

A TREE CROSSES THE CITY

The Unconventional Artistry of Miguel-Ángel Zapata



EDITOR'S CORNER

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Peruvian poet Miguel-Ángel Zapata's latest book of poems, *Un árbol cruza la ciudad* (A Tree Crossing the City, Nueva York Poetry Press, 2020, originally translated by Gwen Osterwald), immediately confronts the reader with an array of soothing, dreamlike images. The serene tranquillity that permeates most poems makes it clear that Zapata (Piura, 1955) aims to escape convention and memorialise without the impassioned intensity and ontological unrest so common in Latin American poets of previous generations.¹ In short, the poet's trademark is quietude.

Along these lines, Zapata's verses signal a commitment, not to a movement, a style or an ideology, but to the quiescent substances that give context to a life's journey. Accordingly, the unaffected aesthetic rendition of life's ambient incidentals is a dominant objective for the poet, as he proposes the immediacy of windows, chairs and glasses of wine as a transcendental and constitutive feature of life. As a result, objects are enriched with the poet's awareness of their dignity; they are celebrated by a poet whose sincerity is ample enough to discard tired routines aligned with genre, convention, ideology and tradition in order to view ambient reality in its truly human dimension.

Quietude

In consequence, Zapata's creative pulsion populates his poetry with physical substance in the form of unremarkable, accessible, passive everyday objects that surround him. Hence, his verses transmute into language the gestation of a benevolently nurturing cosmos, one divested of the sense of distress, futility, passion and heroic resistance that has long been a standard mode of setting the human condition to verse. In conceiving of such a space, the poet aims to capture those moments when the soul experiences quietude, when everything in the universe is coterminous with the self and, loosed from their triviality, the small things that surround him can be mythologised as discreet harbingers of eternal truths.

To explain how Zapata gives expression to his aesthetic ideal of quietude, it would be useful to remind the reader of that Walt Whitman of *Leaves of Grass*, the one that crafts static, haiku-like pictorial vignettes devoid of dynamic verbs:

A Farm Picture.

Through the ample open door of the peaceful country barn,
A sunlit pasture field with cattle and horses feeding,
And haze and vista, and the far horizon fading away.
(Whitman, 1872, p. 208)

In *this* Whitman (there is another that eulogises smoke-belching machines), the harmony of substance with spirit can be manifested more lucidly in the quietude of a peaceful, delicate moment that is suspended in time.

¹ Edwin Murillo provides an extensive list of Latin American poets that exhibit such preoccupations, included in which are the region's essential poets: Darío (Lo fatal), Amado Nervo (Yo no nací para reír; Al cruzar los caminos), Gutiérrez Nájera (To be; Monólogo del incrédulo; Pax animae), dos Anjos (Eu), del Casal (Pax animae; La mayor tristeza; Desolación), Asunción Silva (Filosofía), Vallejo (LXXV), Neruda (Walking Around) and García Bárcena (Estética; Indagación; Ser).

As in Whitman, where peace and quietude suggest social discord and historical conflict as their unacceptable opposites, Zapata's verses gently project a utopian desire for a new sociocultural environment where the people and objects that surround us are not there to be exploited or antagonised, but to be dignified as benign companions in our life's journey. In Zapata, peace and quietude articulate an implicit appeal to sanity, as the reader intuitively infers that our riotous society, with its ruthless competition and brutal antagonisms, is a natural opposite to reason. In order to generate a relevant ambience of quietude, Zapata overrides convention by altering the emotional register and toning down the commonplace, fatigued pathos with a prose-like verse, one that has the feel of familiar environs and comfortable colloquies:

This is the day of the sun and the pines
that dawn in my window,
they who proclaim, with the birds,
the sublime advent of a new day. (2020, p. 74)

There is no suggestion of the pervasive "poet as iconoclast" sensibility here: these are verses that assimilate and metamorphose the mundane, orchestrating it into a poetry that eschews templates and seems to consciously dismiss that aforementioned tradition of rage and anguished perplexity. In Zapata's hands, trees, windows, streets, tables, books, wine, red sauce, bicycles and pillows become components of a profoundly spiritual symphony that emanates an easy musicality through the unassuming intimacy of a sensual memory. "The Art of Solitude" is a case in point:

You are happily at home with yourself, joyful, with no one
at your side: the long wooden table, a painting
by Eielson, several by Quintanilla, old books, red wine,
noodles in red sauce and garlic bread are delightful.

