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EVOCATION OF JOSÉ ANTONIO DÁVILA

I dedicate these simple words to my very close friends Nieves Padilla, Mariano Feliciano, and Luis de Arrigoitia who patiently read my first literary attempts and took the risk of testifying to its possibilities. To Josemilio González who taught me "to write because of need and not because you want to". To Concha Meléndez, Margot Arce, and Juan Ramón Jiménez who gave me their seal of approval because of my knowledge of Spanish and Spanish American poetry. And, of course, to my brothers in eternity, Toñín and Carlos.

Puerto Rico Endowment for the Humanities honors me with the recognition as humanist. This event coincides with the celebration of the Centennial of the University of Puerto Rico, our Alma Mater. At the Endowment, I enjoyed for various years the cordial exchange and exposure to ideas with old and loved University classmates and peers from other institutions, as president of the Proposal Committee. It was like reliving the university years. Doctor Aida Caro, humanist, represented and vitally encouraged the creator dialogue. As stated in a poem:

I came from another world
Utopian and simple.

I was born in Bayamón and educated at Colegio Santa Rosa by Dominican nuns. An extraordinary teacher, Encarnita Rodríguez, forever marked my passion for poetry. I met Gautier and de Diego; they left a deep print in my sensibility. In the same way, great aunt Matilde Otero Cuyar, pianist, in whose house they held the gatherings with José Antonio Dávila and Braulio Dueño, among others. Don Virgilio, who hid in my house when there was thunder, showed me his poem "Nace el día" (The day is born).

José Antonio dedicated the poem "Scherzando" to the great aunt. (For Matilde Otero Cuyar who puts a patina of sun from my homeland in every note.)

I saw her sit down at the piano. From the clef
came a low arpeggio
and sad like the echo of a wail,
like the agonizing climb of a bird,
like the symphonic kiss of the wind.
*The night progressed and that piano
under the magic influx of her hand
put together restless cadenzas,
like the emotion of a wave in a current,
like the restlessness of light in the west
like the shaking of tears in the pupils.*

Inspiration? Improvisations

left it when flying over the meadows,
like shaking during holy prayers,
like a rebirth of illusions,
like a collapse of dreams.

And it ended. My moist retinas
looked to the sky for divine
palpitations of the beautiful notes
and when I saw the abundance from the shadow
I saw its singing copied with stars. over the great stave of the night.

José Antonio was a great projection of a poet that still beats in me from the intimate tuning. I began to write and made the correct decision of titling my first book, which mysteriously disappeared, *Horas inútiles* (*Pointless hours*).

In the 1950's, I organized and was president of the *Círculo Cultural José Antonio Dávila* with the sponsorship of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture and other colleagues such as Luis Nieves Falcón and Carlos Orama Padilla. We transmitted a radio program with Luis Dávila, José Antonio's brother. We published the magazine *Vendimia y Poemas* (*Grape harvest and poems*), unpublished book by the poet, authorized by his brother Ricardo, in 1964.

Vendimia, text that appeared in 1940, origin of the magazine's name, covers poems from 1917 to 1939. It outlines samples of the classics and the Creole theme. Influenced by Spanish and Spanish American poets, as well as by the English and Persian Omar Khayyam, expresses love in solidarity with the cosmos and longs for the final fusion with death in a religious attitude. *Motivos de Tristán* appears in 1957.

In *Lecturas Puertorriqueñas*, poetry, an anthology we published at Troutman Press with Margot Arce and Luis de Arrigoitia, we distinguished him as an "educated and refined doctor and writer. Like Tomás Blanco he looks at himself introspectively and serves as inspiration to metaphysical reflection. Purified by pain and with a sustained faith even when doubt is touched by acute irony, he longs for the pantheistic fusion with the cosmos and incessantly questions himself about the destiny of man called by death, in a sad and yet hopeful lyricism."

We now offer *Impresión para un estudio* (*Impression for a study*) on the presence of Shelley and Omar Khayyam in José Antonio Dávila. Going back to José Antonio forces us this time to reexamine our perception of his poetry. We confess that our predilection for it, like an inexplicable affinity, took us to the imprecise inkling and generality. We had been unable to seize the essential poet. We now resume its study with an accentuated interest and an urgent effort for precision.

