wife (albeit in a Muslim ceremony, given that a Catholic rite was impossible owing to Vicente’s divorce from Manuela Portales).

I tend to think that the central impetus for the work is an erotic storm occasioned by the second Mrs Huidobro, notwithstanding the artistic fusion with the other elements mentioned above. The poem is also a sustained lyric effusion of a kind that Huidobro had never produced before, and it marks the point at which his work moves on from the barnstorming avant-garderie of his younger years to a more mature style, albeit one influenced by surrealism, a movement which Huidobro had previously attacked. It is also the last time that Huidobro was to adopt the god-like narrative persona that occurs in his earlier work. In *Temblor*, as in some earlier works, God is conflated with the poet-creator, as he is in *Altazor*, where the opening lines reflect the opening of a love-poem to Ximena that the author published (to great scandal, in 1926) in the Santiago newspaper, *La Nación*:

Nací a los treinta y tres años, el día de la muerte de Cristo
[I was born at the age of thirty three, on the day Christ died].

Nací a los treinta y tres años, el día de la muerte de Cristo
[I was born at the age of thirty three, on the day Christ died].
(By way of clarification, it should be noted that the author was 33 when he first met Ximena, which gives the imagery another dimension.)

*Temblor de cielo* exists in two versions, one in Spanish and one in French. There is some doubt over which version has primacy, although it has been argued that the French version precedes the Spanish, if not throughout its entire composition. As no manuscripts survive, it is unlikely that we will ever know the truth of the matter. The present translation is from the Spanish, but the French text has been referred to in cases of doubt. The text used is the version published in the author’s *Obra poética* (ed. Cedomil Goïc. Paris: Ed. ALLCA XX, 2003), which adopts some later revisions by the author—which have helped to improve this English version.

The translation of the title requires some explanation: in Spanish, a *temblor* is an earthquake, albeit less severe than a *terremoto*, more of a tremor, a shaking perhaps; one would expect differing words for gradations of an event that is regular in a seismic zone such as Chile and, indeed, I always heard the frequent *small* earthquakes referred to there as *temblores*. Hence, one valid translation of the title could be *Sky Tremor*—and that was my title when an earlier version of this translation was first published. The French title is *Tremblement de ciel*, on the surface cognate with the Spanish, but ‘earthquake’ in French is *tremblement de terre*, even though *tremblement* on its own would usually be translated as “tremor”. Given this, and also the massive quake which occurs in the poem itself, I have now opted for *Skyquake* as being the most accurate translation. Neither version is absolutely correct: I suggest that the reader chooses the one s/he prefers. There is a further wrinkle to this little mystery: Óscar Hahn has suggested¹ that the poem was actually begun in French, with a French title, and that the slightly odd Spanish title—grammatically, it should be *Temblor del cielo*—is in fact a back-translation from the French.

For those chiefly interested in the original Spanish text, with full introduction and critical apparatus, there is a good, and cheap, reading version from Cátedra in Madrid, coupled with *Altazor*, edited by René de Costa. The French version can be had in the Goïc edition of the *Obra poética* referred to above—this is by far the best edition of Huidobro’s poetry available, although it is expensive and not easy to find. There is also now a separate edition in France: *Tremblement de ciel*, Paris: Editions Indigo & Côté-femmes, 2008, which I have not seen, and it is not even clear to me that the book is still in print, or whether the press still exists—

¹ Óscar Hahn, *Vicente Huidobro o el atentado celeste*, Madrid: Visor Libros, 2018.
it specialised in Latin American poetry in French translation.

The best general introduction to the poet is *Vicente Huidobro: The Careers of a Poet* by René de Costa (OUP, 1984). An entertaining biography, *Huidobro: La marcha infinita*, by Volodia Teitelboim—a long-time friend of the poet, and also of Neruda—is again available in Chile, from LOM Ediciones of Santiago, after being out of print for some years.

On a more personal note, I first became interested in Huidobro—until then only a name to me—while living in Chile in the early 1990s. My sojourn in Santiago happened to coincide with the centenary of his birth and the appearance of a number of publications, all of which served to offer an intriguing introduction to his work. It was only later that I explored *Temblor* in any great detail, having previously been obsessed, like so many others, by the other work published in 1931, *Altazor*. The latter remains perhaps the more interesting work, partly because it is such a recognisable modernist monument. By contrast, *Temblor* has had relatively little attention, but it deserves to sit alongside the verse masterpiece as Huidobro’s crowning achievement. The works that followed were much calmer—they could scarcely be more frenetic—taking a different poetic direction, but this was an author who could not be pinned down, one who kept moving, kept staying ahead of all waves and movements. He was his own man to the very end, and we are all the better for it.