Here lingers the scent of wrinkled pillows, the
hollow moment of embrace, and the phantoms that
return like lavenders to distract your pleasant company
each night. (2020, p. 40)

In the first four verses, the poet captures both the quiescence of the objects and the moment of their amalgamation with his self. In the first verse, the poet makes it a point to stress that there is no other living being with him. The second, third and fourth verses contain the images of separate objects, deposited one next to the other without any syntactic expedient to connect them. They seem to live a life of their own, without any sign of intrusion or superintendence from the poet. Thus, they exist in a flawless state that is peaceful, independent and timeless, with only the intervention of the copular verb "to be" in the fourth verse to announce the moment of unification with the poet's self. In the ensuing ideal state, the poet and ambient reality become one and the same.

Likewise, the everyday objects that surround the poet are presented with apparent objectivity, so that the poem's emotional charge seems to emanate directly from the observed scene, autonomously and untamed by the author's manipulations. It is in the fifth verse, "Here lingers the scent of wrinkled pillows", that an extended syntactic unit begins wherein objects (the pillows) enable the self's reverent unification with

ambient reality by providing a nurturing environment for cherished memories (“hollow moment of embrace; phantoms”).

It is important to note that there is no rare imagery here, and that nothing actually *happens* in this timeless realm. But the reader can’t help but notice the exceptional poignancy of Zapata’s experience as he unobtrusively observes these taciturn substances. Causing a deep sense of melancholy to develop from a truly commonplace situation — while using the humblest language to describe it — is one of the poet’s greatest accomplishments.

Thus, the calculated domesticity of the scene resists high diction, gently implying a refusal to venerate gallant intrepidity and flamboyant disobedience. Although Zapata overtly identifies with his Latin American heritage, in his verses he rejects the hindrance to creativity that the worship of that heritage and its heroic substance requires. Consequently, there are in his poetry the gentle, quotidian fundamentals of the human condition: friends, house, food, drink, and emotions and feelings of longing and loneliness that everyone experiences at one time or another. Accordingly, Zapata’s is the voice of a universal individual, not of a specific collective; it is the voice of a man involved in the most transcendent task of all, that of living:

I write poetry as I walk

trees like stars in the
patio full of geraniums.

[...]

There, towers and the Seven Seas
those kings crowned by their own hand
at the poetry festival. (2020, p. 18)

Again, the objects (trees, patio, geraniums) present a scene of taciturn timelessness. The verb is the most energetic element of syntax, but in this poem discourse conditions disallow verbs (trees like stars/in the patio full of geraniums; There, towers and the Seven Seas/those kings crowned by their own hand/at the poetry festival [here “crowned” merely functions as part of the reduced adjective clause in the passive voice]), at points where they would only serve to disrupt the sempiternal quietude and sense of immutability that buttress its semantic value. In fact, the present indicative of the first verse (I write poetry as I walk) simply serves to indicate the subjective perception of contextual matter and inlays the poet’s self in the timeless present of the object.

The importance assigned to the unalloyed circumstance of being alive makes the reader think that Zapata is conversant with Lin Yutang’s prescriptions in *The Importance of Living* (1937), as his verses materialise into a sort of break not only to the bewildering rush that is modern existence, but also to the semantic acrobatics that are all too common in modern poetry.

Reclaiming the Word

Zapata has advised that “[a]rrrogance with poetry leads to destruction. Innocence is stronger than wisdom, just as imagination is more important than knowledge...” (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.). This idea of decontaminating poetry from self-admiration and neutralising contemporary extravagance also distinguishes other poets: There is in Zapata a hint of Jorge Teillier’s attitude towards the pompous and selfish exploitation of words so ingrained in iconoclastic convention. Teillier articulates this attitude in his “Secret Autumn”:

When beloved everyday words
lose their meaning
and not even bread may be named
nor water, nor the window

[...]

It is good to greet the dishes and the tablecloth placed on the table
and see that in the old cupboard
the cherry liqueur prepared by the grandmother
and the stored apples
retain their joy. (1956, n.p.)

Teillier worries that the word is forfeiting its function of conveying the primordial beauty of truth and reality; he exploits the massive physical reality of trees to express that loss:

When the shape of trees
is no longer but the feeble reminiscence of their contour,
a lie, made up
by the murky memory of autumn... (1956, n.p.)

While never acting like what Ralph Waldo Emerson would call “an umpire of taste” (“The Poet”, in *Essays: Second Series*, 1844), Zapata has often expressed these same concerns during conversations and interviews:

[T]here is a poetry I still do not understand, one that tries to play with language and nonsense without having carefully studied Góngora. There are certain poets who are writing impressionist poetry, exaggerated games that only lead to confusion and emptiness. They mistakenly look for the appearance of language, the surprise of the external, and they say absolutely nothing. (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.)