But those observations shall only be the starting point for a greater study, if life provides us with serenity in time to set the poet's profile on a clearer personal perspective. We repeat the most serious and complete study that is still known about him: *Vida y poesía en José Antonio Dávila* (*Life and poetry in José Antonio Dávila*) by doctor Adriana Ramos Mimoso, published in Madrid Ediciones Cultura Hispánica in 1958. It is about the poet's life; it presents the work's panorama, its conceptual and affective vision of the people and things from the topics of love, nature, religiousness, and metaphysical concerns. Also the *Siglo de Oro's figures* (*Golden Age*) and the ones he calls *Estampas del solar* (*Stamps of the land*). The third part of the study goes into the poet's valuation based on poetical procedures; this part, in our opinion, reveals in principle, as the entire study does, the capturing of the poetry's environment.

As is my case, although she has more authority, doctor Ramos was an admirer and studied José Antonio Dávila, set in the memory of that characteristically Puerto Rican family, that has given us such placid happiness in the times of the now distant village of our Bayamón.

We also reread the explanations that serve as prologue to the posthumous work titled *Poemas* and that we offered when the *Círculo Cultural José Antonio Dávila* I presided

published it. We have decided to focus our attention more directly on *Vendimia*, from the perspective of English and Persian poetry; pondering its poetic expression from that perspective, valuing its themes from its representative vocabulary, in a revisit that is not now conditioned, in its dimension, by critics or by previous studies.

It should not be assumed by this that we mean to identify for the first time that there are influences in José Antonio of the English poets or *Rubaiyat* by Persian Omar Khayyam, as doctor Ramos Mimoso mentioned before. What we wish to do is take the general information that she points out in the group study and affirm them in some initial observations for a future, more documented declaration of these influences.

Vendimia was published by the Biblioteca del Ateneo Puertorriqueño (Library of the Puerto Rican Athenaeum) in 1940 and covers the years between 1917 and 1939. We should remember that the poet was born in October 1898 and died in December 1941. This work is divided in six parts or sets of poems headed by an initial one that appears with the heading *Vendimia* titled *Kismet*, and a final one, *Ex libris* under the same name.

The parts that appear in these poems are as follow: *Versos del meridiano* (*Verses of the meridian*), *Versos de la vida moza* (*Verses of the young life*), *Siglo de Oro* (*Golden Age*), *Post-Rafaelíticas*, *La rueca de Némesis* (*Nemesis' distaff*) y *Poemas de un amor triste* (*Poems of a sad love*). The first poem, *Kismet*, is signed by a quote in Shelley's Prometheus Unbound or liberated:

...and hope, till hope creates
from its own wreck the thing it contemplates.¹

...y esperar hasta que la esperanza
cree aún desde su naufragio la imagen que ella otee.²

Con la esperanza se abstrae lo infinito en la poesía, ámbito ultravital del poeta.

Hope abstracts the concept of infinite in the poem, a vitally important atmosphere for the poet. These symbolic verses are part of the last verse of Act IV of the lyrical drama by Shelley when Demogorgon speaks.

Prometheus or the Titan, who in the myth represents humanity or the soul of human kind, in a religious expression, has been condemned by Jupiter, god of evil, to be chained to a rock in Mount Caucasus for stealing fire from the gods. A vulture devours his liver, which constantly renovates itself. Pain is his constitutive element, fury tortures him and he tortures himself, as Jupiter's ghost says: "Thyself torturing solitude"³, longing for liberty by means of protest.

Demogorgon (demos-people and gorgon-fear) is a corruption of the term demiurge, he is the creator of the world and eternity. He dethrones Jupiter. Hercules liberates Prometheus, *Prometheus Unbound* is humanity liberated by wisdom; he joins one of the Oceanidas, nature, and love and good reign over death.

The lyrical drama begins with the wail of a chained Prometheus, mythical Hamlet, and ends with the intonation of a hymn of joy by Demogorgon or Demiurge who sings the victory of Prometheus.

The verses by Shelley with which José Antonio signs *Vendimia* appear in this hymn of joy. Let's look at them now in the context of the last verse in Act IV which we had previously alluded to:

To suffer woes which Hope
thinks infinite; To forgive wrongs darker
than death or night;

To defy power, which seems

Omnipotent;
to love, and bear; to hope till hope creates
from its own wreck the
thing it contemplates.

