



Memory and Mysticism: Fragmentos de alcancía by Alan Smith Soto

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In previous studies, the themes of memory, nostalgia, and the divine have been revealed throughout both recognizably "mystical" literature, as well as in works unexpectedly mystical (such as those by Jesús Jiménez Reinaldo of Spain, or Joaquim Pessoa of Portugal). Even when the writer is not Iberian by birth, Iberian-ness may appear in their work in both an esoteric and mystical sense. We can then begin to categorize the mystical process as it appears, then, in these works, through the presence of steps that mystical poetic subjects take in common. These begin with the aforementioned memory and nostalgia, becoming a unique ontological suffering healed only by union with the divine beauty (generally that of a woman) in a space that their love creates (Simon, *Understanding*, 83). The poetic subject from the work *Fragmentos de alcancía* (Eng., *Fragments of a Piggy Bank*), written by the Costa Rican poet Dr. Alan Smith Soto, finds itself utilizing this process within an Iberian space. In this examination of the work, I hypothesize that the poetic subject of *Fragmentos*, although not a mystical figure, reflects the experience of existing within a Contemporary mystical imaginary due to its occurrence within a self-imposed Iberian space. This imagery consists of both the seeds of a mystical journey, as well as the undermining of that imagery's possible mythological resonances.

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In his own words, Smith states of his collection:

Los poemas los escribí entre 1990 y la fecha de publicación, aunque alguno puede que se remonte a los 80, pero no puedo precisar cuál. La primera parte se abre a un panorama más ancho que la segunda, e incluye temas de poética, amor y sufrimiento y paisaje, siempre la gran palabra. La segunda parte la escribí en un período de 2 semanas, en el pequeño pueblo costero murciano de Isla Plana, y ostente quizás más unidad por ello, dada por el

espacio y el tiempo definidos en que nacieron los poemas allí incluidos. Si bien los temas antes mencionados creo que también están.
(e-mail, 27 June, 2009)

In essence, we may divide the book into 2 sections, not only according to the division the poet has placed for us, but also thematically. The first section, "Así en mis ojos" (Eng., "As such in my eyes"), describes the creative process as one in which various modes of violence express the themes of nostalgia and memory. As we will see, this is not an isolated technique; rather, poets such as Clara Janés and Jesús Jiménez Reinaldo have utilized similar techniques in recent works (Simon, "The Mystic," 85). The section opens with the poem titled "Tempo":

No está mal, me comentan, los sonetos
¿pero a quién se le ocurre, hijo mío,
pisándole los pies al nuevo siglo
encerrar en tercetos y cuartetos

el estruendo angular de estos momentos,
en los que, desde el pan al amorío
(si por suerte hay casa para el frío)
se encuentran en los abismos cibernéticos?

Basta, basta, muchacho, de antiguallas.
Recordarás las ametralladoras
a lo largo del siglo que se acaba

que con cacofonías desgarradoras
pies trocaicos y cuerpos destrozaban
¡Cómo escribir con sangre de palomas!
(13)

The poetic form used here is that of the Petrarchan sonnet, a form which, in and of itself, honors and reflects the tranquility of nostalgia's effect on the past. The theme of poetry's inability to cope with the violent 20th Century, then, engenders an essential opposition, or contrast, in the poem (to be studied in the next paragraph) between the reality of the past and its formalized, perhaps softened, memory.

As we should expect, the two quartets of the sonnet serve to introduce the poem's theme or themes. This poem is no exception. The poetic subject begins by making a metapoetic comment on poetry's limitations as the outside world perceives them (rather than the poetic subject, necessarily). The comment is relatively common – how to express the "jagged edges" and "cybernetic chasms" of the 20th Century experience into "two quartets and two tercets." Although the style of the quartets is that of narrative, rather than the

more lyrical poetry associated with the Petrarchan sonnet, the symbols themselves create an opening into the violence of that century with stunning certainty. The notion of “stepping on the new century’s feet / enclosing into tercets and quartets // the angular noise of these moments” as a physical act connotes a violent treatment of the topic at hand. The lack of punctuation and enjambment from the first to second quartet also give the impression of velocity, an essential tool for expressing the chaotic ever since Marinetti’s and his Futurist art. The rhyme scheme of the second quartet also effectively nullifies any notion of peace and harmony that the poem’s form could have attempted to protect – “amorío / frío” and “momentos / cibernéticos” (Eng., “affair / cold” and “moments / cybernetic”) emphasize the inhumanity of the times, in contrast to the supposedly humane enclosure that the Petrarchan sonnet provides. We see this type of contrast is the poetry of Jesús Jiménez Reinaldo, as studied elsewhere, yet not necessarily in either contemporary Anglo American or Ibero-American poets. In my view, this lends to the idea that, although Smith is a poet of the American continent, his poetic style and work should be considered within the affiliation toward the Iberian poets.

