

**HUIDOBRO, Vicente (1988) : *Altazor or A Voyage in a Parachute*. Translated by Eliot Weinberger. Graywolf Press, A Palabra Sur Book. [8,50 \$ US]**

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■ Vicente Huidobro (1988): *Altazor or A Voyage in a Parachute*. Translated by Eliot Weinberger. Graywolf Press, A Palabra Sur Book. [8,50 \$ US]

Poetic justice has been cruel to Vicente Huidobro. The poet that Neruda once referred to as the “invisible oxygen” of Latin American poetry has suffered from years of moralizing critiques in which Huidobro, the “other Chilean”, has been treated as, at best, the odd man out in the pantheon of major Latin American poets. While his work is a kind of tottering landscape within the canon, the canon itself is a center that cannot hold without him. It is, perhaps, a fitting tribute to his originality that Huidobro’s greatness has always been a bothersome model to follow.

Born within an aristocratic Chilean family in 1893, Vicente García Huidobro Fernández realized early on the importance of a juicy polemic. One of his first books, *Pasando y pasando* (1914) — confiscated by the authorities and burned by members of his family — opened with a much too premature autobiographical essay titled *Yo*, in which he proceeded to systematically debunk Jesuit schools, despotic priests, the Catholic Church in general, Spanish poetry, prominent critics, and the society ladies who composed the *League for Morality in Theater*. In remotest Santiago, Huidobro was already making fun of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s Futurism, writing caligrammatic poems and planting the seeds of future manifestoes. In 1917, with his young wife and kids, he repeated the clichéd continental tour, to a Paris that was already layed out in ink by other Latin American precursors.

Huidobro was determined not to embark into the Latin American ghetto in Paris but to the Paris of the French. What he encountered instead was Babel-on-the-Seine: Gertrude Stein (b. San Francisco, 1874), Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (Constantinople,

1876), Guillaume Apollinaire (Rome, 1880), Pablo Picasso and Juan Gris (Spain, 1881, 1887), Tristan Tzara (Rumania, 1896), and of course Pierre Reverdy, André Breton and others. Not content with being a good Latin American poet or even a passable French poet, Huidobro wanted to be the Foremost Poet of the Twentieth Century — a particularly Latin American rapture that turned him into a one-man corporation. He collaborated (some would say financed) the Review *Nord-Sud* — the most important journal for Cubist art and literature — and wrote a number of his books in a different language: *Horizon Carré* (Squared Horizon), *Hallali*, *Tour Eiffel* and *Saisons Choiesies*. Juan Gris helped him with his French, Pablo Picasso drew his portrait, and Tristan Tzara published his poetry. From vanguardist Paris to tribalist Madrid, from Santiago to Dada Zurich, Huidobro edited magazines, gave out interviews and announced collaborations with friends Stravinskii, Pound, Picasso, Tzara, Nijinskii and the Ballet Russes — collaborations which never materialized and which probably (we may never know) existed only in the frenzied mind of a Latin American arriviste. With every new dictum he enraged the protocol-conscious Hispanics to the point of greed, envy and anger. By 1919, Huidobro was plainly decking out the territory of the Avant-garde in full combat regalia.

He created for himself a poetic movement. With Creationism, Huidobro asserted that words have the power to fashion, shape, and ultimately create, reality. Whereas his Latin American and Spanish compatriots were still debating a dialectical compromise between dreams and reason, Huidobro had settled the matter in a kingdom of paper. With the benefit of hindsight, it is not surprising to see a Latin American emphasis on words over realities. What other longed-for European landscapes could be seen and felt by an imaginative reader from Santiago de Chile, La Paz, or Buenos Aires, except those shaped by verbs, formed by nouns, those cities described by adjectives?