Also in line with Teillier’s diagnoses, Zapata states: “I feel a kinship with contemporary poets who work with the relationship of spirit, nature and language. Those poets who care only about language are not my present or my future” (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.). Thus, some of the most distinct features of Miguel-Ángel Zapata’s poetry, especially in this volume, reflect his concern with the word as it describes Nature (the perceptible substance that surrounds his everyday life) in relationship with his soul. In his verses one perceives a certain respect for the word as a vehicle that, in its most sincere

utilisation, conveys not the stunts of ingenuity, but the very substance of the human being. Accordingly, human tragedy is not conveyed as the abstract calamity inherent to the human condition, but instead is interiorised as the angst (black air) that affects one *real* human being walking on the solid, tangible asphalt that he senses under his feet:

Your feet feel the streets and the black air of some days, and you don't ask unavailing questions about the dead or the pestilence that roams cities without a name. (2020, p. 113)

The grounding in the mundane that is evident throughout much of this poetry is symptomatic of the poet's commitment to a comprehensive understanding of the nature of poetry. In essence, his is an aesthetic cosmos in which the poet can discern beauty in the everyday truth of ordinary things and, at the same time, be awed by the sublime character of the unexceptional objects and events that contextualise the life of human beings. As Zapata states: "I think that was the beginning of my first observations of the world and everything in it: even the smallest things are important" (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.). Through them, a deeper, more honest expression of the human condition is attainable.

The Self and Ambient Reality

Underlying this aesthetics is a belief that the honest image of the human condition necessitates a more intuitive portrayal of and articulation with its ambient reality. Critically, it must be an expression forged with an accessible vocabulary that is not mediated by self-admiration. As a result of this pursuit, Zapata almost instinctively projects an element of gentle intimacy onto the ambient substance in a manner that not only makes it vibrate to the rhythms of his inner moral cosmos, but also makes that substance perform in his own very personal drama.

As an example, Zapata's account of skiing, falling and getting back up again is described in terms of the way in which the experience of contact with an external substance becomes a constitutive part of his consciousness and, subsequently, develops into poetic matter. The event is depicted as an act of unsullied collaboration between reality and his thought process. Consequently, as long as the snow exists outside, not experienced, it is clandestine, not consciously perceived by the poet; once he tumbles and its icy apathy is experienced directly, it is assimilated as a "frozen sea". Only when the snow's objective attributes are sensibly experienced may its substance be poeticised: this snow is not an ideational abstraction only referenced to serve the poet's interests: there is a genuine deference to its cold, white, real substance:

Again you stand after several tumbles and slide once more with the snow from the top. The snow touches you and everything changes: a frozen sea asks you for fire in order to survive the ice. (2020, p. 106)

The insight that enables him to poeticise his humanness arises as the product of his awareness of ambient reality. Thus, the expression of his awareness of self is stimulated by the immersion into the sea of contextual matter that surrounds him, that is to say, he is nothing without a cognizance of outside objects with which he can establish a subjective relationship.

Physical contexts drive the poet's consciousness and are an essential part of it; this seems to point to the idea that, as conscious beings, ambient reality is the most solid footing upon which we can formulate universal judgments about the truth, including spiritual truth. It is the venue where the poet's subjectivity can be activated and enriched by tangible substances and enhanced through experience. It is, likewise, our most pristine link with one another: without the physical substance of reality, consensual truth would be inconceivable and, in an environment of absolute relativism, poetry would degenerate into subjective abstraction and cease to communicate meaning.

So ambient reality, with its material substances, is important not just as a passive background for the poet's experience, but as an active participant in his spiritual and cognitive life, as he has manifestly embraced it: "The aspiration of poetry is for everything to speak: the animals, the trees, the rivers and lakes, and the sky that watches us every day, while we continue our little lives, running on the grass of time" (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.).

Beauty and Reality

The acceptance of that basal connection between conscience and external objects is everywhere evident in this poet. That may be because not only is Zapata a poet, but also a critic, a teacher and an authority on modern poetry. So it is likely that he is mindful of the fact that the link between consciousness and objective reality ("truth") has often been severed in the quest for beauty. He must be aware that, from Plato to Byron, many cognoscenti have argued that poets have an ingrained disregard for "truth," as their art forces them to contrive an alternate, fabricated "truth" that owes its qualities to the aesthetic demands of poetry.