It is in the tercets that the question of the violent experience of the 20th Century becomes highlighted as an element in contrast to a “poetic” descriptive discourse. The comparison of the “trochaic feet” and “unfettered cacophony” in the second tercet undermines the concept of poetic form as some sort of sublime reorganization of the atavistic. The final verse, “How to write with the blood of doves!” brings the mystical discourse of poets such as Clara Janés and José Ángel Valente, in whose poetry the dove (and or the more general “bird”) is associated with the spirit, crashing down into the violence of the reality delineated within the sonnet. The Petrarchan form, in its attempt to encapsulate and give order, becomes its own trap – the discourse of pain and violence undermines and re-writes the poem so as, in the irreconcilable disconnect of the postmodern and the iconic, it is the postmodern deconstruction that wins out. The nostalgic turns on itself, as the poem’s machine guns on the poetic word, stepping on the reality that it has tried in vain to create. In Smith’s own words, “[el primer verso del segundo terceto], de 12 sílabas ... rompe el orden del soneto; el soneto aquí no aguanta.” (e-mail, 25 Aug, 2009) (Eng., “[the first verse of the second tercet], 12 syllables long ... breaks the sonnet’s order; the sonnet here cannot cope”). The iconic then becomes a pathetic irony for the poetic subject, whose recognition of the postmodern process makes it that much more poignant.

In continuing these themes of memory, nostalgia, and violence, we find the poem whose first verse is “en el fondo del mar de arena fina”, (Eng., “in the bottom of the fine sand sea”):

En el fondo del mar de arena fina
una ostra entreabierto es lastimada
y con su salivilla irisada
al grano intruso con dolor lamina.

Es ámbar en su muerte la resina
que del pino era sangre derramada,
antes espesa savia alborotada
hoy temperada piedra cristalina.

Con ejemplos de natural belleza
de callados orígenes heridos
quiero reconocer a mi poesía

por estos balbuceos que su destreza
labra de mis recuerdos doloridos
monedas y fragmentos de alcancía.

(14)

The form here is again that of a sonnet. The use of baroque techniques such as hyperbaton and the contrast of light and dark are also apparent. Smith's previously noted contrasting of the nostalgic simplicity of the Petrarchan sonnet's form with the themes of death and violence (in the present) can also again be observed. Thematically, the quartets describe the introduction of sand into the oyster. The presence of pain helps to further this contrast. In the second quartet, time and memory, such as we find in the previous poem, appear as the physical manifestation of a transition from life to death, from "sap" to "crystalline rock."

Again, the tercets function to attempt to usher in some sort of reconciliation between poetry and reality. The first tercet speaks of the "silenced wounded origins" of nature's beauty, that is, the notion of pain as the root of perfection. Given the techniques used in the poem, we may posit that Santa Teresa's mystical process of "purification through pain" becomes applicable as a tool to reconcile the opposing forces of past and present, violence and formal beauty. The final tercet reinforces this notion with the metaphor of the "piggy banks fragments." That is, the violent breaking of the external body to reveal the inner worth of an object or an entity. By joining the concept of purification through pain with that of destruction of the body, we observe the introduction of a new, all-encompassing motif – the poetic subject's mystical process. Unlike that of poets such as Clara Janés and José Ángel Valente, Smith's work invites the violent present as an element of opposition to formalized beauty so that they may create what mystics call a "binary opposition" (Simon, *Understanding*, 81-2). It is based on this opposition that a mystical process may begin and end. Through it, the mystic recognized the world of the mundane as a false world and in opposition to the pure, real world. This newly found reality then allows for the creation of a middle space from whence the mystic may attain illumination. The difference in Smith's poetry, however, is that we do not see a lover or guide to aid the poetic subject in this quest; rather, the poetic subject seems perfectly capable of indicating to the reader that this process serves as no more than a simple solution to the complex contrasts introduced in the previous poem. In this

sense, the themes of violence, memory, time, and nostalgia, from which the whole discussion originates, function as part of a greater self-guided search for truth that, if taken one-by-one, these themes are incapable of beginning. The whole issue of attempting illumination in such a context reminds us of Jesús Jiménez Reinaldo's recent work.

