

## ARTÍCULOS RESEÑA

### POEMS BY MANUEL ÁLVAREZ ORTEGA, BETWEEN MODERNISM AND THE METAPHYSICAL TRADITION

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*Poems* (2000) by Manuel Álvarez Ortega is a selection of writings edited by Margarita Prieto in Antelia Publishers. The poems were translated into English by Louis Bourne and appeared, for the first time in the *International Journal of Poetry*, Issue number 2, Spring, 1982. The six poems belong to the book *Gesta* also published in 1982.

Manuel Álvarez Ortega, born in Córdoba in 1923, is one of the most important poets of the post-war Spanish generation. He founded and edited the literary review *Aglæ* in 1949, a progressive and liberal journal that was open to poetry with avant-garde tendencies. In this review he publicized the latest French poets whom he also translated into Spanish. His much accomplished translations of Modern French poetry also give him great importance on the literary scene. These include not only the anthologies *Poesía simbolista francesa* (1975), and his recently published book *Veinte poetas franceses del siglo XX* (2001), but also his work on individual poets such as André Breton, Lautréamont, Jules Laforgue, Alfred Jarry, Apollinaire, Paul Eluard, Victor Segalen, Patrice de la Tour du Pin among others.

The poetry of Álvarez Ortega falls within the Modern European movements. For instance he was inspired from outside sources that lead him to re-work worn-out topics with the vision of a Spanish writer who had suffered the consequences of the Civil War and Franco's dictatorship, inner exile and oppression. While other poets returned to a poetry with Neoclassical patterns or a

poetry of social protest, which meant the establishment of the tutelage of Antonio Machado or Juan Ramón Jiménez, representing a stultifying imitation of fashionable models, Álvarez Ortega was revitalizing the entire Spanish literary scene with his poetry of imagination and vivid metaphor.

From his first major books *La huella de las cosas* (1948), *Clamor de todo espacio* (1950), and above all *Exilio* (1953), to his most recent such as *Acorde* (1991) or *Desde otra edad* (2002), Manuel Álvarez Ortega opened up a new form of poetry far removed from the classical and social realist tendencies of that moment. He fills his poetry with the widest possible array of rhetorical and symbolic components, creating a new form of verse and rhythm that are lively and stimulating; a kind of poetry bursting forth with a vitality that evokes the reader's emotion. Like Rubén Darío or Vicente Huidobro, who gave new impetus and strength to Spanish literature, he gives new life to the poetry of the Post-War period.

Álvarez Ortega contributes to the creation of this new form of poetry by using beautiful and unusual imagery. He develops themes around the existential situation of exile and death conjuring up old motifs based on the importance of art over social consciousness according to the criteria of Rilke. Furthermore, he increases the use of new stresses, rhythms, and meters that enrich Spanish verse. Above all, he pays attention to the musicality of a language that is rich and abundant in living metaphors.

These aforementioned qualities of Álvarez Ortega's work have been of tremendous influence to a generation of younger poets, who have considered him a teacher, particularly the generation of writers of the 70s who extolled the rhythmic nature and the importance of his poetry. Jaime Siles, Antonio Colinas, Luis Antonio de Villena, Marcos Ricardo Barnatán, Luis Alberto de Cuenca among other poets of this group have pointed out the influence of Álvarez Ortega in their works. They emphasize the nobility of his poetry not only in anthologies and the numbers of magazines devoted to him, but also in conferences and meetings held in his honor.

Álvarez Ortega's central themes are linked to contemporary aesthetic ideas. These themes and motifs are clearly derived from a number of movements: from Romanticism to Symbolism, from Decadence to the aesthetics of Modernism, and finally from the European avant-garde movements, mainly French Surrealism, very present in his work.

With such obvious influence from these contemporary movements, we recognize that Álvarez Ortega's poetry is inscribed into Europe's most recent modern background. Among the main poets who have influenced him are Rainer Maria Rilke, Saint-John Perse, and other poets with whom he was in touch. This includes not only literary, but personal friendships as well, such as Yves Bonnefoy or Pierre Seghers whom he introduced in Spanish literary magazines like *Poesía Española* and *Aglæ*. All these artists and poets questioned the lack of spirituality of Modernity and highlighted how the process of industrialization led human beings to a state of crisis. We recognize in his poetry the landscapes of despair of which other poets sang, the vision of man in modernity as 'wandering creatures in a valley of unfaithful/ Passions' as Álvarez Ortega points out in the poem 'Meek to the night, like two shadows':

What do we hope for in this deserted  
Cove? What do we want  
To halt in the passing of days, if the body  
Grows old and is made of thorns  
And suffering?

Will our souls  
Reach a pleasanter birthright,  
There where love, with a different warmth,  
Shall be our destruction,  
Ashes in nothingness?

We never knew how to be happy  
On this earth and now  
We love nothing, but a voice from beyond  
Calls us perpetually with the vain image  
We had no wish to be,

Turns brothers into wares  
For a carnival of disguises,  
Disconcerts and drags us  
To an abyss of withering disgrace  
And tears.