In effect, Plato, who had an inconsistent opinion of poets, proposed (Republic, bk. 10; 607b) to banish poetry from the commonwealth because poets deceive, and they do so because they live in a world of appearance, not reality. The philosopher seems to be saying that, by committing to the laboured contrivances of the creative imagination, the poet renounces knowledge of reality and truth. On his part, Byron evidently censures such contrivances when, in his "Dedication" to Don Juan, he paraphrases Hobhouse's droll anecdote regarding an exchange between Ben Jonson and someone named Sylvester. Agreeing to produce witty rhymes, the latter said "I John Sylvester slept with your sister." Jonson replied, "I Ben Jonson slept with your wife." "Why, that's no rhyme!" said Sylvester; "No, but it's *true*" retorted Jonson.

Likewise, in Sonnet 138 Shakespeare suggests that the lack of truth (false subtleties) is the propellant that drives our contemptible civilisation:

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her, though I know she lies,
That she might think me some untutored youth,
Unlearnèd in the world's false subtleties.
[...]
Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

The light-hearted nature of these verses, written by the man that gave us “No legacy is so rich as honesty” (*All's Well That Ends Well*, act 3, sc.5), “This above all; to thine own self be true” (*Hamlet*, act 1, sc. 3), and “O truant Muse what shall be thy amends/For thy neglect of truth in beauty dyed?” (*Sonnet 101*) speaks to the bard’s reverence for truth in its uncontaminated manifestations. Truth, obviously, can be expressed beautifully, but it is a challenging task to keep beauty’s imperatives from whitewashing truth, as Shakespeare suggests.

Baudelaire was also very clear on this point: the quest for beauty must not eclipse what is real and what is true:

The excessive appetite for form [beauty] induces monstrous and unknown disorders. Absorbed by the ferocious passion for the beautiful, the notions of the just and the true disappear. The feverish passion for art is an ulcer which devours what remains; and, as the clear absence of the just and the true in art amounts to the absence of art, the entire person vanishes; excessive specialisation of one faculty produces nothingness. (1976, vol. 2, pp 48–49)

By this I am not proposing that Zapata is in a quixotic quest to redeem that truth, the one whose lack exasperated so many great minds, for poetry. But in the light of the work of Teillier, of Baudelaire (q.v.), and of Zapata himself, one could ask if the experience of reality, of the mundane, of the everyday objects that surround us can be subsumed into poetry in a sort of symbiosis, one in which verses and the objective truth of material reality engage in a relationship of mutual benefit? Is *this* Zapata’s quest?

Consciousness in Communion with the Environment

Perhaps not a quest, but there are additional reasons for the poet’s interest in the unexceptional objects and events that contextualise and permeate his consciousness: one of them has to be associated with his uncanny capacity to commune with them, as we can see when he catches sight of a butterfly during a paddleball game:

Along the beach an errant butterfly searches for its seagull, that solemn, cryptic sky and the strange candour of its fluttering wings. I watch it while I play paddleball on the beach; the ball soars like a comet towards the heavens and she strikes it back towards my flank.

[...]

Butterfly, star, the heavens are distorted by your wings: There is no greater quietude than your smile; your abdomen is the kingdom of the hopeless, and your gaze, which knows no sorrow, lives in the brevity of the sea and in the embroidery of your faded chemise. (2020, p. 158)

It is no coincidence that the poet is engaged in a very commonplace activity, just enjoying a beautiful day at the beach playing paddleball. It is here that the intrusion of a simple external object, a butterfly, not only generates feelings of tranquillity and peace, but also brings on the awareness of finitude, making his voice quiver at the thought of the transience that is heralded by the fading of the butterfly’s colour and the

celebrated brevity of its life (gaze). The poet's subjective core engages in a symbiotic relationship with the fluttering external object, allowing the truth of the poet's mortality to develop as poetry, while the insect's silent disregard for human concerns is internalised as serenity and dispassion. As a result, the butterfly is memorialised as a quintessential source of quietude.

Clearly, a profound *truth* emerges from that seaside experience, and yet, because of the placid surroundings, no struggle, no perplexity, no anguish is evident in these verses: finitude *is* the salient truth in the human condition, and it is communicated by the poet not in paroxysms of fanciful verses, not as a black hole of grief, but as a colourful butterfly that, ignoring sorrow, interrupts his game. This particular poem is an example of how the quotidian nature of the context is critical: poetry is a spiritual environment that the poet regularly colonises with wistful and evocative entities (trees, butterflies, birds...) and events (lunch in the kitchen, paddleball games, a waitress serving in a cafeteria) through which the asymmetrical image of elementary humanity, with its moods, desires, joys and sorrows can be carefully crafted into art.