The themes of nostalgia and memory develop further within this world of an evermore present mystical impasse with the poem that begins "la hiena, en cuyo cuello" (Eng., The hyena, into whose neck"):

La hiena, en cuyo cuello
meto la navaja,
la que, con otros perros,
atacó la casa
mal restaurada
donde murieron padre y madre
antes de meterse en sus sábanas
de pabellón perdido en hospitales
muchos años antes
de su pelo rapado
y su hombro vulnerable.
(22)

Unlike the previously studied poems here, this one takes on an almost free verse form. It should be noted that all verses in the poem are "arte menor," or fewer than 9 syllables long. This gives a quicker rhythm to the poem, possibly reflecting formally the violent velocity seen in the sonnets' themes. This change marks an acceptance of the sonnet's inability to cope with the suffering of modern times. Yet, the poetic subject has not lost the notion of nostalgia. As seen in the longest verses of the poem, verses 7-9, the memory of the poetic subject's parents' death (evidently in the past) contrasts the much shorter verses expressing a quick and violent death (expressed as a present that refers to the past).

Semantically as well as formally, the poem is extremely condensed and non-linear, almost as if to tantalize the reader into a trap. That is, the "house" so described in verses 4 and 5 as "barely restored" may refer to the mystical symbol of the "house" as "...the mystical space ... through which the union of [the mystical seeker's] physical [material] with the energy of the universe may be recognized (Simon, "Mysticism," 48)." The poetic subject's expression of this act of violence both physically surrounds the associated memory and modifies the parents' death in a hospital. This act, then, becomes the principle one of the poem, harnessing death's presence and disseminating it throughout. The trap is sprung in the final two verses, in which the poetic subject breaks from the remembrance of mother and father, seemingly returning to its description of the hyena that it has killed. Yet, this description could represent the status of any of the three characters. In other words, death's embrace strikes all of the poetic objects: mother, father, hyena, and not simply of the

three. The murderous act of the poetic subject against the hyena, then, is converted into one against all three.

This creates an ironic and unforeseeable impasse. The poetic subject, in attempting to avenge its parents' death, has itself murdered them through the power of the poetic and mystical symbolic. Only at the end of the poem does the word "vulnerable" appear, in recognition of the defenselessness of those upon whom the act is committed. It seems that the poetic subject, then, has gone perhaps too far in accepting violence as an assumption. From this point on, however, this first section of *Fragmentos* becomes even more, as it were, *fragmented*, and the poetic subject, that much more self-critical.

Near the end of the first section, the topic of death becomes the most explicit theme. We see this process in the poem beginning whose first verse is "la muerte tiene de miel" (Eng., "Death has of honey"):

La muerte tiene de miel
ojos de gato,
y sonr e su hambre
tapada infantilmente por mi mano.
Ning n abrazo es el  ltimo
si no
el de su manto.
(30)

The form of this poem is entirely free verse. In terms of technique's expression of the underlying themes, we observe that death begins explicitly in the poem as having "of honey / cat's eyes." The poetic subject, then, has come to see death (the consequence of the violence which the poetic subject first expresses, then *creates*, in previous poems) as both shrewd and sweet. Recognition of the active place that the poetic subject takes in death's presence come in the third and fourth verses, in which the poetic subject covers in a childlike manner death's hunger. As we have seen in the previously studied poem, this could be a further conceptualization of the "navaja," or "blade," as the poetic subjects tool for bringing about death (whether purposefully or not, as we have seen). The poem ends with a further comment that "no hug is the last / except / that of its cloak." The poetic subject has used the image of the cloak to cover itself, thereby distancing itself from death's final, yet comforting embrace. The reference also resonates in the previously studied poem's use of the "s banas," or "bed sheets," covering the poetic subject's parents as they die in the poem. Again, the poetic subject turns the images from the previous poem from concrete objects to be metaphorized into implied metaphors which then become conceptualized.

