POETRY AND LOSS

the work of Eugenio Montejo

Nicholas Roberts

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POETRY AND LOSS

THE WORK OF EUGENIO MONTEJO

In a study which covers the entirety of Montejo's career as poet and essayist, this book examines how the work of this seminal Venezuelan writer explores and deals with the experiences of loss in the twentieth century. Focusing on the broad areas of temporal and spatial loss, the analysis underlines the different levels on which such experiences are located in Montejo's writing, from the personal to the national, from the continental to the wider ontological, all filtered through the poet's own lived experience of growing up and writing in Venezuela. It explores how the poetic act emerges throughout as the potential means by which such experiences can be expressed and through which such loss can be reversed and, henceforth, avoided.

This represents the first book-length study in English of Montejo's work and the first monograph in any language to offer a sustained thematic analysis of his entire output. In the process, it serves to bring out from the academic shadows one of the most important and commanding poetic voices to emerge from Latin America in the last fifty years.

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For my parents

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Finally, I must also thank Gabriela for helping me to understand what life is really about.

ABBREVIATIONS AND BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Whilst I have used the Author–Date system throughout for references, the following abbreviations are used for Montejo's principal poetry and essay collections. First editions have been prioritised wherever possible. The exceptions are: *Alfabeto del mundo*, where the first edition is not obtainable; *El taller blanco*, whose first edition lacks several essays from subsequent editions; *El cuaderno de Blas Coll*, where previous editions were successively expanded in subsequent editions; and *Adiós al siglo XX*, whose first edition lacks many poems found in the second (1997) and subsequent editions. I have not been able to obtain the further-expanded fourth edition (2004) of this book. I have not used anthologised/amended versions of poems, unless otherwise stated. Where editions other than those detailed here are referenced, the Author-Date system has been used. For full bibliographical details, see Bibliography.

Eugenio Montejo

Poetry

Humano paraíso (1959)	*HP*
Élegos (1967)	*É*
Muerte y memoria (1972)	*MM*
Algunas palabras (1976)	*AP*
Terredad (1978)	*T*
Trópico absoluto (1982)	*TA*
Alfabeto del mundo (1988 [1986])	*AM*
Adiós al siglo XX (1997 [1992])	*AS*
Partitura de la cigarra (1999)	*PC*
Papiros amorosos (2002)	*PA*
Fábula del escriba (2006)	*FE*

Essays

La ventana oblicua (1974)	*VO*
El taller blanco (1996 [1983])	*TB*

Heteronymic works

El cuaderno de Blas Coll y dos colígrafos de Puerto Malo (2007a [1981])	*BC*
Guitarra del horizonte (1991), Sergio Sandoval	*GH*
El hacha de seda (1995), Tomás Linden	*HS*
Chamario (2004), Eduardo Polo	*CH*
La caza del relámpago (2006), Lino Cervantes	*CR*

Every effort has been made to contact the original publishers of Montejo's other works where long citations are used, and any omissions will be gladly remedied in the next edition of this book, if the necessary information is provided. My profound thanks to Aymara Montejo for giving me her blessing with respect to the use of all citations from her late husband's work.

Introduction: Locating Montejo

Traditions and modernity

Within the tradition of modern Venezuelan poetry, Eugenio Montejo (1938–2008), *nom de plume* of Eugenio Hernández Álvarez, is a central figure. Recent years have witnessed an increasing recognition, both within and beyond the confines of his homeland, of his importance in Venezuela's literary history, and have seen the rapid growth of his reputation as one of the most notable individual literary voices to emerge not just from Venezuela but from Latin America generally in the twentieth century. Such recognition culminated in his being awarded the Premio Internacional Octavio Paz de Poesía y Ensayo 2004. Despite this prominence, Montejo's work has received little critical or academic appraisal, in particular outside of Venezuela itself.[1] It is, in part, this relative dearth of scholarly study which led to the genesis of the present book, whose aim is to explore how Montejo responds both individually and poetically to (his) place and time. It represents, to my knowledge, the first book-length study in English of Montejo's work and the first monograph in any language to offer a sustained thematic analysis of his entire output.[2]

At the heart of Montejo's significance as an individual Venezuelan literary figure lies his positioning within wider national and international poetic lineages, and in his profuse essayistic production and the many interviews that he gave during his lifetime, Montejo consistently underscored the importance of understanding the traditions within which one writes, traditions which play a determinant role in moulding the individual poetic voice. In Montejo's case, this voice bears witness to a particular conjoining of national (as well as wider Latin American) and European poetic traditions, whose resonances are fundamental in determining both the style and the thematic concerns of

1 Only three articles in English, for example, have been published: Roberts (2004; 2007) and Gomes (2004).

2 The only other book-length publications are: Medina Figueredo (1997), which covers Montejo's poetry from *Élegos* (1967) to *Adiós al siglo XX* (1997 [1992]), generally working poem by poem and chronologically through the collections; and Chirinos (2005), which reads more as a history of Romanticism than a monograph on Montejo, dedicating only about a quarter of its pages to an analysis of three of Montejo's collections (*Alfabeto del mundo* (1988 [1986]), *Adiós al siglo XX*, and *Partitura de la cigarra* (1999)).

the poet, and which are, hence, no less indispensable to our own appreciation of his writing.

