



Zurita and his Dantean Dialog

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Introduction

The New-avant-garde in general and Raúl Zurita in particular played a very important role in Chilean poetry after the coup which overthrew Allende. For several years after the overthrow Chilean poetry suffered a long silence due to the censorship of the military government and due the self censorship caused by the trauma of the occupied country. From 1973 to 1975 no book of poetry was published in Chile. In 1977 Juan Luis Martínez (one of the more important writers of the New-avant-garde) self-published *La nueva novela*, which was the beginning of this movement. Raúl Zurita in turn published his first book *Purgatorio* in 1979; it was to be the beginning of recognition of the new poetry after the military coup. Zurita was born in Santiago-Chile in 1951 and according to his own words:

Mi madre y mi abuela son italianas, genovesas, y habían llegado a Chile a finales de los años 30. Ellas con mi hermana fueron mi única familia. Mi abuela era una persona especialmente culta, que había estudiado pintura en Florencia nunca pudo habituarse a este nuevo país que siempre le pareció una miseria. Tal vez por eso vivía hablándonos de Italia, del color de su mar, de sus artistas (especialmente Miguel Ángel) y que en lugar de cuentos nos contaba episodios de la *Divina Comedia*. Yo crecí escuchando estos relatos, eran generalmente episodios del Infierno. Muchos años después, cuando ya escribía, me di cuenta que jamás podría salirme de la órbita de esa obra, que la Divina Comedia estaría siempre detrás de mi... (Láscar, 96)¹.

Zurita's work has been constructed from the inspiration and the influence of *The Comedy*. This fact should be analyzed not only from a stylistic point of view, but also and more importantly, from the perspective of the cryptic language of his poetry, which created a gap in the authoritarian censorship

allowing him to be published legally². This approach has undoubtedly direct connections to the polisemyc work of Dante.

Ignacio Valente, the main critic of 'El Mercurio', the most influential paper in Chile, wrote a long and laudatory review of Zurita when *Purgatorio* was launched³. This critic, a priest and member of Opus Dei, praised his language and his frequent references to God and the Bible. Apparently Valente did not want to grasp all the references to politics that this work certainly makes and he focused only on those topics and analogies which made Zurita's work acceptable to the military establishment. All the writing about suffering, death, hunger, injustice, etc., were framed in a biblical context which made *Purgatorio* a work inoffensive to the government. This was one of the undoubted merits of Zurita's work. It is interesting that Valente, himself a priest, did not take in consideration "...the normal medieval practice of biblical exegesis, in which texts were given, in addition to their literal meaning, an 'allegorical', 'moral', and 'anagogical' (or 'mystical') meaning" (Holmes, 45), and gave Zurita the clearance to be inserted into the canonical world of literature.

The relationship between Raúl Zurita and Dante is a very rich and complex one. It would not be possible to give a broad overview if we try to grasp the multiple aspects that link this two poets, treating them with all the necessary attention that would be needed to establish the laberinthine echoes that Dante has made in Zurita's poetry. Nonetheless I would be satisfied if I can indicate what I consider would be the starting points for a deeper study.

The whole oeuvre of Raúl Zurita Canessa is related to *The Comedy*; if we consider only the titles of his books we cannot loose track of this affirmation. His first book was entitled *Purgatorio* (1979); then in 1982 he published *Anteparaíso*⁴ and, in 1984 *El paraíso está vacío*. In 1985 *Canto a su amor desaparecido* appeared and in 1987 he published *El amor de Chile*; and in 1988, publishes for the effect of this essay and this moment of his work, finally, *La vida nueva* en 1993.

But Zurita uses not only explicit elements to relate his work with Dante's. He also uses biblical referents, he is constantly in weaving political meanings, and his metaphors are often very cryptic, leaving the reader in a kind of maze where is very difficult to be positive about which if any is the ultimate meaning. Zurita also tries to be as universal as he can. He tries to change the uses of language creating new syntax, playing with new metaphors which make the approach hard and fascinating for the poetry reader. He tries to give the most universal vision possible of his time, not only by his writing but also by other forms of art which he produces; he goes beyond historical poetry, introducing it, and beyond formalism, using it. He tries to avoid, at all costs, the 'old' political language, even when he is probably trying to write some of the most political poetry written in Chile during its whole history (even including Neruda). He is trying also to write with layers of meaning as concentric circles (the circles of *the Inferno?*), different levels of interpretations. Like Dante he also has a prophetic view of history. He uses himself as a character in his poems, and he even uses his body as a means of suffering or pleasure, as when he cut his face for the cover of *Purgatorio* or masturbated in public in an art gallery in Santiago-Chile. Zurita also has in common with Dante the unity of his work. He is obsessed with numbers, chapters, and cantos; and if one book is not the continuation of the other, there is at least a common atmosphere among them: *Purgatorio*, *Anteparaíso* and *La vida nueva* are clearly related titles. Finally Zurita also had his muse: Diamela Eltit, a writer like himself, and like Dante he suffers the loss of her. She left him in 1984 and he wrote one of his best lyrical poems to her: *Canto a su amor desaparecido*. He has, then, his Beatrice.