In terms of the poem's connection to a more mystical thematic, I believe that the metaphorized image of the blanket, besides aiding the poetic subject in throwing death's presence from the hand which feeds it, also serves as a sort of "Alam-al-Mithal," or third space, from which the mystical seeker may find union and spiritual enlightenment (Simon, *Understanding*, 83). The issue

then becomes the absence of a guide or other being with whom the seeker may unite. This necessary step does not exist in the poem. In fact, the only possible guides have already passed from the scene in the previous poem, making enlightenment impossible. The third space, then, serves as a reminder of the poetic subject's loneliness, rather than as a step toward the "pure" world. Even "purification through pain" will not aid this poetic subject, as the pain seems inflicted on several others, rather than on the subject itself. Of course, we could then infer that the poetic subject is itself the guide, and that poetry as both an expressive and creative medium serves to aid others in their mystical quest. This would, in an unexpected way, turn Smith's poetic subject into the guide to which the poetic subject of Clara Janés' *Arcángel de sombra* turns.

To summarize, the first section of the work moves from an attempt to reconcile nostalgia and memory with the violent present. The poetic subject then incorporates this violence into its own experience, creating a poetic language of death and aloneness.

The second section of the work, titled "Poemas de Isla Plana," does not continue this trajectory. Rather, it seems to find a utopic place in which hope may live. As Smith has stated, these poems were composed during a two-week trip to a small village on Isla Plana. It should be no surprise that the beauty of such a place could bring a poetic subject toward a more utopist concept of the universe, even with the imperfections described in the poems studied here.

We should note that, formally speaking, the poems of this second section do not subscribe to any traditional poetic form. Rather, they seem to carry with them the shift to free verse seen in the first section. In my judgment, this implies that, as the reader delves into this utopia, the violent other world described before is still present in the poetic subject's mind.

The first poem in the collection begins with the verse "Esta mañana a las diez:"

Esta mañana a las diez
bajé al mar, y estaba
poblada la playa de sombrillas,
y su frágil amparo
las familias;
el hombre y su barriga
la madre desdoblado una toalla
y la niña que llena
de sus sueños el cubo con la pala.

(41)

This first poem sets the scene for the section. The poetic subject describes the scene observed upon going to the beach beyond the fishing village about which Smith spoke.

The description of the motion toward the beach is narrated in the past, while that of the scene, in the present. This change in time perhaps reflects the attitude of the poetic subject: from narrating past action to describing a mental moment as though the subject were reliving it. In fact, the use of the gerund "desdoblando" (Eng. "unfolding") suggests an action that to the poetic subject has become fixed in time.

Symbolically speaking, the notion of contrast between worlds (which implies the possibility of a more mystical interpretation of the text) is present in the poem. In the second verse the poetic subject "descended to the sea." This action of descending may connote the notion of returning to the Kristevan "chora," as well as to a "lower" place, giving this utopian space the unexpected complexity of representing simultaneously the return to origin and the movement toward the dystopian-like "anti-mystical" space found in the work of poets such as Jesús Jiménez Reinaldo. The third, fourth, and fifth verses describe the "shadows / and their fragile shelter / the families," an inversion of the cause-effect relationship between the person and the shadow. This dependence upon the shadow's creator for protection expresses the fragility of what should be a less "fragile" moment in time and space. Again, Smith's poetic subject sees in contrasts an indication of a more profound relationship between the objects observed. The poem then talks about a mother, father, and daughter at the beach. We cannot overlook (nor over-emphasize) the repetition of this familial triumvirate as a unified element in opposition to the moribund one from the first section of the work. This functioning and living family unit, to which the poetic subject has "descended" and which in its togetherness protects the shadows, serves to illustrate the essence of the utopian in this poem. Here, in this space to which the subject travels, we find that a child's dreams, the mother's act of creating a positive space through self-extension (through the towel's unfolding), and life's fullness (hence, the "man and his belly") find their realization.

In essence, the condensed language of the poem responds to the desperate context of the first section with the opening of that desired space for illumination and the poetic subject's ability to move towards it, thanks to the unknowingly affirmative efforts of others. The seemingly anti-mystical nature of the journey turns out to be another element in the contrast of descending / ascending which further defines this space as a mystical one.

Of course, the collection is not without a humorous element, as found in the poem titled "El hombrón" (Eng., "The Large Man") on page 43:

El hombrón

Despatarrado, rojo, calvo, grande
tumbado al sol, al lado de su esposa
que sentadita bajo la sombrilla
parece velarlo con cansancio,
el hombre chuletón duerme o finge
y apartado, está solo en el silencio

invadido de la pequeña caverna de su cráneo.