Montejo's place within Venezuela's national tradition involves the recognition of two focal points in the poetic tradition of the country, both of which were discussed several times by Montejo: the *generación del 18* and the *generación del 58*.[3] The former comprises a group of Venezuelan intellectuals who lived their formative years under the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez (1908–35). Writing from 1918 onwards, they represent a transitional movement, breaking what Nelson Osorio T. terms 'el estancamiento Modernista' (1985: 123) and paving the way for the emergence of the Venezuelan avant-garde, otherwise known as the *movimiento del 28*, in which several members of the *generación del 18* went on to participate.[4] The group includes such figures as José Antonio Ramos Sucre, Luis Enrique Mármol, Andrés Eloy Blanco, and Fernando Paz Castillo, and its importance for both Montejo and Venezuelan poetry cannot be overemphasised.

In his 1979 prologue to an anthology of Paz Castillo's poetry, Montejo declares the group to be 'de tan determinante gravitación en nuestras letras' (1979: 8), going on to describe the poets which make up the group as the very foundations upon which any and every Venezuelan poet since builds:

> [Estos poetas] integran lo que llegará a ser el primer intento coherente por establecer un clima de modernidad literaria tal como hoy lo concebimos. Por eso quienes más tarde se sumen al empeño de reactualizar nuestras artes, lo harán sobre todo a partir del avance que ellos anticiparon proyectándose así hasta el presente, con aportes inéditos, la gestión renovadora de los hombres del 18. (8)

And some twenty years later, he states unambiguously that he considers them the founders of 'la poesía moderna en Venezuela' (López Ortega 1999: 8).

[3] See, for example, Montejo (1979: 8–13) for comments on the *generación del 18* and comments made in interview on both *generaciones* in López Ortega (1999: 8–11). These two *generaciones* are not, of course, the only poetic movements of significance in twentieth-century Venezuelan poetry. The *generación* or *movimiento del 28*, for example, was both an important anti-Gómez student movement and a pivotal poetic movement in Venezuela centred around the publication of the journal *Válvula* in 1928 and headed by figures such as Miguel Otero Silva, Jóvito Villalba, and Rómulo Betancourt (see Osorio T. (1985: 89–109; 143–80)). Likewise, the increasingly urban poetics begun by the *generación del 58* led to the emergence in the early eighties of groups such as *Guaire* and *Tráfico*, headed by figures such as Rafael Arráiz Lucca, Armando Rojas Guardia, and Yolanda Pantin (see Gackstetter Nichols (2000)). Montejo himself, however, focuses predominantly on the *generación del 18* and the *generación del 58*.

[4] For a more thorough introduction to the *generación del 18* see Castellanos (1966). There is also a short, though informative, essay entitled 'La transición y los poetas del 18' by Nelson Osorio T. (1985: 121–5).

What stands out in Montejo's 1979 description of these poets is the focus on the act of *renovación* and *(re)actualización*: the group's primary importance lies in bringing Venezuelan poetics up to date. This characteristic of the *generación del 18* has frequently been commented on by critics: Juan Liscano points to their work being 'una poesía de ruptura violenta o parcial con el lenguaje estereotipado imperante' (1973: 20), and Nelson Osorio T. signals their role in 'colocar a la literatura venezolana en una hora más ajustada con la que marcan los relojes del continente y el mundo' (1985: 123). For Montejo, likewise, the global situation and understanding of these poets is important: coinciding with the end of the First World War, 'la acción de este grupo notable se inserta […] en un movimiento más vasto, el cual reúne sus *coetáneos* [de Fernando Paz Castillo] entre hombres de varios países que guardan una sintonía similar ante los hechos que les corresponde vivir' (1979: 9). And yet elsewhere Montejo sees the importance of the *generación del 18* as lying not so much in an *actualización* in continental or universal terms, as in the fact that it was one which responded to the needs and conditions of the time in the Venezuela of Gómez:

> En plena dictadura […] estos muchachos de apariencia distraída oponen a la teoría del 'gendarme necesario' asumida por la inteligencia de la época la de la 'palabra necesaria'. Ellos desafían el hecho de no tener una vida holgada ni mucho menos y van haciendo una poesía que hoy nos honra.[5]
>
> (López Ortega 1999: 8)

Put simply, in his comments on the *generación del 18* Montejo reveals his understanding of modern Venezuelan poetics as built upon a model of *(re)actualización*, where the poetic act becomes '[e]l empeño de reactualizar nuestras artes' (1979: 8) in accordance with the national experience of the time. This understanding of twentieth-century Venezuelan poetry may go some way to explaining the tendency for its classification in terms of 'generations': the tradition founded by the *generación del 18* is one of the periodic re-generation of existing poetics in order constantly to align it with the new social and political realities experienced by the people and poets. In short, it is an approach to twentieth-century Venezuelan poetry which looks to identify the determining moments of the lived experience of the nation with its determining poetic moments, or movements, each of which renovates the inherited poetics.