Although we can be certain of all these connections between *The Comedy* and Zurita's work, we cannot say that Zurita is copying Dante's work explicitly or even thematically. The relation is deep but at the same time oblique. Perhaps if Zurita had not himself stated about his great devotion to *The Comedy*, it would have taken some time for critics to recognize the profound kinship between the two.

While Zurita deploys many references to biblical topics, nevertheless the main referent, the closer circle⁵, is Chile under the military boot. Zurita plays with geography⁶, giving new meaning to the valleys, mountains, sea, etc. He sets out in motion, for instance, to walk the Andes ranges, and make *Il Duce* (Mussolini-Pinochet) perform a role in his world⁷:

LAS CORDILLERAS DEL DUCE

*Frente a la cordillera de los Andes
desde el oeste como la noche
Las cordilleras del Duce avanzando*

- i. No son blancas las cordilleras del Duce
- ii. La nieve no alcanza a cubrir esas montañas del oeste

Detenidas frente a la cordillera de los Andes
aguardando como un cordón negro que espera la
subida final de todas ellas allá en el oeste solas
agrupándose tras la noche

- iii. Porque frente a los Andes se iban agrupando
como la noche del oeste
- iv. Por eso la nieve no cubre las cordilleras del Duce
sus cumbres son la noche de las montañas

Ciñéndose de negro frente a las nieves de Chile como si
los nevados no fueran otra cosa que espinas hiriendo la
noche y ellas pusieran entonces la corona sangrante de
los Andes

- v. Por eso de sangre fue la nieve que coronó las

- cumbres andinas
- vi. Porque sólo la muerte fue la corona que ciñó de
sangre el horizonte
- vii. Y entonces ya coronados todos vieron las
cordilleras del Duce ceñirse sobre Chile
sangrantes despejadas como una bandera negra
envolviéndonos desde el poniente (*Anteparaíso*, 92-93).

When we read this poem, which is a representative example of one part of his corpus, even if we are fully familiar with the Spanish language we have a good chance of feeling perplexity before this 'weird' syntax and the unusual referents used in it. It is as though Zurita had a strange way of saying things, or is simply playing with signifiers, conceiving the 'poem' as an *object*, a mere literary artifact. Naturally this very construction has an exotic beauty of its own⁸; but as in Dante's writing, this is only one (the shallowest) of the levels of meaning. We can go deeper: 'we can replace for example the word 'cordillera' by army (the power, the coldness, and the mystery behind its walls, the threat). We find words like 'cordón negro', 'nieves', 'espinas', 'noche', 'corona', 'muerte', 'ciñó', 'hiriendo', etc. which although using a 'surrealistic' context, all draw a cold, deadly and desolate picture. Zurita is talking about the coup, but as I have said, the censor did not notice it and his work went to print without any difficulty.

But Zurita is not only talking about the coup, this would be too single-minded to make him a great poet. His crucial coordinates are the fundamentals of human life, the need and search for happiness. In his own words:

Anteparaíso fue concebido como un recorrido, como una trayectoria que comienza con la experiencia de todo lo precario y doloroso de nuestras vidas y que concluye con el vislumbre de la felicidad. Yo nunca escribiré el *Paraíso*, aún cuando algo así hoy pudiese ser escrito; pero incluso si ello es posible, sólo lo será como una empresa colectiva en la cual la vida



de cada ser que pisa la faz de la tierra devenga en la única obra de arte...
(*Anteparaíso*, 24).

Las *Cordilleras del duce*, then, is part of this project, this journey (he is like Dante also a pilgrim) where he is moving his work of art from suffering to happiness. From hell to paradise, but paradise is not something possible to write individually; it is a global task which involves the whole world⁹.