Tony Frazer
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Ante todo hay que saber cuántas veces debemos abandonar nuestra novia y huir de sexo en sexo hasta el fin de la tierra.

Allí en donde el vacío pasa su arco de violín sobre el horizonte y el hombre se transforma en pájaro y el ángel en piedra preciosa.

El Padre Eterno está fabricando tinieblas en su laboratorio y trabaja para volver sordos a los ciegos. Tiene un ojo en la mano y no sabe a quién ponérselo. Y en un bocal tiene una oreja en cópula con otro ojo.

Estamos lejos, en el fin de los fines, en donde un hombre colgado por los pies de una estrella se balancea en el espacio con la cabeza hacia abajo. El viento que dobla los árboles, agita sus cabellos dulcemente.

Los arroyos voladores se posan en las selvas nuevas donde los pájaros maldicen el amanecer de tanta flor inútil.

Con cuánta razón ellos insultan las palpitations de esas cosas oscuras.

Si se tratara solamente de degollar al capitán de las flores y hacerle sangrar el corazón del sentimiento superfluo, el corazón lleno de secretos y trozos de universo.

La boca de un hombre amado sobre un tambor.

Los senos de la niña inolvidable clavados en el mismo árbol donde los picotean los ruiseñores.

Y la estatua del héroe en el polo.

Destruirlo todo, todo, a bala y a cuchillo.

Los ídolos se baten bajo el agua.

— Isolda, Isolda, cuántos kilómetros nos separan, cuántos sexos entre tú y yo.

Tú sabes bien que Dios arranca los ojos a las flores, pues su manía es la ceguera.

Y transforma el espíritu en un paquete de plumas y transforma las novias sentadas sobre rosas en serpientes de pianola, en serpientes hermanas de la flauta, de la misma flauta que se besa en las noches de nieve y que las llama desde lejos.

Pero tú no sabes por qué razón el mirlo despedaza el árbol entre sus dedos sangrientos.

Y éste es el misterio.

Cuarenta días y cuarenta noches trepando de rama en rama como en el Diluvio. Cuarenta días y cuarenta noches de misterio entre rocas y picachos.
First of all it should be known how often we have to abandon our bride and flee from sex to sex right to the ends of the earth. There where emptiness draws its violin bow over the horizon and a man is transformed into a bird and an angel into a precious stone.

The Eternal Father fashions darkness in his laboratory and strives to turn blind men deaf. He keeps one eye in his hand and knows not to whom he should give it. And in a jar he keeps an ear copulating with an eye.

We are far away, at the end of all things where a man, hanging from a star by his feet, swings head-down in space. The wind that bends the trees ruffles his hair.

Flying streams land in new forests where birds curse the appearance of so many useless flowers. How right they are to insult the fluttering of these dark things.

If it were only a question of beheading the captain of the flowers and making the heart of superfluous feeling bleed, the heart full of secrets and shards of the universe.

The mouth of a man in love over a drum. The breasts of the unforgettable girl nailed to a tree where they can be pecked at by nightingales. And the hero’s statue at the Pole.

Destroy all of it, all of it, with bullet and blade. Idols fight it out under water.

— Isolde, Isolde, so many kilometres separate us, so much sex between you and me.

You well know that God pulls out the eyes of flowers, as he has a penchant for blindness.

And he transforms the spirit into a packet of quills and transforms brides seated on roses into pianola snakes, into snakes that are sister to the flute, the same flute that is kissed on snowy nights and that calls to them from afar.

But you do not know why the blackbird shreds the tree with its bloody talons.

And this is the mystery.

Forty days and forty nights clambering from branch to branch as in the days of the Flood. Forty days and forty nights of mystery amongst rocks and peaks.
Yo podría caerme de destino en destino, pero siempre guardaré el recuerdo del cielo.

¿Conoces las visiones de la altura? ¿Has visto el corazón de la luz? Yo me convierto a veces en una selva inmensa y recorro los mundos como un ejército.

Mira la entrada de los ríos.

El mar puede apenas ser mi teatro en ciertas tardes.