In this respect, it is not surprising that the second landmark movement in Venezuelan poetry to which Montejo frequently alludes is another 'genera-

[5] The concept of the *gendarme necesario* originates in Vallenilla Lanz (1961 [1919]). It refers to the argued need for a *caudillo* in order to maintain public order and was used specifically to justify the Gómez regime.

tion' marked by an abrupt change in the political, as well as the social and economic, character of the country.[6] The *generación del 58* comes at the point when Venezuela was both beginning its incursion into democracy following the regime of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1952–58) and also undergoing a period of radical transition from an agrarian country to an increasingly industrial one dominated by oil.[7] With these democratic and industrial times came a corresponding need for a new *poética actualizada*, what Ángel Rama describes as a 'reconsideración de los sistemas expresivos heredados de los mayores […] postulando una urgente modernización para dotar a las obras de su buscada capacidad comunicativa y de posibilitar la apropiación amplia de la realidad del período' (1987: 15). It is within this generation that Montejo finds himself, a generation writing from 1958 onwards and throughout the sixties, and which includes such figures as Rafael Cadenas, Ramón Palomares, Francisco Pérez Perdomo, and Juan Calzadilla, often working within poetic groups such as *Sardio*, *El Techo de la Ballena*, and *Tabla Redonda*.[8]

Given the combination of the wildly different nature of the sociopolitical situation in the two periods and what Montejo identifies as the need to *reactualizar* the country's poetics accordingly, these two literary movements represent, in Montejo's words, 'dos extremos, dos polos entre los que median cuarenta años' (López Ortega 1999: 9). And, indeed, the differences between the poetry and approach of the members of the two generations are marked. For the *generación del 18*, for example, as Montejo notes, 'el paisaje es una preocupación fundamental' (10), whereas 'la generación del 58 que escribe a cuarenta años de la generación del 18 se define, naturalmente, por lo urbano' (11). It is a contrast played out within Montejo's work itself, as I shall examine in chapter 3.

Yet these differences also run alongside and work towards a common goal. Contained within the concept of *reactualización* found in both movements there lies, for Montejo, a predominant concern for a poetics which reflects and represents the nation in a more 'authentic' way. In the case of the *generación del 18*, their lyricism and distinct preoccupation with the Venezuelan *paisaje* formed the basis for a reimposition of the autochthonous. In a decidedly anti-decadent poetics, they attempted to 'liquidar el modernismo en Venezuela y equilibrar los valores autóctonos (nativismo) […] [y]

6 Chirinos describes the *Viernes* movement (c.1935–41) and the *generación del 42* as, similarly, having 'la intención de actualizar nuestras artes' (2005: 66).

7 For an overview of the changes experienced during this period, and the particular importance of the year 1958, see Ewell (1984: 94–154). Montejo's witnessing of these changes is referred to in Rodríguez Silva (2005a: 9).

8 See Ángel Rama's prologue to *Antología de 'El Techo de la Ballena'* (1987) for an informative discussion of the emergence of the poets (and artists) of these groups and this *generación*. Rama draws attention to the need for 'la renovación literaria contemporánea de Venezuela' (11) which characterised the group/journal *El Techo de la Ballena* in particular.

revalorizar los elementos propios de la nacionalidad en la búsqueda de un mensaje propio que asumiera lo nacional' (Carrera 1997). Both the dictatorial regime of Gómez and the prevailing literary (Modernist) climate of the beginning of the century were seen as suffocating the nation, repressing its 'authentic' being. The reaction against this by the poets of the *generación del 18* was, as Montejo pointed out, to reclaim the poetic description of the land itself, transforming it from what he terms a literary, that is, by implication, a shrouded or 'inauthentic', presentation, into one which was more 'authentic', more *criolla*:

> Se dice que ellos nacionalizaron el paisaje porque antes […] el paisaje era un paisaje literario. Un poema brasileño se preguntaba que qué importancia tenía que el ruiseñor no cantara aquí si cantaban otros pájaros. Si tú recorres la poesía venezolana del siglo XIX te vas a encontrar con ruiseñores (aunque la paraulata sabanera blanca sea también un ruiseñor, eso no hay que decirlo). Pero para la generación del 18 fue una preocupación seria la búsqueda expresiva en torno al paisaje nuestro […]. En un poema Paz Castillo dice: 'Cuando Jiménez dice chopo, cuando Machado dice olmo, yo digo urape'. Ahí se ve la lucha del poeta por introducir con la mayor naturalidad espiritual posible una palabra como urape.
>
> (López Ortega 1999: 10)

As the reference to the nightingale and the Spanish poets Juan Ramón Jiménez and Antonio Machado shows, the prevailing literary models in Venezuela were, in Montejo's understanding, 'inauthentic' in the sense that they were identifiable not as Venezuelan but as distinctly European (Spanish).[9] The *generación del 18*, then, were attempting to reassert a poetics and a language of and for Venezuela, understood by Montejo as, by implication, a poetics and a language which would not be *literarios*, but somehow natural, 'authentic'. Within this context, the importance of Montejo's notion of the *palabra necesaria*, referred to above in interview with López Ortega, becomes apparent. Extending his discussion of the term in his acceptance speech for the Premio Nacional de Literatura in 1998 (2006b: 291–4) and in the 2004 essay 'La balada del insomnio venezolano' (2006b: 263–72), Montejo lays bare that the groundwork laid by the *generación del 18* was not just that of the *(re)actualización* of the poetic word in Venezuela, but that of an attendant specific engagement by the Venezuelan poet with the language and being of the Venezuelan people, whereby his/her role was to realign and 're-authenticate' these two elements. In both these pieces, the identification