To be able to understand this poem it is useful to know that it is part of a whole chapter in *Purgatorio* named *Cumbres de los Andes*, where its first poem is entitled *La Marcha de las cordilleras*¹⁰. Each poem of the chapter is lit if we read the whole section; in the same way every section is clearer if we read the book, and so on. That is to say, in order to get a better understanding of Zurita's oeuvre, the more we read it (quantitatively speaking), the more we understand it, as if we are charting the code, the alphabet and the grammar he is inventing. His work has been conceived as a continuum, as a unity (probably this was one of the biggest problems in understanding his first book *Purgatorio*) and also as a sort of hologram, but you do not realize the 'image' until you have read a good deal of it. It is hard to say what Zurita's motivation was for doing it that way, but I would argue that it was in part the necessity of overcoming the censorship. It is interesting to notice here how content and form are historically related. Perhaps Dante also left Virgil, a pagan, in hell on account of the censorship of the church. History repeats itself ?

In the poem Zurita says that the Duce's Cordilleras are not white, the snow (coming from the sky (cielo?)) is not able to cover them. Then he says that the snow cover the Duce's mountains because they are the night of the mountains. It is not logical in terms of natural weather. This metaphorical distortion is similar to that of Dante's *Purgatorio* when in some terraces of Mount Purgatorio there is neither rain, nor wind, nor any weather effects. Then he uses terms of the crucifixion: to gird (ceñirse), thorns (espinas), crown (corona), bleeding (sangrante), to express the pain, the treason, the crime over Chile. He says later that blood was the snow which crowned the Andes summit.

White and red, purity and pain, (the communist innocence and party). And after the Duce's victory, the country was wrapped with a black flag: the emblem of death.

Commentary

Religious and biblical references are places common in Zurita's work, although he was not a religious person¹¹. As yet it is not clear why as an agnostic he introduced so many references to religious issues, loaded his language with Christian words. It is a matter of speculation to interpret this problematic characteristic of his poetry, but I would argue that this happened for two main reasons. The first one is the indisputable influence of Dante in his poetry. As he has confessed in the interview quoted above, he could not be estranged at all from *The Comedy* and the core of this model is Christian religiosity. The second is the need to bypass the censorship. Indeed, it is not unlikely that he wrote bearing in mind Valente's review¹².

The overall effect of this approach was his immediate success among mainstream critics. At the same time, he also gained popularity with the underground literary world of the universities, *barrios* (outskirts) and churches. The public was starved of new poetic messages, although Zurita was complex poet for the understanding of most of his readers and listeners.¹³ Probably the Christian language displayed in his poetry also helped to make his work more digestible by the population of a Catholic country like Chile, where the Church was working very hard to help the people overcome the harshness of the regime. As they did for Dante, political difficulties helped to shape the body of Zurita's work, and their textual strategies led both poets to success. Different kinds of success, undoubtedly, but both found their way to fulfill their purposes.

The poem 'Como un sueño' is a good example from *Purgatorio* of the language and tone of Zurita's poetry in the early eighties.

COMO UN SUEÑO

Mira qué cosa: el Desierto de
Atacama son puras manchas
sabías? claro pero no te
costaba nada mirarte un poco
también a ti mismo y decir:
Anda yo también soy una buena
mancha Cristo -oye lindo no
has visto tus pecados? bien
pero entonces déjalo mejor
encumbrarse por esos cielos
manchado como en tus sueños

COMO ESPEJISMOS Y AURAS EL INRI ES MI MENTE EL DESIERTO DE CHILE

The language of this poem is loaded with such biblical speech as 'desierto', 'mirarte a ti mismo', 'Cristo', 'pecados', 'sueños', 'auras', and 'INRI', and with such related referents as 'encumbrarse', 'manchas' and 'puras'. We can find hundreds of such words in Zurita's work. He invokes this religious world constantly, without finding this tradition anywhere in modern Chilean poetry except for Gabriela Mistral (Nobel Prize 1945), but nonetheless Zurita does not acknowledge any particular influence from her.

A complete different situation happens with the political meaning of his work. As I noted above, the context of Zurita's work was the recently installed military regime. This political environment was eager for everything but poetry, which it perceived as one of the means of rebellion and communism, a weapon capable of subverting the masses. In 1973 in the cruelest way the soldiers killed Victor Jara, for composing and singing protest songs. Neruda (Nobel Prize 1972) died ten days after the coup and his house was vandalized by the army hours before his family was to bring the coffin to hold a vigil over his

remains¹⁴. For Zurita then the challenge was to get into the mainstream literary system (with massive distribution) and to express a political and human message about the atrocities of the military regime. His solution was to create a highly sophisticated literary code with a high standard of beauty and ambiguity capable of breaking the wall of the highest censorship: an Opus Dei priest.