La calle de los sueños no tiene árboles, ni una mujer crucificada en una flor, ni un barco pasando las páginas del mar.

La calle de los sueños tiene un ombligo inmenso de donde asoma una botella. Adentro de la botella hay un obispo muerto que cambia de colores cada vez que se mueve la botella.

Hay cuatro velas que se encienden y se apagan siguiendo un turno sucesivo. A veces un relámpago nos hace ver en el cielo una mujer despedazada que viene cayendo desde hace ciento cuarenta años.

El cielo esconde su misterio.

En todas las escalas se supone un asesino escondido. Los cantores cardíacos mueren sólo de pensar en ello.

Así las mariposas enfermizas volverán a su estado de gusanos, del cual no debían haber salido nunca. El oído recaerá en infancia y se llenará de ecos marinos y de esas algas que flotan en los ojos de ciertos pájaros.

Solamente Isolda conoce el misterio. Pero ella recorre el arco iris con sus dedos temblorosos en busca de un sonido especial.

Y si un mirlo le picotea el ojo, ella le deja beber toda el agua que quiera con la misma sonrisa que atrae los rebaños de búfalos.

¿Sobre qué corazón hinchado de amargura podrías flotar tú en todos los océanos, en cualquier mar?

Porque debes saber que aferrarse a un corazón como a una boya es peligroso a causa de las grutas marinas que los atraen y en donde los pulpos que son nudos de serpientes o trompas de elefantes les cierran la salida para siempre.

Date cuenta de lo que es una montaña con los brazos levantados pidiendo perdón y piensa que es menos peligrosa que los mares y más asequible a la amistad.

Sin embargo, tu destino es amar lo peligroso, lo peligroso que hay en ti y fuera de ti, besar los labios del abismo contando con ayudas tenebrosas
I could fall from destiny to destiny, but I will always retain the memory of the sky.

Have you experienced visions from on high? Have you seen the heart of the light? At times I become a vast forest and march across worlds like an army.

Look at the arrival of the rivers.

Some evenings the sea can hardly even be my theatre.

The street of dreams has no trees, nor a woman crucified in a flower, nor a ship sailing the pages of the sea.

The street of dreams has an enormous navel from which a bottle protrudes. Inside the bottle there is a dead bishop who changes colour whenever the bottle moves.

There are four candles that light up and go out one after another. Sometimes a flash of lightning allows us to see in the sky a woman in tatters who has been falling for a hundred and forty years.

The sky conceals its mystery.

On every step up the scale one suspects a hidden assassin. Faint-hearted singers die just thinking of it.

So it is that weak butterflies will return to the caterpillar stage they should never have left. The ear will fall back into childhood and will be filled with marine echoes and with those algae that float in the eyes of real birds.

Only Isolde knows the mystery. But she plucks at the rainbow, her trembling fingers seeking a special sound.

And if a blackbird pecks at her eye, she lets it drink all the water it wants with the smile that attracts herds of buffalo.

Above which heart, swollen with bitterness, could you float in all the oceans, in any sea?

Surely you must know that it is dangerous to cling to a heart as if it were a buoy, because of the marine caverns that attract them, and the octopi that are knots of snakes or elephant trunks keep the exit permanently closed.

Pay heed to a mountain with its arms raised, begging pardon, and bear in mind that it is less dangerous than the seas and more amenable to friendship.

However it is your destiny to love danger, the danger that lies inside and outside you, to kiss the lips of the abyss counting on dark aid for
para el triunfo final de todas tus empresas y tus sueños cubiertos de rocío en el amanecer.

De lo contrario agradece y retírate hasta el fondo de la memoria de los hombres.

— Isolda, Isolda, en la época glacial los osos eran flores. Cuando vino el deshielo se libertaron de sí mismos y salieron corriendo en todas direcciones.

Piensa en la resurrección.

Sólo tú conoces el milagro. Tú has visto ejecutarse el milagro ante cien arpas maravilladas y todos los cañones apuntando al horizonte.

Había entonces un desfile de marineros ante un rey en un país lejano. Las olas esperaban impacientes la vuelta de los suyos. Entretanto el mar aplaudía.

El termómetro bajaba lentamente porque el mirlo había dejado de cantar y pensaba lanzarse de un trapecio al medio del mundo.