[9] On this association of Modernism with Europe, Gerald Martin has noted that 'in Latin America writers almost unconsciously identified Naturalism with American concepts and Modernism with European forms' (1989: 5).

of the term with a specifically Venezuelan context, implied by its contrast to the *gendarme necesario*, is reiterated, and, likewise, there is the sense that the (poetic) word in question is one which is to speak for and bring together the nation as a whole, as Montejo underscores in his description of Leoncio Martínez's 1920 poem 'Balada del preso insomne', where 'va a reunirse […], *avivado por el alma colectiva*, un hallazgo de lo que debemos llamar la "palabra necesaria", vale decir, una concreción del verbo más verdadero *a los ojos de todos*' (2006b: 263–4, italics mine). The role of the poet as both reflecting and speaking for the people of Venezuela is a theme which, as we shall see, marks much of Montejo's poetics, and the centrality of (national) language and being to the poetic project in Venezuela is brought to the fore in Montejo's affirmation that, in the Venezuelan poetic tradition, 'la aspiración a una vida digna principia por la vigilancia de la palabra que la nombra, y por la consecuente identificación entre vida y palabra' (2006b: 294). These words speak not just of the *generación del 18*, then, but of Montejo's underlying philosophy of the role and aims of poetry, set squarely here within the context of Venezuela. Furthermore, both in emphasising the need to be attentive to the way in which language is used and in the subsequent alignment of language with the (ontological well-)being of the people, they also attest to a distinctly (in this case, late) Heideggerean mode of thought within Montejo's work,[10] to which I shall refer at several points in this study.

Returning, for now, to the specificities of Montejo's depiction of the *generación del 18*, we might note that the question of how any poetic presentation of the Venezuelan *paisaje* could ever not be *literario* is left hanging, as is the implied problematic notion of the 'authentic' or 'natural'. These themes will be taken up in chapters 3 and 4, where Montejo's own attempts at such a recasting of language and *paisaje* are explored.

The questionableness of a poetics which is not literary is further enhanced by the evident identification of the nationalisation of the *paisaje* and the imposition of indigenous terms for its flora and fauna with arguably the most famous Venezuelan poem of the nineteenth century, Andrés Bello's 'Silva a la Agricultura de la Zona Tórrida' (1985: 40–9). What is more, the engagement with this earlier poet also anticipates one of the primary characteristics of the *generación del 58*'s attempts to create a renewed national poetics to counter the petite bourgeoisie's dominance of Venezuelan culture and society (Rama 1987: 12), namely the fact that their own search for and use of new poetic forms runs alongside a renewed interest in the country's poetic tradition, and, in particular, the poetry of key members of the *generación del 18*, notably Ramos Sucre, whose work began to receive its first critical appraisal from

[10] See Pattison (2000: 173–5) for an overview of these aspects of Heidegger's thought.

1958 onwards.[11] This interest reflects both the debt owed by the later generation to the earlier poets as they seek to repeat their move of *actualización* and also a parallel, underlying concern for the rescuing of a sense of national poetic tradition. And it is here that the ambiguous nature of the concern for 'the national' becomes clear. The model set down by the *generación del 18* is one of *renovación*, of rejection of the existing poetics and a move towards one which might address the concerns and nature of the nation of the time. And, indeed, both *generaciones* point towards new poetic horizons, in the case of the *generación del 18*, the avant-garde, and in the case of the *generación del 58*, an appropriation of a heterogeneous range of often anarchic styles, languages, and rhythms (Lasarte 1991: 5–6; Rama 1987: 11). Yet, together with this diachronic view of a changing nation, there is a concomitant desire to assert a synchronic concept of 'the nation' and a national poetic tradition, as indicated by their interest in central figures of the country's past poetics.[12] And it is precisely in this tension between the need to *actualizar* and the affirmation of a past national poetic tradition that Montejo locates modern (twentieth-century) poetry in general, stating in a 1987 interview with Rafael Arráiz Lucca that 'la modernidad es la relectura de una tradición bajo formas nuevas, hasta entonces desconocidas' (1987: 4). Indeed, it also serves to define Montejo's own poetic production. López Ortega, for instance, refers to the latter as 'un punto donde la tradición se recoge y transforma, un espacio que es origen pero también desembocadura' (2005: 16), and, more recently, Miguel Gomes has talked of the 'imposibilidad de clasificarlo como innovador de vocación o tradicionalista empedernido' (2007: 16).

More broadly, we are left with the question of where Montejo himself is positioned within the genealogy of *generaciones* and movements of modern Venezuelan poetry. In his essay 'Nueva aproximación a Ramos Sucre' (*TB*), first published in 1981, Montejo referred to himself as a member of the *generación del 58* (29), as he did in interview in 2001 with Francisco José Cruz (2006: 372). But Montejo also underlined the complexity of his relationship with the movement, acknowledging that he was 'muy perplejo frente a la situación social de entonces' (López Ortega 1999: 9), as a result only publishing his first 'libr[o] definitiv[o]' (9), *Élegos*, in 1967, thus locating him

[11] See Lasarte (1991: 6). This is also alluded to by Montejo in his essay 'Nueva aproximación a Ramos Sucre' (*TB*, 29–39, p. 29).