Lest anyone interpret this treatment of everyday substances as frivolous, it must be remembered that there is at work here an elaborate alchemy that produces the poems' meaningful substance, one that is enabled by the intense semiotisation of the everyday objects that enter into the poetic domain. While not entirely stripped of their practical function, objects do acquire important symbolic and signifying attributes. Substances usually found in ambient reality, in effect, become *dramatis personae* in the intimate, familiar, hospitable environs of the poet's internal opus.

This practise of semiotising everyday objects is evident throughout the many pages of a book where trees cross the street and God is a bird. The window that opens onto the poet's past, for example, "I open the same windows of another house, that slow fire of mother's burners, now that her figure reappears gracefully among the crystal goblets" (2020, p. 80) is not much different in any substantial way from the opening in the wall where we might look out into the street, but it is transformed, becoming a symbol not for another window in another place, but for the act of looking back, with nostalgia, at an irretrievable childhood.

So it would not do to characterise this poetry, full of mobile trees, bird-gods and yes, flying women ("She'd fly with her hair along the plazas/each strand a syllable for the tree of bliss") (2020, p. 148) as a tranquil repository of elegiac, pastoral stoicism, as it would not do justice to the complexity of Zapata's creative imagination.

The Poesy of the Everyday

To flesh out my meaning, I would bring *Le Spleen de Paris* into the discussion and say that, like Zapata's, Baudelaire's prose poems also probe the manner in which the everyday and the commonplace can serve to dramatise the profound depths of elementary humanity; this is reflected in the intrusion of everyday life and ordinary events into the domain of abstraction that is poetry:

A shrivelled little old woman was happy to see the pretty child over whom everyone was celebrating and everyone tried to please. [...] So she approached, wanting to offer childish giggles and suitable grimaces.

But the horrified child cringed under the decrepit old woman's caresses and filled the house with screams. (2014, p. 1)

Baudelaire's old woman then goes on to discourse on how in old age we come to disgust even the ones whom we most love. The readers can easily recognise unembellished life experience ("truth") intruding felicitously into the poetic realm. In Zapata, likewise, everyday life invades the poetic realm with the overwhelming power of the recognisable. Case in point is the poet's ride in the city subway:

When you sit in the last car you open the book of sweet life, and you forget the signs that stalk you at each station. People board and disembark and chat through cryptic texts on their mobile phones, perhaps evading the anxiety of contact, of looking fixedly into another's eyes, of vibrating with the life that soars with the black hair of that woman whom I expect to greet at the station. (2020, p. 90)

In this poem Zapata weds an everyday, commonplace scene to a concern for our basal humanity: modern people have isolated themselves from one another through the agency of a small screen that feeds them all sorts of information. All of it without looking their interlocutor in the eyes, without physical contact, all while immersed in a digital world that is not real. He contrasts their delusions with his expectation of an encounter with an all-too-real woman whom he anticipates meeting at the station. The subway car, the station, are places where real life unfolds. Acting upon Teillier's lament over the loss of the human dimensions in poetry, Zapata proclaims that "Whatever poetry that relinquishes the ambient reality where human life unfolds, from this moment on ceases to be poetry" (Ildefonso n.p.). In this sense, Zapata's poetry is in practice an insubordination, a rebellion against the fashionable poetry that renounces ambient reality and where a tree is a poor two-dimensional shadow of a tree (as proposed by Teillier).

Accordingly, the attribution of a personal nature to a tree ("A tree laments its solitude and I search for my refuge in a bottomless glacier") (2020, p. 30), a tree where a supreme being may be nesting ("God is a blue bird that knows well how to fly") (2020, p. 122), is an extended metaphor. It is a metaphor for the multidimensional spirit of a real life, truly lived, that flows into his verses (as in the poem below) as a defiant promenade of trees "over the houses", over the abodes of poetry, "in defiance of every evil", that is to say, rebelling against the aesthetic judgment that has disengaged poetry from everyday life and reality. Thus, it is the tree that, as advocate and champion of ordinary objects, has the task of describing their evident, transcendental power: "the tempest that is a flower":

A tree crosses the city with
dark birds.

From the window the light drizzle
deceives like black snow.

Rooted in the soil, the tree rises
slowly over the houses,
climbing beyond its whirlwind

and rises over the anguish of
every evil.