Dante used his pen to construct a literary fiction which affords him some protection disguising his personal intentions with his literary architecture. Although Zurita had different purposes than Dante, he also had to hide his thoughts and political intentions of the rulers. To achieve this, Zurita invented a metaphorical and allegorical system, which can only be decoded once we find the referents, the geographic referents, for example (the indifference of deserts, the cruelty and power of mountains, etc). Like Dante, Zurita had to create a code that he would allow him to say what was impossible to communicate in any other way. Different times, different situations, different strategies, nevertheless the same spirit: the need of truth. Naturally, their own historical truth.

Since it is a major historical issue, to announce what he sees it is impossible to deny in the long run, but also impossible to say in any direct way in the short run as, for instance, Neruda said it in his *Canto general*. Since Zurita remained in Chile for the whole dictatorship journey, he had to write from within, that is to say, he had to create a literary medium capable of being clear and obscure at the same time. To fulfill this purpose he not only used metaphors, but his whole work reads as if it were reflected in a distorting mirror: everything is there, but hidden from the 'simple-minded eye', that is to say the military eye. Moreover he introduced a brand-new language, not surrealistic, nor antipoetic, nor symbolist alone. He consciously created¹⁵ a style in poetry which combined a beautiful literary structure with an undeciphered new code. That is to say, the historical context and the aesthetic factor have merged neatly in his corpus.

To understand his literary work, it is extremely important to be aware of his body art, his land art, and his happenings. For Zurita, the human body and the 'earth body' are also texts and metaphors *per se*. In this way he follows the medieval tradition of seeing the world as a sacred text, as a book, in which we can read and extract meaning. We can see Dante's *Inferno* vividly present as a subtext when he cut his face, or threw ammonia into his eyes. He was trying to be the punished one, the metaphorical savior of the beaten Chile. When he wrote in the New York skies in June 1982 *La vida nueva*:

MI DIOS ES HAMBRE
MI DIOS ES NIEVE
MI DIOS ES NO
MI DIOS ES DESENGAÑO
MI DIOS ES CARROÑA
MI DIOS ES PARAISO
MI DIOS ES PAMPA
MI DIOS ES CANCER
MI DIOS ES VACIO
MI DIOS ES HERIDA
MI DIOS ES GHETTO
MI DIOS ES DOLOR
MI DIOS ES
MI AMOR ES DIOS

He was playing with the idea of writing evil on heaven and doing it in the greater possible scale: *the sky*¹⁶ in *New York City*. It is outstanding how Zurita has managed to fulfill his 'magnitude' desire, creating this volatile monument which recalled Zen Art and Michelangelo's work on the ceilings of the Sistine Chapel.

For this 'graffiti' Zurita uses eleven negative nouns out of fourteen. Only 'paraiso' and 'es', besides 'Mi amor es Dios', have positive meaning. He is

writing in the sky nouns of hell. This is the kind of paradox recurrent in his poetry, which gives Zurita's work different levels of interpretation, and at the same time helps to make his poetry cryptic and in a way hermetic.

One possible reading is the religious one (the only one interesting enough for Valente); we can decode this text as a hard complaint against God and his responsibilities for the miseries of the world. This reading could be supported by the evil referents on the sky (cielo)¹⁷. Another reading is the political one. He is writing in New York, the very center of the capitalist system: the heart and the brain of the contemporary (historical) world. In this level of interpretation it is also possible to see on the one hand the internal contradictions of 'Sodom' (the Empire State and the Statue of Liberty) with its minorities (written in Spanish) and on the other, the causation against the *pushers* of the invasions and war actions around the world. It seems that he did it again. Now by-passing the "American System"; coming from Chile, the same country just beaten by the imperial power. He brought them the mirror.

After this event and asked why he had done it he answered:

Cuando decidí escribir en el cielo pensé que el cielo, desde los tiempos inmemoriales ha sido el lugar hacia el que todas las comunidades han dirigido sus miradas, porque allí está escrito su destino. Uno de los mayores deseos sería ocupar ese cielo como una página donde cualquiera pudiese escribir su destino. ¹⁸(*Anteparaíso*, 7-8).

He talks about *el cielo*, about fate, he plays with words referring to the destiny written in the sky (like Dante did with *Paraíso*), he says that one of his dearest desires would be that everyone could write his or her own destiny. Writing and life interwoven again, first was the word and then the world. Also a deep complaint, a great dream about freedom and justice.