[12] This understanding of national tradition resonates with Hobsbawm's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) and the 'contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of the social life within it as unchanging and invariant' (2). The result is not just an invented or created (poetic, national) tradition, but, as Benedict Anderson pointed out in *Imagined Communities* (1991), the realisation that (a sense of) nation, both of a particular time and synchronically uniting all times, constitutes an imagined or posited community (6–7).

'en la cola de la generación del 58' (9). What is more, Montejo highlighted a notable poetic and creative distance between himself and this *generación*:

> ¿Cómo me situé ante ellos? Los vi con gran amor, con gran cariño, pero también sentí distancia con la perspectiva creadora. El surrealismo, tomado como lo tomaron algunos, me pareció que no era un terreno fértil. Pero tampoco lo negué rotundamente; quería más bien que el tiempo verificara las cosas. (9)

Indeed, more than with the *generación del 58*, Montejo emphasised on occasion his links with the poetic tradition of Valencia, Venezuela's third city, in which he spent much of his upbringing and youth, and which was, at least during this time, a semi-rural location. Here, together with poets such as Teófilo Tortolero and Reynaldo Pérez So, he made up the so-called *Grupo de Valencia*, founding the journal *Poesía* in 1971.

Given these diverse factors, influences, and movements, it is difficult to identify Montejo with any one group or tendency in particular. Throughout this study, the concerns of the *generación del 58* found in Montejo's work will be apparent: the move into a Venezuela characterised by increasing urbanisation and industrialisation and how this is handled poetically and personally; the interest in the rediscovery or unearthing of past poetic traditions and figures in Venezuela, not just of the *generación del 18*, but of pivotal intervening figures such as Vicente Gerbasi and Juan Sánchez Peláez; and the sense of a need to reinvent a national poetics are all present in Montejo's writing. But, as Montejo himself indicated, both the way in which he responds to the poetic and social situation in which he finds himself and the themes and techniques which characterise his work are not solely guided by the *generación del 58*, nor by any other poetic group. Indeed, whilst his membership of the more 'rural' *Grupo de Valencia* can be seen to inform, as we shall discover, his approach to the increasing urbanisation of Venezuela, it is as an individual poet working within wider traditions that Montejo most often presents himself, rather than as a member of a specific school or movement.[13]

The effect of this positionality is, on the one hand, to point up the extent to which Montejo's concern for an overall sense of nation and national poetic tradition comes to be seen as the search for a national *meta*tradition, observing

[13] Even as regards his membership of the *Grupo de Valencia*, the extent to which Montejo downplayed any sense of a common or unified cause is noticeable. He stated, for instance, that 'éramos un grupo de amigos; no teníamos metas comunes como no fuesen la de aupar publicaciones y trabajar en conjunto […]. No tuvimos una agenda de principios para seguirlos' (López Ortega 1999: 7). The only thing Montejo did describe them as having in common was a posture against Neruda's 'tono de poesía social' (7) and, as with the wider *generación del 58*, 'el estar pendiente uno del otro ante el país de entonces, ante el nacimiento de la democracia' (7).

and bringing together the diverse elements of the Venezuelan traditions of which he is a part. But it also leaves us with the dilemma of how we are to locate and understand the individuality of Montejo. Key, in this respect, are Montejo's early essays, collected, for the most part, in *La ventana oblicua* (1974). These writings, centred around specific poets and poetry in general, act as signposts to the influences and tendencies which make up Montejo's particular poetic approach and identity. Moreover, it is in these pivotal essays that the primary thematic threads and concerns of Montejo's work, what I have referred to in my title as 'poetry and loss', are made apparent, as I shall discuss shortly.

Whilst prominent Venezuelan figures such as Ramos Sucre and Sánchez Peláez do appear as the subject of individual essays in *La ventana oblicua*,[14] as well as of later essays,[15] underlining the importance of the national poetic heritage, we see, above all, a broader contextualisation of Montejo's literary apprenticeship and interests in these works. There is, for example, a sense of the interest in Oriental philosophy and poetics which makes itself felt in much of Montejo's writing, emerging in the essay 'I Ching, el libro de las mutaciones' (*VO*, 101–9), and, earlier still, in the Taoist ruminations of 'Textos para una meditación sobre lo poético' (1966), a text published in the same year as Rafael Cadenas's collection *Falsas maniobras* (1966), itself imbued with a sustained engagement with Zen Buddhism.[16] Similarly, an awareness of the wider Latin American context within which both he and Venezuelan poetics in general are situated is hinted at early on by essays on Drummond de Andrade (Brazil) and César Dávila Andrade (Ecuador) in *La ventana oblicua* and by pieces such as the short introduction to César Vallejo's work published in 1971.[17] Indeed, the question of these broader Latin American influences and concerns was addressed more directly by Montejo in later years, drawing attention to the presence of poets such as Carlos Pellicer, Eliseo Diego, Vallejo, and Octavio Paz in his poetic sensibilities.[18]

[14] See 'Aproximación a Ramos Sucre' (*VO*, 67–84) and 'La aventura surrealista de Juan Sánchez Peláez' (*VO*, 151–60). Montejo's first published article on the work of Ramos Sucre, 'El laúd del visionario' (1969), appeared some three years before 'Aproximación a Ramos Sucre' was written (1972).