Ahora sólo una cosa temo y es que tú salgas de una lámpara o de algún florero y me hables en términos elocuentes como hablan las magnolias en la tarde. El cuarto se llenaría de libélulas agonizantes y yo tendría que sentarme para no caer al suelo sin conocimiento.

La muerte sería el pensamiento mismo. Reflejado en todas partes donde se vuelvan los ojos.

Sobre el castillo el esqueleto del general hará señas como un semáforo. Nosotros contaremos las calaveras que se arrastran por el campo atadas a través de una cuerda interminable a la cola del caballo sonámbulo que nadie reconoce como suyo.

Los esclavos negros aplaudirán sobre el vientre de las esclavas tan ebrias como ellos sin darse cuenta de que el viento es un fantasma y que los árboles allá lejos flotan sobre un cementerio.

¿Quién ha contado todos sus muertos?

¿Y si se abrieran todas las ventanas y si todas las lámparas se ponen a cantar y si se incendia el cementerio?

Por cada pájaro del cielo habrá un cazador en la tierra.

Sonarán los clarines y las banderas se convertirán en luces de Bengala. Murió la fe, murieron todas las aves de rapiña que te roían el corazón.

Pasan volando las estatuas migratorias.

En la llanura inmensa se oye el suplicio de los ídolos entre los cantos de los árboles.

Las flores huyen despavoridas.
the final triumph of all your endeavours and your dew-covered dreams at dawn.

On the contrary, give thanks and withdraw into the depths of the memory of men.

— Isolde, Isolde, in the Ice Age bears were flowers. When the thaw came they were freed and escaped in all directions.

Think of the resurrection.

Only you know the miracle. You have seen the miracle performed in the presence of one hundred enchanted harps and all the cannons aimed at the horizon.

Then there was a procession of sailors before a king in a far-off land. The waves impatiently awaited their return, while the sea applauded.

The thermometer dropped slowly because the blackbird had stopped singing and thought of leaping from a trapeze to the centre of the world.

Now I fear only one thing and it is that you might emerge from some lamp or vase and speak to me in eloquent terms in the manner of evening magnolias. The room would fill with dying dragonflies and I would have to sit down so as not to faint.

Death would be thought itself. Reflected in all the places to which the eyes return.

Above the castle the general’s skeleton will signal like a semaphore. We will count the skulls that crawl through the field tied by endless cords to the tail of a sleepwalking horse that no-one claims as his own.

Black slaves will applaud over the bellies of slave girls so intoxicated that they do not realize the wind is a ghost and the trees are floating above a cemetery.

Who has counted all their dead?

And if all the windows were opened and all the lamps began to sing and the cemetery caught fire?

For every bird in the sky there will be a hunter on the ground.

Bugles will sound and flags will be turned into flares. Faith is dead; dead too are the birds of prey that were gnawing at your heart.

Migratory statues fly by.

On the immense plain the ordeals of idols can be heard amongst the songs of trees.

Flowers flee in terror.
Se abren las puertas de una música desconocida y salen los años del mago que se queda sentado agonizando con las manos sobre el pecho.

Cuántas cosas han muerto adentro de nosotros. Cuánta muerte llevamos en nosotros. ¿Porqué aferramos a nuestros muertos? ¿Porqué nos empeñamos en resucitar nuestros muertos? Ellos nos impiden ver la idea que nace. Tenemos miedo a la nueva luz que se presenta, a la que no estamos habituados todavía como a nuestros muertos inmóviles y sin sorpresa peligrosa. Hay que dejar lo muerto por lo que vive.

— Isolda, entierra todos tus muertos.

Piensa, recuerda, olvida. Que tu recuerdo olvide sus recuerdos, que tu olvido recuerde sus olvidos. Cuida de no morir antes de tu muerte.

Cómo dar un poco de grandeza a esta bestia actual que sólo dobla sus rodillas de cansancio a esas altas horas en que la luna llega volando y se coloca al frente.

Y, sin embargo, vivimos esperando un azar, la formación de un signo sideral en ese expiatorio más allá, en donde no alcanza a llegar ni el sonido de nuestras campanas.

Así, esperando el gran azar.

Que el polo norte se desprenda como el sombrero que saluda.

Que surja el continente que estamos aguardando desde hace tantos años, aquí sentados detrás de las rejas del horizonte.

Que pase corriendo el asesino disparando balazos sin control a sus perseguidores.

Que se sepa por qué nació aquella niña y no el niño prometido por los sueños y anunciado tantas veces.