It is useless to aspire to the eternal.  
We are wandering creatures  
In a valley of unfaithful  
Passions, adventures of other temptations  
In a cloister in ruins.

These landscapes of ruins, isolation and emptiness are symbols of solitude and despair, the own experience of the poet who reflects on his situation in his writings. In this metaphysical struggle the poet appears like a ghost or living dead, he is the 'hollow men' of Eliot wandering in the 'wasteland'. These symbols that emphasize the need for spirituality and conviction were also employed by the poets of the Generation of 1927 such as García Lorca in *Poeta en Nueva York* (1929) and Luis Cernuda in *Un río, un amor* (1929) or *Donde habite el olvido* (1933), where we find a writer who constantly questions the situation of decay and remembers spaces and times gone by. As heir of this Generation of 1927, Álvarez Ortega also points out this theme of decay in poems like 'And who shall lead us to the land', where the poet does not miss an occasion to highlight the mood of emptiness produced by the war or the present history of Spain and that poetry is a vehicle to call this existential situation into question:

And who shall lead us to the land  
Where the nostalgia of another time dies  
And love, dressed in the night's shadow,  
Grows old in the open air or plays at random  
With misfortune?

Be who it may, from now on  
A wandering ghost or a temporal  
Relic, when the hours of a feverish day  
In that world where deception  
Reigns

But in the same poem, Álvarez Ortega also reveals his worries about the fate of humankind. Alongside this theme are others such as the importance of nostalgia; recalling other past times gone by and the fight of memory against oblivion. It is these very themes that come to be the main subjects of his poetry:

We shall make a place in the pit  
Destined for our bodies, the inheriting  
Grave, there where marble and nettle,  
Loosed from their liturgy,  
Refusing risk

And abstinence,  
Shall give us exactly the time  
Of our brief life span.

Classical motifs referring to temporality appear in his poetry. We find the *homo viator* in some compositions such as 'The day's journey done, what will you do. [...]?' or in 'How many times you have seen the night die', the *vanitas vanitatum* that defines life as a vanity fair or as a 'carnival of disguises' in the poem 'Meek to the night, like two shadows'.

Among other references and symbols the figure of the shadow stands out symbolizing the fall of man and the decay of the human body; the other side of life. Nevertheless, this negative vision of existence is saved by the images of the poet who looks for support in the midst of a terrible collapse. This support is his writing, his poetry. The poet thus appears disguised as a hunter who immortalizes passing existence in the poem. He captures a piece of life as he composes. This is evident in 'The years could not make a frontier' where the poet also points to the fight between life and death, the dominion of human decay that is also present in 'How many times you have seen the night die'. Whereas in 'He lived submerged in a Shadow', the poetic word is described as «A sign engraved/ among epitaphs and metals. It was like a wheel/ of damned syllables embedded in the wood.»

We cannot deny Álvarez Ortega's connection with the old metaphysical tradition. For example, there is the presence of John Donne whose few verses introduce the book. The sensibility to patterns as well as the reflection about subjects such as *carpe diem* (seize the day), the passage of time, the battle between death and love, and the conflict of the writer creating within time the poetry that will outlast him, all relate the poetry of Álvarez Ortega to the metaphysical poets.

Then we find such themes as the fight between the soul and the flesh, death and life, dream and insomnia, good and evil, the desire for eternal life and mortality. This dialectic found in his poetry takes its root in the metaphysical tradition that developed not only this war of opposites, but also the themes of time and *carpe diem*, the preoccupation with aging of the human person and his desire for immortality. Poets express their condition of despair through symbols such as the shadow, mentioned above, that appears with great force in the poems 'He lived submerged in a shadow' where metaphors and images related to death and isolation serve to describe the anguish of the fate of humankind. At the same time, the poet asks questions without getting any

answers, only the signs of writing or the poem will remain as the epitaph on the tombstones:

What is left when the face  
 Is but an obituary written  
 In the stone, and, ringed with misfortune, like  
 A creed that grows lost,  
 Memory turns into a sickly constellation,  
 The exact time of an adventure  
 Put off for centuries?

Late – or never – we hear  
 What death whistles.  
 Sluggishly, while we succumb to the sobbing  
 Of an endless age  
 On a fruitless earth, we create our carnal  
 Law, and in it, noise alone,  
 A line of foulmouthed insects, we sew  
 Our blame.

But far from the winding sheet and the faith,  
 When the dust unfurls its negation  
 In such an abyss, what is left  
 Of such a gesture? Or what is revealed  
 Of another incarnation, if beyond the known truth  
 Our bodies are wounded in the doubt  
 Of a surrender so unfair?

Alvarez Ortega's poetry has the power to evoke these landscapes of decay of the human being and to penetrate metaphysical reflections about their condition. All are expressed by vivid metaphors and magnificent imagery which turn this poet into a hermit of beauty, the best post-war Spanish poet who has developed the aesthetics of art for art's sake and writing as a method of introspection.