On the other hand, regarding his language, it is very hard to find traces of his literary idiom in 'real' or colloquial context. In this sense, Zurita's writing is fully original and unique. We can say that he has made a new way to utter things in Spanish. This achievement makes another connection with Dante's

work. While Dante was the highest exponent of medieval thought and the very first poet of the modern age, Zurita was also a poet on the edge of two worlds, modernity and postmodernity¹⁹. This fact makes him to be very critical about the importance and scope of language itself considering it, as Martinez did, as an object²⁰, on the one hand, and very politic on the other. That is to say, he grasped all the historical spirit of the revolutions from the Russian one to the Latin American ones, particularly the Cuban and Chilean ones. This hyper-awareness of language was also a very important tool to use in breaking the limits of censorship. In this sense we can say that Zurita is, as Dante also was, a man of his times.

Mazzeo has said of Dante that: "...the critic will discover in the texture of the poem not simply the history of the world but the history of poetry itself as that history looked to Dante" (3). Although, for many reasons, we cannot compare the scope of Zurita's poetry with Dante's, we can certainly see that in Zurita's work there is also an important synthesis of world poetry up to his time, and even though Zurita's work has been concentrated on Chilean affairs, it is also true that an important part of his poetry uses Western history as symbolic referent. This concern, makes Zurita a very universal artist when he makes his work, at the same time, he could be a relevant sample of the 20th century Western poetry.

The 'magnitud' topic mentioned above also find roots in Neruda's poetry; Zurita declares:

Admiro profundamente a Neruda pero hago algo que creo es completamente distinto. Los escenarios naturales son para mí como metáforas, como encarnaciones del amor, de la pasión, de la maldad, del sueño. Pero lo que amo en Neruda (como lo amé en Miguel Angel) es la escala. La magnitud. (Láscar, 98).

Neruda, then, reproduces in Chilean poetry this paradigmatic greatness, this desire for constructing a comprehensive opus, which was already present

in Dante and Michelangelo, but Neruda established a more explicit and direct political content²¹ in his work.

He loves the size of Neruda's *Canto general* for instance, not necessarily the way it was made. This is a clue to his relationship to Neruda and with his own language²². Zurita could not work in the straightforward way that Neruda did, although Zurita like Neruda, was looking for poetry for the lay person. Zurita surpassed socialist realism in form and content, yet this does not make him a better poet than Neruda. Nonetheless Zurita found the way to express himself, as Neruda did in his own time.

To write after Allende, was to write in another world entirely. Not only had the political and historical conditions changed, but the very concept of poetry creation. Here we should highlight the importance of the relationship of life and art, history and creation, for Zurita. He had to overcome the 'old' political language to accede to a new stage in political consciousness. The world of Allende was over, was Neruda's. Thus, not only censorship was the unique concern for Zurita's crypticism, but also and on another level, the Chilean political and literary tradition.

From a different angle, like Dante, Zurita uses himself as a character. This is not only a resource used as a literary technique, but also stands in the way of his concept of poetry and art. For Zurita, life and art, although they are not the same thing, are deeply connected; that is why he has undertaken others forms of art, as I mention above. Zurita, the human being, is also the artist, he lives and he creates at the same time, and of a matter of course, he is part, as a *character*, in his creations, like Dante as the pilgrim in *The Comedy*.

XXXVIII

Sobre los riscos de la ladera: el sol
entonces abajo en el valle
la tierra cubierta de flores
Zurita enamorado amigo
recoge el sol de la fotosíntesis

Zurita ya no será nunca más amigo
desde las 7 P.M. ha empezado a anochecer

La noche es el manicomio de las plantas (*Purgatorio*, 18)

Zurita's poetry has a different approach than Dante's regarding the author's involvement in it. In Zurita, the relationship with text is not a clear and unproblematic one, in opposition to the pilgrim, who is guided by Virgil and whose journey would be perfectly safe, almost guaranteed by Beatrice intervention. The pilgrim's world is a world of revelation, while of Zurita's one is a world of confusion and punishment. He is the punished one, the one who is taking the role of Christ without being a savior; he is a kind of *anti-savior*, a Woody Allen's Christ.

The problem at stake here has a close relationship with their commitment with history. Both poets have a prophetic view of history, although their approach is different. For Dante, there is a clear way to overcome Italy's problems: Italy must get rid of a worldly Church and separate the role of the government (Monarch) from the spiritual one (true role of the Church). With this prescription, Italy would overcome, at the same time, its moral bankruptcy. For Zurita, though, the only way to surpass pain, genocide and hatred is by means of love. This point is clearly stated by him in *El amor de Chile y La vida nueva* (book which closes the circle opened by *Purgatorio*). The very names of these two books show us the atmosphere of his concluding vision of life, humanity and history. The titles in *El amor the Chile*, for instance, are all related with love: 'Querido tú, queridos valles', 'Amadas piedras, Queridas montañas', 'Queridos, amados desiertos', etc.