[15] See 'Nueva aproximación a Ramos Sucre' (*TB*, 29–39) and 'Adiós a Juan Sánchez Peláez' (2006b: 279–83).

[16] Taosim is also an overt concern throughout the heteronymic work *Guitarra del horizonte* (1991) and is mentioned explicitly in the title poem of Montejo's *Partitura de la cigarra* (*PC*, 53).

[17] See, respectively: 'Poesía y vitalidad en Drummond de Andrade' (*VO*, 93–100); 'La fortaleza fulminada' (*VO*, 85–91); and Vallejo (1971: 9–11).

[18] Montejo discusses the influence of poets such as Vallejo and Pellicer in the interviews: Araujo (2004); Martins (1998); and Rodríguez Marcos (2002), as well as dedicating an essay to Pellicer in *El taller blanco* ('En torno al primer Pellicer', *TB*, 17–28). Diego is discussed in 'Recuerdo de Eliseo Diego' (2006b: 253–6) and Paz is shown to be a particularly significant

Several critics have also underlined Montejo's debt to such Latin American figures,[19] and I shall be drawing out some of the most salient resonances with poets such as Paz and Vallejo during the course of this study.

Despite the clearly important role played by these wider Latin American currents, it is nevertheless striking that it is, to a large extent, European traditions that make up the primary subject matter of the essays of *La ventana oblicua*. Twelve of the nineteen essays in the collection are dedicated to European figures or literatures: the Grail legend; Novalis; Arthur Rimbaud; Paul Valéry; Antonio Machado; Gottfried Benn; Giuseppe Ungaretti; Joë Bousquet; Jean Cassou; Luis Cernuda; Salvador Espriu; and, hovering between the Latin American and the European, though always writing in French, Jules Supervielle. This preponderance of European poetic models in his thought and formation is reiterated by Montejo himself in many interviews,[20] and its significance cannot be underestimated, pointing towards a conjunction which remains at the heart of Montejo's poetics throughout his career. In short, whilst, as my focus on the Venezuelan context of his work has reflected, Montejo frequently emphasised the importance of his specifically Venezuelan poetic influences (2006b: 300) and, more generally, of the need to appreciate the nature of the homeland of any artist in an evaluation of his/her work,[21] it is at the intersection of the concerns of a modern (late twentieth-century) Venezuelan poetics and those of a diverse range of European poets and movements that Montejo's work finds its heart. Moreover, this dual concern underlines the way in which a national poetics in Latin America is inextricably caught up with European poetic and philosophical traditions. To take the particularly pertinent examples of the two *generaciones* on which Montejo focused, the *generación del 18*, whilst working against European poetic models and terms, were, nonetheless, strongly influenced by Bergsonian thought;[22] and, as Rama has noted, in the *generación del 58* 'se registra una rápida y muchas veces superficial o indiscriminada apropiación de los valores europeos' (1987: 17). It is a further problematisation of 'the national' which is never far from the surface of Montejo's work, as shall be evident throughout this study.

Perhaps the most important tie which links Montejo to European shores in his poetic training and reading is also the most obvious of the ties which link

figure in Montejo's poetic reading and background in 'En la muerte de Octavio Paz' (2006b: 285–7) and in his acceptance speech for the Premio Octavio Paz (2006b: 299–309).

19 Among critics to draw particular attention to Montejo's Vallejian traits is Ferrari (1988: 15).

20 See, for example, López Ortega (1999: 7–8; 9–10; 12–13) and Gutiérrez (2002).

21 See 'El horizonte espacial del Orinoco en las obras de Jesús Soto y Alirio Palacios' (2006b: 329–43).

22 See Montejo (1979: 10).

Latin America in general to Europe and, specifically, Spain, namely that of a common language. Once again for Montejo it is a question of acknowledging the traditions within which, as poet, one finds oneself, in this case that of the language in which one writes:

> Desde el principio traté de situarme ante las nuevas corrientes sin sacrificar el diálogo con la tradición poética de nuestra lengua. Siempre procuré identificar en la nueva palabra poética algún eco de las voces antiguas, las voces que conforman su magnífica tradición. (Cruz 2006: 372–3)