Although the aforementioned system of contrasts (sun / shade, light / dark, male / female) is present in the poem, it is evident by the final verse that the poem means no more than to criticize a fellow beach-goer. In essence, the poetic subject looks to remove this object from the mystical process through deconstructing symbols relevant to him, in this case. We see this clearly in the references to the poetic object as nothing more than a cooked piece of meat (such as in the use of the term "chuletón," as well as the description in the first verse as "red, bald, big"). We understand the most ironic use of those symbols, however, in the use of "silence" in the final two verses, not as a pacific force in opposition to violence, but as the only company the man has in "the small cavern of his cranium." Inasmuch as Smith's poetic subject delves into the epistemology of death and the mystical, he also knows how to joke.

From this point we may return to the process as evolving toward the notion of "divine beauty," a characteristic of Iberian Mysticism insofar as it pertains to those most recent mystical poets (named above). The poem titled "En la playa" on pages 44 and 45 reveals this openly:

En la playa

La niña quinceañera
desnudó sus tetas;
eran, probablemente, las más bellas
del mundo;
un niño de cinco años, de espaldas a la mar,
paralizó su juego ante el brillo dorado;
abrió los ojos grandes, y su boca pequeña,
y una sandalia colgaba
de su mano;
mirándola, mirándola,
alcanzó sus talones
la punta de saliva
de una ola brillante.

Leyó esa tarde:
y las calles de la ciudad
serán llenas de muchachos y muchachas
que jugarán en las calles (Zacarías, 8, 5).

The poem is divided into two stanzas. The first describes the effect the girl's breasts have on a young boy at the beach; the second, a quote from the Bible. Divine beauty appears in the poem in its mystical connotation; that is, as the angel who "acts as intermediary between [the mundane world] and [the pure, divine world]" (Simon 83). Again, this new angel's presence at the

beach, or the utopian paradise Smith's poetic subject describes and in which it find reconciliation between the aforementioned conflicting themes, gives further credibility to the notion that "The angelic intellect ... exists as a space in which the angel may guide the mystic This space ... is known as Active Imagination ... (83)." The on-looker's reaction, one of stupefied enjoyment, resonates in Clara Janés' imagery of the mystic's reaction to divine beauty. In the "Poema del encuentro" (Eng., "Poem of the Encounter") in *Diván y el ópalo de fuego*, Machnún states that Leyla's beauty "enmudeció la voz del ruiseñor" (Eng., "muted the raven") and "occupied the memory" of Machnún (Janés, *Diván*, 40). The somewhat exaggerated pathetic fallacy that describes the boy's physical reaction, that is, the waves of saliva, in the 12th and 13th verses also lend to this reaction (although giving the kind of humorous re-touching of the imagery that "El hombrón" provides throughout).

The second stanza, unlike the first, moves toward a re-contextualizing of the scene through the presence of Biblical chapter of Zechariah, a description of Zion after the promise of Jerusalem's restoration. This chapter comes after the fall of the Kingdom of Judah near the end of the Old Testament. According to the first verse of the poem's second stanza, the boy had read these verses that same afternoon. The relationship between the verses and the vision of the young girl's breasts is an ironic and dystopian one – the divine beauty and peace promised after defeat finds physical representation in an adolescent, erotic context. This subversion of the Biblical text's status as part of a societal mythos through its reapplication in such a scene lends the same complexity to the poem as that found in Jesús Jiménez Reinaldo's "Nueva York" when, at the end of a poem describing the dank, spiritless world of the city, the poetic subject states: "et in Arcadia / ego (Jiménez 25)." Again, the anti-mystical takes center stage, even in the supposedly utopian poetic space. So, despite signs that the poetic subject's struggle may have ended at the beach, it continues with yet another fragment of the piggy bank stabbing him so ironically in the foot.

The closing poem, "A la orilla del mar," (Eng., "At the Sea's Edge"), summarizes the relationship between space and time in the work:

A la orilla del mar

Ese guijarro redondo, perfecto,
es un pequeño hombro de tiempo.
(56)

In essence, the perfect pebble representing the "shoulder" of time reminds the reader that all elements of this space are nothing more than a fragment of the poetic subject's memory, embedded in the present through violence and death, shrouded in irony and the avoidance of self-realization. The notions of memory and nostalgia, the mystical, Biblical and literary references present, do not create a new mythology for the reader. They simply aid the poetic subject in capturing all the pieces of him that make up the "piggy bank."



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