In *La vida nueva* there are not this sort of titles. Nonetheless, the overall picture could be summarized by Zurita's own words:

Dante, en la última página de *La Vita Nuova*, promete escribir un poema en el cual espera decir de su amada lo que no ha sido dicho de mujer alguna. Muchos años más tarde él terminó la *Divina Comedia* pero, para poder hacerlo, su amor tuvo que morir. Bien, desde los inmensos

espacios del sur del Río Grande yo he tratado de imaginarme el viaje inverso, para pasar no de la promesa al trabajo, no de la *Vida Nueva* a la *Comedia*, pero sí -abiertos como una flor desde nosotros mismos- pasar de la *Comedia* a la *Vida*, del trabajo a la promesa, del Viejo al Nuevo Mundo, a las orillas de esta tierra que nos ama. Yo quisiera que nuestra vida nueva terminase con esas palabras. *Salvo que yo no quiero que mi amor se muera*". (*Purgatorio*, 25)²³

Zurita has tried to write 'la promesa' in *La vida Nueva*, and he is using this reversed method, because his Beatrice was not a woman but Chile itself. Although Chile has many meanings (as many as we can think of), it is clearly the country, but it is also something else. It is also Beatrice, the dead *lover*, because Chile has a literal meaning, no doubt about it, but also (a) metaphorical one(s). Chile is the lost paradise, and only can be recovered by love. However, this love must be an universal one. That is why he must be a prophetic poet, he must build through words²⁴ and his own actions a new world where all our *Chiles* can be reached and at last return to the lost paradise.

The last poem in his 519 page book *La vida nueva* does not say what he announced in the words quoted above, but:

Así, resplandecidos, como mares
vimos los ríos cruzar el centro del
cielo y luego doblarse. Abajo se
comenzaban a perfilar de nuevo las
montañas, las cumbres erguidas
contra un fondo de olas y tierra

Amado Padre, entraré de nuevo en ti. (519)

It can be noticed that Zurita has changed his difficult syntax. This last poem is clear, like most of the new poems printed²⁵ in this book. This one in particular, is even closer to narrative than poetry. Could it be the subject matters, the cause for this change, as Dante did, in an opposite way, in *Paradiso*? When Dante developed a more and more poetic language while he were claiming from *Purgatorio* to *Paradiso* (going from the promise to work),



apparently Zurita went in an opposite way, because he was going backwards (from work to the promise).

The lack of power and originality of Zurita in his last book could be compared with the weaker strength of Dante in the last section of the *Comedy: Paradiso*. It is easier to talk about human pain and abjection than about happiness. There is a sort of *natural logic*, which can be followed to understand the cause of pain, and pain itself. Nevertheless when in poetry we talk about solutions, it seems too reductionist and ideological, that does not convince and it produces a reaction against it. It is not credible. Solutions seem to require another sort of literary vehicle like essays, novels or theatre.

Canto a su amor desaparecido

Zurita in 1995, out of his overall plans (from work to promise), published *Canto a su amor desaparecido*. The origin of this book was his personal experiences of rejection by his wife and beloved companion Diamela Eltit. They both worked together for years, they performed together and they were part of the CADA art group. Suddenly, in 1984, the couple broke up and for Zurita this was a very painful situation. He ended up writing this poem, a very political one, indeed, like Ernesto Cardenal did in his *Epigramas*, when he was rejected by his lover: "Te vi con otro/ y por eso me fui a escribir/ estos poemas contra el gobierno/ por los que estoy preso".

Zurita wrote a whole book, where he redirected some of his feelings about Eltit against the military government. This work is one of the most emotionally powerful of all his works. The people murdered by the police and secret services around the world speak from their graves. He uses different voices like in a theatrical script, the literary technique created by the Mexican poet Juan Rulfo in *Pedro Páramo*.