In the name of the tree, in the name
of heaven, the rings of its heart. (2020, p. 20)

And again:

I named this tree
leaning with open branches
like an altar to heaven.
Without clouds, it descends each morning,
and very cunningly describes
the tempest that is a flower. (2020, p. 24)

The prominence and significance of commonplace objects, of the ambient substance that has been eviscerated and invalidated at the hands of poets, is vigorously recovered here in the ordinary flower, described in these verses as a “tempest”. And there is a well-reasoned strategy involved in equating the ordinary with the amazing, like portraying the flower as a tempest. It is the uncanny, almost surreal imagery and verbal handling of the mundane that generate a peculiar aesthetic realm where irrational associations beget beauty by harmonising inharmonious elements in a beguiling, sensual lyricism reminiscent of César Vallejo: “love ascends to the heart and the blood quickens/like a cherry tree bled dry in the street amid the snow... (2020, p. 96)

Additionally, in the prologue to this collection he states that “This is poetry: an unknown tree/that crosses the city” (2020, p. 18). The trees that cross the city, large, ponderous and somatic are, as I have proposed, suggestive of the host with which ambient reality – our consciousness’ contextual matter – invades the domain of poetry in a liberating assault. This gentle onslaught replaces the abstractions of intellectual detachment with the solid monumentality of a tree and with the experiential language of human existence.

In a like manner, as Zapata observes a waitress at work, we intuit that her movements are meant to be regarded as the wordless verses of a reality that is more sublime and contains more truth than any fanciful, stirring, deceitful set of words: those movements carry with them the unadulterated substance of life. Because the poet’s verses are assembled with words, the motions of her corporeal reality need to be translated faithfully into a tone and a rhythm that cohere with her movements; to this end, his words enter into an erotically charged dance wherein the poet is gradually seducing her movements into his verses, transferring everyday life into poetry in seamless, unadorned harmony:

She brings the red wine, smiles and flaunts her black hair,
knowing full well that the world watches her, in her legs
abide centuries of tenderness.

[...]

Life begins in the curvature of her

spine and in the arc of her perspiring neck.

[...]

Her graceful bearing is an affirmation of life, and when she approaches, deceitful as poetry, I fall silent. (2020, p. 89)

But seducing the reality of another human being into poetry is more complex than doing so with a tree, wine or red sauce; here the poet enters a quagmire where words are more apt to disappoint: her movements' translation into words are necessarily filtered through the poet's subjective enthusiasm, and efforts to capture her fail the poet as the waitress, perhaps feigning unfelt affection in search of a tip, approaches him. Thus, intimidated by the prospect of generating a self-serving abstraction that fails honestly to convey her humanity, he falls silent.

In this mundane environment, even God is not the object of idealised imagery or solemn worship: Zapata's God is a happy bird that sings in a tree and dissipates the darkness, a companion—perhaps He has a nest in the poet's back yard—that brings joy and with whom an intimate familiarity has developed: "God is a joyful bird that walks against the gloom [...] God is a blue bird that knows well how to fly" (2020, p. 122).

The image that Zapata deems necessary to bring God to life in his poetry is not that of a codified God, assembled to hover over every human thought and action. The poet's God is *his* God, the one *he* experiences, one that is not codified or consensual. To speak of God in consensual terms requires a conventional idiom that is devoid of dynamic vitality, using language that is corrupted and altogether unequal to the task of accommodating the poet's earthy, cathartic, heterodox vision. More facile and elemental imagery and language are necessary to convey the subjective, idiosyncratic reality of the poet, and, by extension, of the divine being that flies out of the deepest spaces of his consciousness and lands in a tree in his back yard in the form of a bird.

In this regard, and in an effort to bring our quotidian, everyday reality into his poetry, the poet seems to be particularly mindful of the socially constructed essence of all our "truths," so with an abstract concept like God, he endeavours to contrive an unadulterated, independent image, unaffected by the assumptions of social or aesthetic covenants. Effectively, Zapata's intention seems to be to remove poetic language from its approved social function, infusing it with an unsullied human dimension that lies beyond dogmas and collective mythologies.

Ancillary to this intention, the poet detaches his persona from that abstract collective "we" created by the language of social convention, intensifying his individuality ("You are happily at home with yourself, joyful, with no one / at your side", [2020, p. 40]) by tapping into sources that have remained latent in the human psyche and predate collective epiphanies. As such, the reader is confronted with a poetic practice that gives voice to the individual psyche's pushback against collective encroachments, crafted in poems that always move towards the uncorrupted expression of personal truths (the essence of *my* life is not properly explained by dogma: it is more befittingly diagrammed in the curvature of the waitress' neck; *my* God is not correctly described in books: He is a bird in a tree).