Within that tradition, Montejo finds himself drawn in particular to the 'veta lírica [que] procede del Romancero o de más lejos, pasa por algunos anónimos populares y se concreta más hermosamente en Manrique y Fray Luis de León [y] luego […] Quevedo' (373), and, we might add, which leads to the Romantic verse of poets such as Machado, about whom Montejo wrote and commented a great deal, and Lorca's *Romancero gitano* (1928).[23] Yet, whilst appreciating this Spanish heritage, Montejo underlines that this was a tradition which was transposed into Latin America as part of the *tradición culta*, in that 'las filiaciones también pueden rastrearse en la relectura que de estos creadores se ha hecho en Hispanoamérica. Se puede reconocer, por ejemplo, lo que hay de Quevedo en Vallejo o lo que hay de Quevedo en Borges' (López Ortega 1999: 8), a transposition in which it is important to note 'la búsqueda de una entonación específicamente latinoamericana' (Cruz 2006: 373). Bringing this lineage still closer to home, Montejo also underscores the continuation of the *Romancero* tradition within the *tradición popular* of Venezuela and, more generally, Latin America, referring to the *Romancero* as 'ese canto que se repite y que hoy lo encontramos acá tanto en la copla llanera [de Venezuela] como en toda hispanoamérica' (López Ortega 1999: 7).[24] Such a tracing of the *Romancero* lineage from medieval Spain to the modern Venezuelan folk tradition reflects the importance for Montejo both of the Peninsular heritage of the Spanish language and its poetic traditions and, as we saw in relation to the *generación del 18*, of the need to affirm both the Latin American and, in particular, the Venezuelan modulations of that (poetic) language. This is made particularly evident in his acceptance speech for the Premio Nacional de Literatura, where the evident pride in belonging to the Spanish linguistic tradition is foregrounded in Montejo's stressing that

[23] Montejo frequently underscored the importance of this Spanish lineage: see, for example, López Ortega (1999: 8) and Araujo (2004). Chirinos has focused on the relevance of Machado and Lorca in understanding Montejo's Spanish debts and influences (2005: 76–84; 106–12).

[24] The *copla llanera* is a traditional Venezuelan lyric form comprising four octosyllabic lines. It is the form used by Montejo's heteronym Sergio Sandoval in the collection *Guitarra del horizonte* (1991).

it is 'nuestra lengua, la misma lengua que cuando la hablamos delante de otras gentes […] hace possible que sin vacilación se nos identifique como venezolanos' (2006b: 291).

Tracing the Orphic

Amidst the numerous references to the *Romancero*, European Romanticism, and twentieth-century figures such as Cernuda and Ungaretti, the most central and recurrent European poetic strand in Montejo's work is a classical one: the myth of Orpheus. At regular intervals in Montejo's production, the presence and importance of Orpheus is rendered explicit, specifically in the poems 'Orfeo' from *Muerte y memoria* (1972), 'Arqueologías' from *Terredad* (1978), 'En esta ciudad' from *Trópico absoluto* (1982), 'Orfeo revisitado' from *Alfabeto del mundo* (1988 [1986]), 'Partitura de la cigarra' from *Partitura de la cigarra* (1999), and 'Máscaras de Orfeo' from *Fábula del escriba* (2006a), with the first of these, 'Orfeo', constituting one of the most determining poems of Montejo's *œuvre*. Aside from these explicit instances, Orpheus is also an implied presence, in particular in Montejo's early essays on the Grail legend and German Romantics such as Novalis and Rilke.[25]

A discussion of Montejo's adaptation of the myth in the poem 'Orfeo' is central to any understanding of the essential concerns and thematics of his work, as several critics have recognised.[26] But it is important first to examine the basic topoi with which any engagement with the Orphic myth necessarily enters into dialogue, not least, in Montejo's case, because of the continued resonance of these topoi throughout his corpus.

One of the most important characteristics of the mythical figure of Orpheus in European literature is as an analogy that serves to expose the contradictory positions and pulls of any poet in any time and place. In the successive retellings and reengagements with the myth of Orpheus, from Virgil and Ovid to Milton and Rilke,[27] several key paradoxes emerge: the ability of poetry to triumph over death, an affirmation prioritised in the Ovidian version, and yet also the failure of poetry and the poet before death; the Orphic song as both a revitalising song which moves and unites the animate and the inanimate, and yet also as a song of mourning, of lamenting a loss which it could not reverse,

[25] In particular, see 'Desde el ciclo de la tabla redonda' (*VO*, 135–42) and 'Novalis, el fuego ante la noche' (*VO*, 27–38). Montejo refers to Rilke in 'Textos para una meditación sobre lo poético' (1966).

[26] Among the critical works to draw attention to the figure of Orpheus in Montejo's poetics are Balza (1983), Rivera (1986), Iribarren Borges (1987), and Medina Figueredo (1997).

[27] Among recent recastings of the myth, the trilogy of Orphic films by Jean Cocteau is one of the most famous, comprising *Le sang d'un poète* (1930), *Orphée* (1950), and *Le testament d'Orphée* (1959). Montejo himself shows an awareness of Cocteau in referring to him twice in 'Fragmentario' (*TB*, 238; 239).

as is emphasised in Milton's *Lycidas* (1983 [1638]);[28] the power of poetry as both immanent and yet also transcendent, a contradiction between whose polarities Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1992 [1922]) in particular shift.[29]

