

MEMORY AND UTOPIA

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Abstract: In *Memory and Utopia*, Manus O'Dwyer offers a new insight into Valente's poetics. Contrary to the view that Valente detached his verse from any kind of social or political commitment, O'Dwyer claims that the notions of void and self-negation are key to understand his desire to make his lines reach a broad community and recover the memory of the dead. The author delineates Valente's poetic career on the basis on the identification between desolation and the Francoist dictatorship. Valente's verse points at a new nothingness, but not with the selfish aim to enjoy an isolation from reality. Quite on the contrary, in his poems and essays, the non-place or desert, together with other poetic motifs that have been previously analysed from an erotic perspective, allows the poet to portray an impossible community that accepts all those who have been denied participation in the discourse of History. It is only by means of a language that has not been corrupted by the institutional discourse that the poet can draw the map of that utopian, literary space.

Key Words: José Ángel Valente; Memory; Utopia; Francoist dictatorship; Void.

Resumen: En *Memory and Utopia*, Manus O'Dwyer ofrece una nueva perspectiva sobre la poética de Valente. O'Dwyer se enfrenta a la opinión, tantas veces asumida, de que Valente quiso desvalijar su poesía de cualquier asomo de compromiso político o social. Argumenta, en cambio, que los conceptos de no-identidad y de vacío son clave para entender el deseo de Valente de alcanzar, mediante su voz poética, a una amplia comunidad, y de recuperar con ella la memoria de los muertos. O'Dwyer delinea la trayectoria poética de Valente, identificando la desolación con la dictadura franquista. La poesía de Valente apunta a la nada, pero no con la intención egoísta de resguardarse de la realidad. Antes al contrario, en sus poemas y sus ensayos, el desierto o no-lugar, junto con otros motivos poéticos que han sido entendidos desde una perspectiva erótica, permiten al poeta retratar una comunidad imposible, que acoge también a todos aquellos a los que se les ha negado participar en el discurso de la Historia. Será solo mediante la palabra que no ha sido corrompida por el discurso institucional que el poeta podrá dibujar el mapa de ese espacio literario y utópico.

Palabras clave: José Ángel Valente; memoria; utopía; dictadura franquista; vacío.

In one of the entries of his *Diary*, Valente alludes to his search for nothingness as the only possible path towards the free poetic word: "Porque toda palabra poética ha de dejar al lenguaje en punto cero, en el punto de la indeterminación infinita, de la infinita libertad" (Valente 139). In *Memory and Utopia*, Manus O'Dwyer offers a new insight into that relationship between void and freedom. Under a mask of self-negation or "máscara de nadie", Valente refuses to instrumentalize his verse, thus transcending the common formulas of poetic realism (Gamoneda 77). This is not so strange an impersonation if we remember that the pursuit of a different identity, the "ontological change", is one of the highest spiritual goals in the Cabalist mystic tradition (Idel 181-182), to which many of his lines clearly adhere. O'Dwyer identifies this non-identity with Valente's aim to dissolve his own self in a community that welcomes those who have been denied participation in the discourse of History.

In an introductory chapter, O'Dwyer clearly exposes the main purpose of his work, which aims at contextualizing Valente's poetry in his specific historical reality, instead of analysing his literary production on the basis of a self-sufficient, intimist mysticism. According to O'Dwyer, a closer reading of Valente's poems and essays reveals an elegiac sense of empathy with those who have been displaced by History to the group of the outsiders. O'Dwyer makes of the relationship between Valente's attempt to find the poetic pre-word or *antepalabra* and his attempt to build a literary space of memory

the essay's common thread. This hypothesis is contrasted here with an exhaustive bibliography, pertinently enumerated with regards to each work's particular perspective on Valente's literary career.

The first chapter opens with the aim to identify "a constant concern for the relationship between poetry, political change, and cultural memory" (11) at the very heart of Valente's poetics. O'Dwyer introduces the first key terms (memory, utopia, symbol) that will lead the reader to the understanding of the link between the mystic and the social. This chapter focuses on the first steps of Valente's poetic career, a period characterised by his apprehension of both the "correlative object" theory proposed by TS Eliot and the aesthetics of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and other Marxist thinkers. The most important consequence of the approach to these sources, O'Dwyer concludes, is Valente's early attempt to make the poetic language prefigure a "world transformed" (16), a literary space where the poetic language's specificity does not act against its social values. Valente advances then towards the identification between poetry and knowledge. The assimilation of Ernst Cassirer's and Susanne Langer's theories on the poetic symbol guides Valente's search for the *antepalabra*, the word-at-the-beginning that breaks the conventional link between signifier and signified. However, this linguistic expedition is never shadowed by an egocentric or individualist perspective; quite on the contrary, it allows for the discovery of "a fundamental aspect of language that is beyond subjective intention" (16), a poetic language that relates "both to the past, to experiences that have remained inarticulate, and to the future, the possibilities that are beyond our imagination" (16).