Que se vea el cadáver que bosteza y se estira debajo de la tierra.

Que se vea pasar el fantasma glorioso entre las arboledas del cielo.

Que de repente se detengan todos los ríos a una voz de mando.

Que el cielo cambie de lugar.

Que los mares se amontonen en una gran pirámide más alta que todas las babeles soñadas por la ambición.

Que sople un viento desesperado y apague las estrellas.

Que un dedo luminoso escriba una palabra en el cielo de la noche.

Que se derrumbe la casa de enfrente.

Para esto vivimos, puedes creerme, para esto vivimos y no para otra cosa. Para esto tenemos voz y para esto tenemos una red en la voz.
The doors of an unknown music are opened and out come the years of the mage who remains seated in his agony, hands on his chest.

How many things have died inside us. How much death do we carry inside us. Why do we hold on to our dead? Why do we persist in reviving our dead? They prevent us from seeing ideas being born. The arrival of new light frightens us, as unaccustomed to it as our motionless dead, who lack dangerous surprises. The dead have to be left behind for the sake of the living.

— Isolde, bury all your dead.

Think, remember, forget. May your memory forget your memories, may your forgetting remember what is forgotten. Take care not to die before your death.

How does one grant a little greatness to this present-day creature that only bends its weary knees at this late hour when the moon comes flying in and stands before you.

And nevertheless we live in hope of some luck, the appearance of an astral sign in this expiatory of the beyond, that not even the sound of our bells manages to penetrate.

Waiting, in this way, for the great chance.

Let the North Pole be detached like a hat raised in greeting.

Let the continent that we have watched over for so long emerge, seated here behind the bale of the horizon.

Let the assassin run past, firing wild shots at his pursuers.

Let it be known why it was that girl who was born and not the boy promised in dreams and foretold so many times.

Let the corpse appear yawning and stretching beneath the earth.

Let the glorious ghost be seen passing through sky groves.

Let all rivers be halted suddenly with one commanding voice.

Let the sky change location.

Let the seas mount up in a great pyramid higher than the Babels dreamed of by ambition.

Let a desperate wind blow and extinguish the stars.

Let a luminous finger write a word in the night sky.

Let the house across the street collapse.

For this do we live, believe me, for this do we live and for nothing else. For this we have a voice and for this our voice has a net.
Y para esto tenemos ese correr angustiado adentro de las venas y ese galope de animal herido en el pecho.

Para esto enrojece la carne martirizada de las palabras y crece el pensamiento regado por los ríos subterráneos. Para esto el aullido del sobresalto heredado del abuelo más trágico.

Cortad la cabeza al monstruo que ruge en la puerta del sueño. Y luego que nadie prohíba nada.

Alguien habla y nace una amapola en la cumbre de la voz antes que brille el opio de la mirada futura.

—Paz en la tierra al marinero de la noche.

Los exploradores silenciosos levantan la cabeza y la aventura se desnuda de su traje de oro.

He aquí el sentido del ocaso.

Acaso el ocaso nos haga caso y entonces habréis comprendido los signos de la noche. Habréis comprendido los inventos del silencio. La mirada del sueño. El umbral del abismo. El viaje de los montes.

La travesía de la noche.

Isolda, Isolda, yo sigo mi destino.

¿En dónde has escondido el oasis que me habías prometido tantas veces?

La luz se cansó de andar.

¿A dónde lleva, dime, esa escalera que sale de tus ojos y se pierde en el aire?

¿Sabes tú que mi destino es andar? ¿Conoces la vanidad del explorador y el fantasma de la aventura?

Es una cuestión de sangre y huesos frente a un imán especial. Es un destino irrevocable de meteoro fabuloso.

No es una cuestión de amor en carne, es una cuestión de vida, una cuestión de espíritu viajante, de pájaro nómade.

Todas esas mujeres son árboles o piedras de reposo en el camino tal vez innecesarias.

Botellas de agua o toneles de embriaguez generalmente sin luz propia. Obedecen como las catedrales a un principio musical. Cada acorde tiene su correspondiente y todo consiste en saber tocar el punto del eco que ha de responder. Es fácil hacer tejidos de sones y construir una verdadera techumbre o magníficas cúpulas para los días de lluvia.

Si el destino lo permite, podemos guarecernos por un tiempo y contar los dedos de aquella que nos tiende los brazos.