Neither to change, nor flatter,
nor repent;
this is the glory, Titan,
is to be Good, great and joyous,
beautiful and free;

This is alone Life, joy,
empire and victory.

According to John Zillman, *Prometheus Unbound* is the supreme English poem of the nineteenth century. He states that this poem by Romantic Shelley is equally great to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

Why have we stopped in this aspect of the verses by the English poet? Because they tell us why José Antonio chose them. They provide the fatalistic romantic tone in *Vendimia*, in dramatic lyricism, saved by hope from the constant doubt from which the poet frees him.

Shelley defines the language in *Prometheus* as a perpetual Orphic song: Language is a perpetual orphic song.⁴

Like a song of solitude. Orpheus, husband of Eurydice, is the solitary singer, founder of the Orphic mysteries. That is why communication is so difficult and that difficulty increases when we try to understand a poet's creating language. It is a way of capturing, from the representative vocabulary, the complete intrahistory of the work.

That is why it is particularly interesting to trace vocabulary coincidences between José Antonio and Shelley. Later on we refer to José Antonio and Persian Omar Khayyam. Let's isolate the constant vocabulary in both poets in *Prometheus Unbound* and *Vendimia* and indicate where the variants have been possible.

The poem titled *Kismet*, destiny, that *Vendimia* initiates, highlights in its first verses and in others that follow, the words, *wind, shadows, desire, fire, bright star, night, goldfinch, red, feel*.

The wind drags shadows and although I
see nothing
something knocks on desire's door.

The noun wind, fury, with its variants breezy, breeze, appear in José Antonio's entire book like destiny's overbearing and fatal force or like faint trade winds. It is "heavens winged hound"⁵; the "whirlwind"⁶; the wind that joins the bird in Shelley and is a bird, goldfinch, or nightingale in *Vendimia*: "Birds wing the wind"⁷; in *Prometheus* birds pull or put their wings to the wind. The nightingale also appears in Shelley. The man is a "child of many winds"⁸.

Light is brightness that dazzles in both. Also the note of solitude, desert, desolation, ashes, residue, debris, rose, buds, bulbs, tree, blood, wine, stars. Shelley alludes to the wine that absorbs dust when it spills; the maddening wine of life; the soul as an extinct fire, the enigma of the afterlife in which, according to Shelley, a voice that has not spoken sleeps.

And in *Canto de los espíritus (Spirit songs)* "death, despair, love, sorrow; time, both, today, tomorrow"⁹. This reference to time that flows between yesterday and today, life's obverse and reverse, intensifies the pain in José Antonio's soul throughout his entire poetry. It is a devouring time. But in both poets wisdom born from hope prevails over death; they

both project a philosophy of life in a romantic transposition of faith in the omnipotence of love beyond death.

In *Vendimia*, Shelley combines with the other influence we mentioned – the one in the poem titled *Rubaiyat* by Omar Khayyam, eleventh century Persian poet and mathematician – which Irish Edward Fitzgerald made known in his version in the 19th century after pre-Raphaelite poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti rescued it from obscurity.

The author of the *Rubais*, rhymes or quartets, titled the work *Rubaiyat* because it connects a set of rubais or rhymes in which he ponders on fleetingness with a realistic attitude. According to Fitzgerald, it is an eclogue, an Epicurean poem, which reveals the idealized pragmatism that leads to "carpe diem". It is opposite to Ecclesiastes – vanity of vanities, all is vanity – in its presentist affirmation (eat, drink for tomorrow we die). The topic, old already, oozes enthusiasm in Omar. Doubt transcends in the conception of life as delight.

We also notice in José Antonio, as in *Rubaiyat*, the pagan and hedonistic note when he stresses with sensual delight "the geranium fire of your kiss" – the true and later dreamed experience of love¹⁰ is evidenced in *Kismet*¹¹, *Para Blanca de Cavalcanti*, *Dama de la alcoba* (*Lady of the bedroom*)¹², and others. But José Antonio goes beyond sensual realism and spiritually evokes the experience of love.