Yet the occupation of Paris by Latin American could not be accomplished at such an early age and had to wait for the more propitious winds later ushered in by Surrealism. Huidobro's parabolic descent in ratings can be measured by the increasing power and prestige of the recipients of his polemical darts — André Breton and Pablo Neruda, among many others. Throughout the Twenties, Huidobro wrote plays, political satires, and scandalized Chilean society by divorcing his first wife and fleeing to Paris with a society debutante. After a number of years he went back to Chile, was candidate for President under a reformist plank, lost the election, and finally settled into a kind of dejected discontent. His last poems read like the catalogue of a forgotten hero, Ulysses settled in Ithaca, struggling to forget desire amidst memory's debris. As spectators of his drama, Huidobro knew we desire the success of those who have somehow failed. That is one of the reasons why he has left us one of the most important poems in Latin American literature.

*Altazor or a Voyage in Parachute* (1919-1931) celebrates the transparency of words within a language that is rendered progressively more opaque. Starting with a Preface in which the poet's doppelgänger — Altazor — nostalgically recreates a fable of his own beginnings, the poem takes the reader into seven cantos in which the character's supposed fall from grace is enacted. Uncanningly flat yet with the uncanny depth of words, the space of the page is concrete and abstract at the same time, following tried and true Cubist practice. In *Altazor*, all references and allusions form one continuum: Nietzsche and nursery rhymes, Spengler and Lindbergh, Freud and Cervantes. The azor of the title — a goshawk — is also "azar" (chance, in Spanish) and "hasard" (in French) as in Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés...* The first Canto — a dialogue between the supposed poet and his condemning other — will finish off by the fifth into two hundred and thirty five verses which repeat the word "windmill", the most explosive homage to Cervantes

written before the Borgesian Pierre Menard. If Don Quixote's lance was able to rip into the cloth of the windmills, Huidobro's sustained repetition will have words themselves and their permutations tear a gash into the page. What starts off as the narration of a flight into space and a descent into hell acquires the immobility of glass in the last section of the poem. The last Canto presents us with a random collection of vowels hurling through space the muted, arrested flight of immobility. They are opaque remnants from the debris of words — sounds crystallized, the skin and the cloth of a broken parachute.

Eliot Weinberger's work with *Altazor* is a feast of original solutions for apparently untranslatable words. As Weinberger himself says, "it is quite possible that another English version would be utterly dissimilar to this one, seemingly based on another poem. The game of *Altazor* has an infinite number of moves, and I look forward to its next translation match." By taking some liberties with the text and entering with admirable courage into its combinations, Weinberger has rendered a quite literal translation. Nevertheless, since what is literal for Huidobro is based upon the layering of possible meanings within combinations of consonants and vowels, Weinberger's statement brilliantly accepts the fact that in order to enter into the real of a poem thus construed, different sets of keys are needed. Some word plays are of course impossible to translate, but Weinberger has the good sense to create still others that could not be rendered back into Spanish.

Language for Huidobro is a self-perpetuating machine, a transparent piece of clockwork which allows us to peer into its own machinations. The seven Cantos are undoubtedly the seven letters of the word *Altazor* and the seven letters of the name Vicente — the final epitaph for the heroics of the Avant-garde.

It is fitting that Huidobro's *Altazor* should open a promising collection of Latin American poetry — *Palabra Sur* — directed by Cecilia Vicuña for Graywolf Press. Although Latin Americans have never disputed his place alongside that of Neruda, Vallejo, Paz and Borges, Huidobro will always be the old-man out leaving us to deal with the fact of his own exclusion.

The idea that a haughty Latin American could write part of his work in French and claim to be better at it than the French poets themselves is, in itself, a preposterous notion, a dangerous precedent for nationalism. A no-less indefatigable propagandist than his compatriot Neruda, Huidobro's struggle to gain his place in the international Avant-garde of the Twenties, and to fight his way into the emotional geography of Paris, has made him the most conspicuous *bête-noire* of Latin American Poetry, a living polemic after all these years. Weinberger has once again brilliantly opened a debate on language and translation of a poet that posterity has unjustly punished for his ego.

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