As a consequence of these practices, Zapata's poetry comes across as the product of an aesthetic process that searches for an ideal expression not through the glorious conquests of obscurity, but through a well-adjusted strategy that imbues the cosmos with his authentic, unfeigned self. Unlike Matthew Arnold or T. S. Eliot, who believed that the true self (that is to say, its expression through poetry) was hindered by the "bewildering series of distractions and fancies which makes up the conscious mind of an ordinary man" (Hillis Miller, 1965, p. 152), Zapata assumes that profound emotional and spiritual material can be brought to the surface precisely through those everyday events that were deemed "distractions" by the two English poets.

Such an assumption is based on the idea that a mind detached from the objective world of events, objects and relations that we all share would lack the power to connect wholeheartedly with other minds, its voice delivering meaning that is overly self-centred, its emotive charge reduced to the status of an introspective abstraction. In consequence, his poems enact the personal drama of an authentic "I" that is often presented as "you" in an act of ecumenical inclusion (an "I" offered as the Spanish informal tú [you] in a demiurgic brand of metonymy). In these verses, a familiar subject pronoun hovers over a familiar landscape, covering it with the poet's rich, personal mythology.

The poet has remarked that "The act of writing is in all the daily acts of our existence: the crow writes, the sky writes to you without meaning to, and the window, which is the threshold between happiness and pain, is also the space where the word enters and stays with you" (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.). In Zapata's poetic cosmos, inasmuch as the poet is honest (unambiguously rejects ornate, fabricated language), and only insofar as he is unfettered (discards the artificial buttresses offered by tradition, dogma and aesthetic convention), can he give objective reality a charge of truth and poetic expression. Judging by his work, it would seem that, for Zapata, a true poet is one that is able to see poetry in the activity around a kitchen table:

I place the white tablecloth then, the bread, the fresh fish and wine to celebrate the music that enters through every door, and I open the same windows of another house, that simmering on mom's stove burners, now that her silhouette reappears gracefully among the wine goblets. (2020, p. 80)

The humble objects that populate this passage allow the poet to reach into the past and retrieve, like an antiquarian performing platonic anamnesis, youthful memories of down-to-earth happiness. The reader becomes conscious of an eloquent prosopopoeia where absence speaks in silence about that "other" house and that "other" time: youth, the mother, innocence, that simple joy that always is and is no longer speak through the quietude of the objects that contextualised them. In short, absence gains an eloquent voice through the silent bygone objects that, notwithstanding their stillness, contribute to the emotional charge and provide a stage for the intimate scenes of a life lived. The dialectic of moments that exist no longer and yet persist in the poet, the unrelenting presence of their absence and the eloquence of their silence all drive the poet's voice forward.

Zapata has suggested that objects and substances whose reality was experienced in the past can support the subsequent act of writing poetry, stating that "[F]rom the time I

was a small child I could play with the memory of the pleasant objects and things of the countryside where I had lived before” (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.). As the previous scene suggests, the truest aspects of the human condition can be revealed poetically by articulating the lyric plenitude of its common surroundings: simple everyday objects, permeated by the nostalgia for things past that is a common human trait, become poetic substances that are unconstrained by time or space. Windows are a case in point. The poet explains:

I have seen many windows, and I believe that the window has been an indispensable object since ancient times. It is a look toward otherness, toward nowhere, toward the infinite to find another air and another sky. (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.)

Windows are unconstrained poetical substances that are opened simultaneously in his present home on Long Island as well during his childhood in Perú. Such commonplace objects owe their ubiquity to the poet’s use of them as catalysts for retrieving the irretrievable past and articulating absence, that domain of “another air and another sky”. The eccentric images, metaphors and language one would almost expect in such an endeavour are absent: To make this binary lyrical introspection possible, he merely opens the windows.

The Demise of Antithesis

This poet shows us that perhaps poetry’s greatest potential resides in its elucidative character. By this I don’t mean to suggest that it has the power to reveal the mysteries of the universe, but it does have the virtue of so expressing the character of the objects in Nature as to rouse in us a profound and intimate sense of their intrinsic worth and of the value of our connections with them. Zapata understands the indispensable role played by those objects in our experience of the universe, not only by those that physically surround us, but also by those whose essence has been captured in art, so that in his work we no longer perceive them as alien elements, extrinsic to our sense of self:

I walk through the city and every tree is a miracle of the morning. They all form a queue to meet each other. With this happiness, I will again enter a museum and calmly observe a painting by Bacon, search for Klee’s fish and swim with them, or clamber up Francisco Toledo’s leafy Tree of Oaxaca, to end up in a hole next to Goya’s dog. (2020, p. 92)

The trees, miracles of the morning that fill the poet with happiness, have a moral contour that reminds the reader of Thoreau’s “nothing stands up more free from blame in this world than a pine tree” (1906, p. 145) and possess the transcendent immediacy of Plumly’s “White Oaks Ascending”: “The body/piecemeal falls away;/the spirit, in the privacy/of dark, sheds all its leaves./I died, I climbed a tree, I sang” (Thomas, 2019, p. 40). The poet does not just observe these objects -real or painted- but communes with them, quietly dismantling their absolute otherness.