Throughout Montejo's work these basic contradictory positions and characteristics of the poet and poetry are never far from the surface. Moreover, Montejo also engages with a further – and more fundamental – poetic questioning found within the figure of Orpheus. As Charles Segal has noted, one of the central oscillations in the character of Orpheus, both as poet and as a religious figure, is between his Apolline and his Dionysiac heritage (1993: 9). As Nietzsche famously discussed in *The Birth of Tragedy* (2000: 1–144), the figure of Apollo represents form, structure and rationality, and that of Dionysus ecstasy, unbridled emotion, and instinct. And the conflicting presence of these two within the figure of Orpheus is felt throughout the discussion in Montejo's essays of the *poeta nascitur non fit* debate, a discussion that extends more than twenty years from the essays of *La ventana oblicua* (1974) to those of *El taller blanco* (1996). In the former, Montejo brings this question to the fore in writing on the German Romantics. In 'Novalis: el fuego ante la noche' (*VO*, 27–38), Montejo takes a somewhat critical view of the importance given to systematic thought, theory, and 'la especulación científica' (31) by figures such as the Schlegel brothers, Fichte, and Schelling, describing Hölderlin as a notable exception to this rule, even if such a theoretical schooling was inevitably to be found in the poet:

> Cierto que [Hölderlin] escapará al rigor teórico por no sabemos cuál gracia angélica que le demarca otros cometidos […]. El será, con todo, el menos atrapado en los rigores intelectivos, el menos tentado por aquellas formas que los otros acometen como un mandato generacional. (31)

As the tone of this passage suggests, Montejo leans towards the characteristic which is most commonly associated with Romanticism in general, namely the assertion of emotion and intuition over rationalism. In this vein, in the essay 'Sobre la prosa de Machado' (*VO*, 125–34), Montejo describes Machado as a 'refutador de la poesía intelectual y de la llamada *estética de la construcción*, por más que, como lúcidamente advirtiera Gottfried Benn, el arte moderno tienda hacia una "cerebración progresiva"' (133). Yet Montejo also dedicates considerable attention in *La ventana oblicua* to discussing precisely those poets who emphasise the importance of intellect, form, and control, not least Benn himself, for whom 'el poema es […] un *hacer*, una

[28] Where helpful, original publication dates (in original language where appropriate) have been included with references. All original publication dates are in the Bibliography.

[29] For a good overview of these central contradictions and the way in which they are played out in different renderings of the Orphic myth, see Segal (1993: 1–35).

operación volitiva que refuerza la experiencia y que se nutre en el dificilísimo combate librado a cada instante para conquistar formas nítidas de expresión' (*VO*, 45). Likewise, Montejo refers to Valéry's 'brillantez formal' (21) before commenting on how Valéry 'def[iende] […] el poema que *se hace* […] frente al poema que *nace*' (23).[30] Indeed, what is striking throughout these early essays by Montejo is the extent to which, alongside the laudatory descriptions of a Romantic rejection of 'los rigores intelectivos' (31), he stresses the importance of the technique and technical prowess of the poets about whom he writes, as, in a decidedly Modernist manner, he depicts the task of the poet as that of a craftsman, not least in his description of Ramos Sucre as a poet who 'se det[iene] en el oficio e intent[a] por sobre todo recrear una especie de gema arduamente trabajada' (77), an image echoed in his reference to the Brazilian Modernist poet Drummond de Andrade's 'humilde artesanía ante cada vocablo' (97). Moreover, critics have frequently commented on the sustained concern for poetic construction in Montejo's own work. Guillermo Sucre, for instance, describes Montejo's 'pasión constructiva y el casi perfecto control sobre el desarrollo del poema, que excluye lo divagatorio y deshilvanado' (1985: 309), and it is notable that Montejo's first published collection *Humano paraíso* (1959) was a collection of sonnets, a strict and measured poetic form.

The discussion of the two sides of the *se hace*/*nace* debate continues into the piece entitled 'Fragmentario' in the later *El taller blanco* (*TB*, 229–43), first published in 1983. This 'essay' is in fact a series of fragments, as the title suggests, concerned primarily with expressing Montejo's thoughts on poetry and the poetic act.[31] Here Montejo sides firmly with intuition, inspiration, and emotion, declaring in the very first fragment that:

> Aprender a sentir: esta sola tentativa, que no es nada pequeña, formaría mejor al joven poeta que todo el aprendizaje perseguido a través del conocimiento literario, las reglas, modas, etc. […] [E]l sentimiento mismo, cuando es legítimo, procrea su forma o la posibilidad de inventarla.
>
> (229–30)[32]

[30] Many of the figures on both sides of the *se hace*/*nace* debate referred to by Montejo engage with the myth of Orpheus, Valéry in his poem 'Orfée' (1957: 76) and Benn in his poem 'Orpheus' Tod' (1986: 182–3), precisely in the period in which he had turned from the Dionysiac to the Apolline (see Ridley (1996)). On the other side of the debate, Goethe, to whom Montejo refers in 'Fragmentario' (*TB*, 241–2), likewise turns to the Orpheus myth in *Faust* (1956: 133).

[31] The nature and title of 'Fragmentario' recalls Novalis's *Fragmente* (1929 [1798]). The connection is especially acute given the number of fragments of Montejo's piece which display Romantic sensibilities and tendencies. For a detailed, if rather too single-minded, analysis of Montejo as a Romantic poet, see Chirinos (2005).

[32] This rejection of the intellect and rationality is also found in the first of Montejo's heteronymic works *El cuaderno de Blas Coll* (2007a [1981]), a collection of fragments concerning