7KH ZKROH ERRN LV YHU\ YLVXDO DQG LW FDQ EH E
RULJLQDO FRS\ WKDQ E\ TXRWLQJ LW QHYHUWKHOHV
PXFk DV , FDQ

&DQWR D VX DPRU GHVDSDUHFLGR

&DQWp FDQWp GH DPRU FRQ OD FDUD WRGD EDx
PXFkDFKRV PH VRQULHURQ 0iV IXHUWH FDQWp OD
OiJULPD

&DQWp OD FDQFLyQ GH ORV YLHMRV JDOSRQH
RWURV GHFHQDV GH QLFKRV ORV OOHQDEDQ (Q FDG
QLxRV HVWiQ PXHUWRV 7RGRV \DFHQ DOOt SdtVHV
OHV FDQWp DVt GH DPRU OD SHQD GH ORV SdtVHV
KDVWD HO ILQ HO FDPSR (QWHUD VX HQDPRUDGD FDC

)XH HO WRUPHQWR ORV JROS
SHGD]RV QRV URPSLPRV <
DOFDQFp D RLUWH SHUR OD
LED

7H EXVTXp HQWUH OR
GHVWUR]DGRV KDEOp FRQWL
UHVWRV PH PLUDURQ \ \R
DEUDFp 7RGR DFDEy

1R TXHGD QDGD 3HUR PXHUV
DPR \ QRV DPDPRV DXQTXH
HVWR QDGLH SXHGD HQWHQ

6t Vt PLOHV GH FUXFHV OOHJDQ KDVWD HO ILQ GHO
/OHJXp GHVGH ORV VLWLRV PiV OHMDQRV FRQ WRQH
JDQDV GH GHVDJXDU

\$Vt OOHJXp D ORV YLHMRV JDOSRQH GH FRQFUHWR
'H FHUFD HUDQ FXDUWHOHV UHFWDQJXODUHV FRQ V
VPHQ VDQJUKH G tDR

9L JHQWH GHVJUHXDGD KRPEUHV SLFRWHDGRV GH Y

- la nevera, oh sí, oh sí.
 - moviendo las piernas a todos esos podridos tíos invoqué.
 - Todo se había borrado menos los malditos galpones.
 - Rey un perverso de la cintura quiso tomarme, pero aymara el número de mi
 - guardián puse sobre el pasto y huyó.
 - Después me vendaron la vista. Vi a la virgen, vi a Jesús, vi a mi madre
 - despellejándome a golpes.
 - En la oscuridad te busqué, pero nada pueden ver los chicos lindos bajo la
 - venta de los ojos.
 - Yo vi a la virgen, a Satán y al señor K.
 - Todo estaba seco frente a los nichos de concreto.
 - El teniente dijo "vamos", pero yo busco y lloré por mi muchacho.
 - Ay amor
 - Maldición, dijo el teniente, vamos a colorear un poco.
 - Murió mi chica, murió mi chico, desaparecieron todos.
- Desiertos de amor.

The word 'desaparecido' is a very loaded word in Latin America. It refers to those who were arrested by the police and killed in torture. It happened in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, El Salvador, almost everywhere. The police never acknowledge their detention and the families never recovered their bodies. Zurita here is playing with his personal lost as much as with the social one. His own lost is so intense that it can be associated with the one of the mourners. The way he says it, the graphic ideas of tombs, the multiple voices, have created pathos never reached before or after in any of his other books. Although we can notice that this book has been positively created, the feeling behind is so powerful that it sometimes overwhelms the reader.

The use of different voices -women, men, torturers, prisoners- as much as the topic and the language at stake, create a world where it is very difficult to escape. The reader can feel how deep is his wound, by the permanent

repetition of words related with death and torture, without even the mention of Eltit's name. The silence about her makes this work extraordinarily corrosive and alive. This was Zurita's *Vita Nuova*.

Conclusions

Dante Alighieri has been a major influence in Zurita's life and literary project. From his very first years Raúl Zurita learned about *The Comedy* and his fascination with Dante never was diminished.

In the sixties when he started writing poetry Dante was his beacon and later, after the military coup, *The Comedy* became even more meaningful for his work. His life was marked by his own family²⁶ past, by Dante and by the coup.

His talent, his relationships and his fate led him to be the poet who broke the silence of Chile when he published *Purgatorio* in 1979. In his Dantean poetic pilgrimage, he never published such a thing as *Inferno*. He started with *Purgatorio*, then *Anteparaíso* (1982) and finally *La vita nuova* (1993)²⁷. The reason for this, as I have argued before²⁸, is because he was writing from Hell. Chile was the *Inferno* at that time, and due to his pedagogic (messianic) view of poetry he was trying to find the way out of it.