In “A Tree Crosses the City”, a collection of poems where quietude is critical, the antithetical binary that is generally defined as “substance/spirit” is disactivated, in the sense that substance now feeds the spirit, and the spirit immerses the substance around

it in transcendent essentiality. This results in a profound harmony where the self is in unimpeded communion with its context. As can be seen in the lines below, when the poet conflates the tree's forthcoming experience of winter with his own mortality (that other life that awaits us), we recognise that the poet's intimacy with the objects that surround him is a source of insight into his own inner being:

The naked tree begs for your embrace, for a word that will give it patience for when the winter arrives, that other life that awaits us. Today you write while watching pines, yellow flowers and dozens of birds that alight to feed on the birdseed and the bit of water that you leave for them each day. (2020, p. 130)

The elimination of antithetical binaries brings a sense of harmony, a feeling of calm and quietude that one also detects in Wordsworth's solitary wilderness, where Nature's substance, conventionally extraneous to the self (a bird, the seas, a remote northern Atlantic archipelago), now gives a voice to the quietude in the poet's soul:

A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides. (Matthews Manley, 1916, p. 389)

One might characterise Keats's environment of soft-fallen snow upon the mountains and the moors, where waters have the priestlike task of cleansing the earth's *human* shores, in the same manner:

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art—
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—
No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death. (2010, p. 305)

And Chateaubriand, in whose *Atala* the erstwhile antithesis European/Native American is abolished in the body of a young woman of mixed Spanish and Indian parentage. The context surrounding her story is one where quiet objects of Nature not only captivate the two main protagonists/lovers, but also fully integrate with the writer's spirit and allow it lyrical expression:

The moon shone in the midst of a spotless blue sky, and its pearl-grey light fell on the indeterminate summits of the forest. Not a sound was heard, except some distant unknown harmony that reigned in the depth

of the trees: it seemed that the soul of solitude sighed throughout the whole extent of wilderness. (Chateaubriand, 2011, n.p.)

As with these writers, for Zapata poetry provides a vehicle with which to interpret the quiet language of the objects that surround him and, through them, give voice to his inner world. But Zapata's communion is more thorough: through those objects he is able to epitomise his moral cosmos. Through them he comes to detect the true essence of life and realise that he thinks, feels and understands only insofar as he is part of that universal system that we call Nature.

This is why, at times, it seems that the objects in his poetry have written their own stories, even though it is the poet's struggle with the idea of the fundamental unknowability of the essence of God (Aquinas's *Deus absconditus* concept) that is being epitomised by their plight:

A tree waited with abiding faith
for rain that failed to arrive.
This was the tree that each morning
surveyed the grey skies while leaning
on a wooden bridge,
and with so much thirst spread its branches
to trap the moisture of the morning dew
just at the moment
when the musicians arrived
and cowed cypresses
vanished into the night. (2020, p. 144)

Doubtlessly the integrity of his communion with those objects is sustained by the sincerity and candour with which he treats them; that conduct is reflected in the unembellished serenity of his verses, where he combines truth of subject with accuracy of composition.

Timelessness and Serenity: Conclusion

In Zapata's verses, past and future intermingle in a timeless embrace. Memory can turn absence into presence and make the present look into the future with the innocent dreams of childhood (the past). He describes memory as a journey to the past that is always fostered by the everyday objects that have surrounded his life:

To return to childhood is a wonderful thing. One should always be a child, and there are thousands of ways to be one. Poetry is precisely a way to dream that good times are coming and that the sky and bread will arrive at the window and at the table". (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.)

In the end, perhaps, when opening his windows, the poet can again feel the presence of the mother in front of the stove burners, can once more become the person that intuits the names of every bird that crosses his sky and can speak the language of butterflies; perhaps looking through those windows he is reminded of the untroubled bliss of childhood and can again experience the joy of defying gravity while in a woman's embrace. What is undeniable is that it is in the quietude of those everyday objects and

events that Zapata's verses ring with the sound of truth and achieve the tenor of truly authentic poesy.

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