For him, as for Omar Khayyam, life is a passing enigma. The use of the verb "to pass" is a constant in him. The Persian also oscillates between past and present with the nostalgia of flowing time.

In the poem, *Kismet*, the poet expresses "elan vital", the desire to live within the illness that weakens him and gloomily draws him near death. The fascinating thing about his poetry is the unequivocal tender bitterness of living by dying.

Like Omar Khayyam, José Antonio coincides in the vocabulary we described in Shelley: wind, shadows, night, sunset, desire, bird, –the bird is on the wing¹³ –the bird of time, goldfinch or nightingale, wings, roses, ashes, residue, debris, dust, grain, yesterday, today, nothing, bitterness, life, light, bright stars, stars, and moon.

A hair perhaps divides
the False and True,¹⁴ says the Persian poet.

And José Antonio:
Good and evil, as seen in
my creed, are not always
good and evil

The Persian:
I myself am heaven and hell.¹⁵

And José Antonio in Credo:
I believe that man has
inside himself
a heaven and a hell.¹⁶

In *Rubai* 91¹⁷ we see Khayyam's desire to transform into nature when he dies, which appears in "Escombro" ("Rubble") and other poems by José Antonio. Khayyam's influence is recorded, as in Shelley's case, by Dávila in the poem *Aromas de Rubaiyat*¹⁸ which we included in the posthumous work *Poemas* when we organized it and made the final revision entrusted by his brother Ricardo. This poem is not in *Vendimia*, but it is a detachment of this work.

José Antonio, sybaritic like Omar, quotes Rubai 28¹⁹, "I came like water and like wind I go". In its first verses, Dávila's poem paraphrases Rubai 12.²⁰

Here with a loaf of bread beneath bough,
a flask of vine, e book of Verse -Thou
beside me singing in the wilderness
and wilderness is paradise enow.

like the good Omar, would also
like to lie next to the
tedious path with a book of verses
and a glass of wine.

The poem ends with the same quote as *Rubai*²⁸: "I came like water and like wind I go". The life of all artists, because it is ultra sensible, is before-life or before-death, but the work, qualified life, becomes quintessence and is saved in beauty.

Full of the poet's upright beauty, as Octavio Paz would say, we offer this reflection to the beloved poet:

I write now in the shadow
like yellow leaves,
my last words are falling.
Nothing appears in my solitude
to fulfill the love ritual
of my docile language.
I look for something to reveal itself
in my dream but nothing comes.
Only, that someone appears
in this solitude
and lovingly
cuts my soul
and plucks it far away.

Notas

¹ Zillman, John, Shelley's *Promecheus on Unbound*, Acto IV, Demagorgón, p. 300, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1959, 792 páginas.

² Traducción libre de la Autora.

³ Op. cit. Acto I, El fantasma de Júpiter, p. 148.

⁴ Op. cit., Acto IV, La tierra, p. 288.

⁵ Op. cit., Acto I, Prometeo, p. 133.

⁶ Op. cit.,

⁷ Op. cit., La tierra, p. 170.

⁸ Op. cit., Acto II, escena I, Asia, p. 181.

⁹ Op. cit., Escena III, Canto de los espíritus, p. 205.

¹⁰ Op. cit. Dávila, José A.: *Dícticos I*, (a) Vendimia, Biblioteca del Ateneo Puertorriqueño, San Juan de Puerto Rico, 1940, 159 páginas.

¹¹ Op. cit. p. 66.

¹² Op. cit. p. 104.

¹³ Kayám, Omar: Rubaiyat, p. 7, Primera edición 1859, New York, Randon House 1947, 149 páginas.

¹⁴ Op. cit. Tercera, cuarta y quinta edición 1872, 1879, Rubai 49

¹⁵ Op. cit. Rubai 66.

¹⁶ Op.cit. Credo, p. 69.

¹⁷ Op. cit. p. 107.

¹⁸ Op. cit. Dávila, José Antonio: Aromas de Rubaiyat, p. 21, Poemas, San Juan de Puerto Rico, Editorial Cordillera, 1954, 82 páginas.

¹⁹ Op. cit., Rubai 28, p. 68.

²⁰ Op. cit., Rubai 12, p. 58.