His 'pilgrimage', nonetheless, and maybe Valente did not have a wrong appreciation about him in the long run²⁹, lost a lot of vitality, when he started giving formulas for human happiness and justice. He became closer and closer to the Christian discourse, and less ambiguous. In his search for fairness he found a dead end and naturally an indisputable recognition by the 'democratic' government who kept the dictator Pinochet as Senator for life. Part of this recognition was Zurita's appointment in Italy as Cultural Attaché in the early nineties. He became the official poet of the 'protected democracy', and so far we have not seen new works from him³⁰.

Notes

1 This quote is part of an interview answered by Raúl Zurita in Chile to me in 1996, in order to complete my Master (H) thesis, at the University of NSW in Sydney, Australia.

2 Zurita was the first poet published by a professional publisher (Editorial Universitaria) and not self financing his writing during the military rule.

3 I have tried to obtain bibliographical information from the USA about this article, which I read when it was first published, but with negative results.

4 "This volume opens with the poem 'La vida nueva', an ambitious project, until that moment unpublished in contemporary poetry" (Anteparaiso, 7). This poem was written on New York skies in 1982 by means of 5 airplanes.

5 This idea of circles recalls us Dante's one too, as vertical clusters of meanings. Zurita seems to use Dante's circles as a technical and aesthetic procedure to create layers of interconnected readings.

6 Dante uses underground (*Inferno*), mountains (*Purgatorio*), and stars (*Heaven*) as metaphors to signified eternal punishment, temporal punishment, and salvation. The deeper and the highest.

7 The Duce business is also a double relation. On the one hand, Mussolini and Pinochet were both right wings dictators but, on the other, Zurita have chosen a Dante's fellow countryman, an Italian dictator to make the analogy; nor Franco nor Hitler instead. Franco would be a more direct analogy for been a Spaniard and explicitly beloved by Pinochet or Hitler for been the paradigm of cruelty.

8 Zurita, in this joy for playing with form, descends from Mallarmé like his friend and peer Juan Luis Martínez.

9 It is interesting to point out how close is to Dante in this idealistic desire too. Dante conceived *The Comedy* as a mean for convince and change the ideas of his time and make a happier world.

10 'Marcha' means in Spanish to march, but also to walk or even to go. To understand that it is the first meaning preferred by Zurita it is necessary to associate it with other poems. The Cordilleras are marching, like the army does: the Cordilleras are the chilean army.

11 Raúl Zurita was at least a sympathizer of the Chilean Communist party by 1983. He worked very close to their cultural policy at that time, giving poetry recitals, performing in forums, giving conferences and workshops, and participating with the intellectuals and artists creating a cultural alternative to the official culture.

12 Zurita's work was not an isolated one. He belonged by the 1970' to a group of artists (grupo CADA) and critics (Nelly Richard) which were very aware of the political situation in the broad sense of the word.

13 One aspect that overcame the difficulty Zurita's poetry was his extraordinary talent for declaiming it.

14 In Chile when a person dies, the relatives normally take his/ her remains to their home and they have a vigil for 24 hours before the burial.

15 Zurita used to work 8 hours per night composing his poetry.

16 In Spanish, 'cielo' has both meanings: sky and heaven.

17 Again Zurita is using the geography as a metaphor.

18 First of all it is interesting how he refers to communities, in a very general and postmodern way, and *el cielo* as their cielo. He is legitimizing the ownership of the cielo for any community, for any individual.

19 Zurita began writing in the sixties, published his first book in 1979, and has continued publishing up to the present. One of his main intellectual mentors, Nelly Richards, is a very well known figure of postmodernity.

20 As a separate entity from any external referent.

21 The Spanish Civil War was paramount to make a turn in Neruda's poetry, from more metaphysical and existentialist poetry to a political one, since he wrote *España en el Corazón*.

22 This is important to point out because Neruda is the greatest of the Chilean poets who addresses historical-political topics.

23 Last italics introduced by me.

24 Fully aware of the role of language in ideology building.

25 *La vida nueva* is a kind of collection of old poems treated within a new context. It has poems from *Anteparaíso* and *Canto a su amor desaparecido*, for instance, but diagramed, as a whole, in a different way.

26 His mother and grandmother are the only ones mentioned by him. His father died when he was one year old.

27 In between he published *El paraíso está vacío* (1984) and *Canto a su amor desaparecido* (1985). I have written the names of his works in Italian to highlight the closeness with Dante.

28 Masters (Hon) Thesis.

29 From his own point of view and political project.

30 After publishing *La vida nueva* he has published his first novel and lately, in March of 2000, a book entitled *Poesía militante* where he wrote a laudatory poem to Ricardo Lagos, the social democrat president of Chile. Zurita won the 2000 National Literary Award, which has been very controversial in the literary Chilean world.

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