It is perhaps in this first chapter where the author more insistently deviates from his essay's main idea, introducing secondary debates that do not clearly illustrate his main hypothesis: the interlacing of the mystic impulse and the social compromise as a way to construct a new space of memory and utopia in Valente's early and later poetry. At any rate, these pages present a tantalizing view on Valente's poetics, a first analysis that will be carefully polished in the following sections. Chapter 2 ("Memory and Signs") and chapter 3 ("Poetry and Community") extend the chronological study of Valente's career in order to explore the deepest significances of memory and utopia in his verse, whereas chapter 4 ("Valente and Jabès") and chapter 5 ("Valente and Celan") focus on the relevance of these two poets for the shaping of Valente's own literary domain.

As stated by O'Dwyer, one of the key ideas behind Valente's definition of the poetic word is that nothingness preludes *poiesis*. As God needs to make their own self retreat so that a space for creation is possible, the poet must first discover a void in order to express that nothingness through his lines. This contact between the poetic word and

absence is a prerequisite for the delineation of the *antepalabra*. Between hope and melancholy, Valente's early works look at that void, and even beyond it, at a distant, impossible future. If *A modo de esperanza* (1953-1954) stands as a ruinous lighthouse in the middle of a sea of solitude, *Poemas a Lázaro* (1955-1960) descends into a hell of desolation and guilt, whereas *La memoria y los signos* (1960-1965) and *El inocente* (1970) favour a political commitment with the marginalised. In all these works, O'Dwyer identifies, on the one hand, that desolation or death with the Spanish Francoist dictatorship; on the other hand, the possibility of a new, utopian literary space with the arrival of a new period after the post-war era. In respect of this compromise, it is important to remember that Valente's solidary verse is based on the principle of no-identity, according to which the poetic word must be liberated from pre-established, political predicates (López 309-310), including those of the leftist side.

In the third section of his essay, O'Dwyer analyses the previous works' fight to reveal "a poetic language that could establish or celebrate a sense of community" (58). Valente's poetic voice is neither naïve nor reckless in this linguistic exploration: he is aware of the limitations of language, and he contemplates the danger of falling into the sterile word, the rotten word that spreads its lies in a world full of voiceless corpses. A tension is always latent between the free word and the institutional speech of corruption and oblivion. This tension is clear when comparing optimistic poems like "La rosa necesaria" in *A modo de esperanza*, to more pessimistic visions of language, as those found in "La plaza" or "La mentira", from *Poemas a Lázaro* (60). In *La memoria y los signos*, Valente faces "the question of the relation between poetic language and community" (61). Poems such as "Con palabras distintas" or "Como una invitación o una súplica" aim at discovering a new, utopian word that would be the expression of a new, utopian world. But that expression is condemned to remain in the almost, in the attempt. The same exploration of the poetry-community relationship takes place in the second half of Valente's poetic career, from *Interior con figuras* (1973-1976) to *Fragmentos de un libro futuro* (1991-2000). O'Dwyer sees a turn in Valente's poetics, from the social to the mystic; however, he also clarifies that "the second half of Valente's career is not a solipsistic turning from communitarian issues towards a hermetic discourse that refuses communication" (69). What O'Dwyer finds in these later books is a new perspective that relies on "the immanent transcendence of relation" (69) between the individual and their community, a relationship that is usually codified in the erotic encounter of the lovers. At this point, the reading of certain female erotic motifs, such as the almond, needs perhaps a more convincing analysis, since these poems can hardly face an interpretation based on the social more than on the sexual and metaliterary approaches.

The final sections of the essay link this social interpretation of Valente's poetics to his assimilation of two fundamental sources, Jabès and Celan. In chapter 4, O'Dwyer suggests that the poet's encounter with the desert as the very centre of nothingness is deeply rooted in his disbelief of common realism. If Valente refrains himself from transgressing the immanent barrier of the transcendent is because he rejects any kind of dictatorial discourse, either from radical communism or from totalitarian fascism. Finally, Valente's apprehension of Celan's concern with the community consolidates the interlacing of the linguistic and the social: "Valente can see in Celan a common desire to construct a new poetic language that would coincide with a public sphere that has fully broken with the ideology of fascism" (94). It is in the German poet's verse where Valente finds a new version of the myth of Narcissus, one in which "what is seen in the water is not an echo, a confirmation of the self, but a vision of the self as other" (102). However, the gap between Narcissus and his reflection, between the poet and its enunciative lyric persona, remains indelible.

Memory and Utopia gravitates around the idea that Valente was not (or not just) a modern mystic who devoted his word to the ineffable, but a poet who found in mystic motifs the way to access his social context, in an attempt to resist the institutionalized, vain discourse of recent extremist political practices. The essay's common thread is hard to follow sometimes, as O'Dwyer introduces new secondary themes without softening the link to previous or following sections, thus painting a complex mosaic where the reader has to make an effort if they want to find a common pattern. However, this is only a minor impediment to the understanding of a brave, innovative proposal that is able to look at Valente's literary production as a whole, and to find in his verse the aim to construct, through "a paradoxical immanence of the transcendent" (115), a utopian space of memory and self-negation in the community.

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