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The Incertitude of Language and Life in the Poetry of Olvido García Valdés

Abstract

Two of Ludwig Wittgenstein's formulations serve as guideposts for the analysis of the poetry of García Valdés: the concept of language-game and the Creation Mystic Experience, or seeing the world as a miracle. The paper first considers the language-game in terms of "unbound" or exempt language. The poet, recognizing the metamorphic nature of language, frees it from predetermined cultural content and, most notably, from grammatical rigidity, toying with ambiguity and fluidity through such techniques as juxtaposition, pronoun vagueness and ellipsis. The second part of the study considers the poet's exploration of the ineffable, which embraces both the astonishment of being alive in the world—a mystic experience—and the mystery of death. The discovery of the wondrousness of the real comes through unhurried observation—principally visual, but also auditory and tactile—and is expressed with poignancy in language exempt from conventional constraints. When the focus is on mortality, additional textual strategies are present, for example, locating death in the body and placing a single sound within vast silence. What predominates is neither the astonishment of the real nor the menacing nearness of death but tension between the two; the ineffable balances on an axis of chiaroscuro.

The Incertitude of Language and Life in the Poetry of Olvido García Valdés

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Olvido García Valdés (Santianes de Pravia, Asturias, Spain, 1950) has published six books of poetry, *El tercer jardín* (1986) 'The Third Garden'; *Exposición* (1990) 'Exposition'; *ella, los pájaros* (1994) 'she, birds'; *caza nocturna* (1997) 'night hunt'; *Del ojo al hueso* (2001) 'From Eye to Bone'; *Y todos estábamos vivos* (2006) 'And We Were All Still Alive.' In 2005 an anthology, *La poesía, ese cuerpo extraño* 'Poetry, that Strange Body,' appeared, and in 2008, a volume of her collected poetry, *Esa polilla que delante de mí revolotea* 'That Moth that in Front of Me Flutters.' The adjective "abstract" is frequently used to describe the poetry of García Valdés (Blesa, García Fernández); thought-provoking is perhaps a better choice. The reception of the poet's *oeuvre* mirrors what Ludwig Wittgenstein hoped for from readers of his *Philosophical Investigations*: "I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But, if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own" (viii). This desire is not the only link between the Spanish poet and the philosopher. Wittgenstein's formulations serve as useful guideposts in the analysis of García Valdés's poetry; two in particular stand out: the concept of language-game, principally formulated in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), and the mysticism alluded to in his *Tratatus* (1922).

The preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, in which the philosopher confesses his inability to successfully wield his thoughts into a whole, confirms a view of language as unstable and fragmented (vii). Language bounces around, evolves and eschews unity. Meanings of words, symbols, and sentences are metamorphic, always provisional: "New types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence and others become obsolete and get forgotten" (*Philosophical* 1. 23). Wittgenstein became a model for

poets of the second half of the twentieth century precisely because “he never gave up the struggle, both with himself and with language, never allowed himself to accept this or that truth statement or totalizing system as *the answer*” (Perloff 8). Totalizing explanations are to be avoided: “Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from *one* side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about” (*Philosophical* 1.203). García Valdés’s poetry mirrors not only the language-game concept of the later Wittgenstein but equally the mysticism alluded to *Tractatus*. In this early treatise he emphasized that the expressive capability of language is limited for the most to descriptive statements, such as those found in the natural sciences, but also recognized that “there were certain ineffable truths about what is real that had to be passed over in silence yet were not for this reason unimportant or insignificant for human life” (Nieli). Michel de Certeau explains that Wittgenstein reduces “truths” to “linguistic facts and to that which, *in* these facts, refers to an ineffable or ‘mystical’ exteriority of language” (11). Important passages of *Tractatus* broach this mystical exteriority, which relates to experiences that give insights into the meaning of life (Nieli), for example: “The solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies *outside* space and time (It is certainly not the solution of any problems of natural science that is required)” (6.4312). Our analysis of the poetry of García Valdés first considers the concept of the language-game in terms of unbound or exempt language and second, the presence of mystical elements.

Exempt Language

García Valdés’s poetry reflects the provisional nature of language. Poems highlight how words can function exempt from predetermination, evolving with usage, and how absolute meaning cannot be captured and pinned down like a butterfly specimen. Oxford Dictionaries defines the adjective “exempt” as “free from an obligation or liability imposed on others” and identifies its origin as the Latin *exemptus* “taken out, freed” (“exempt”). The descriptor underscores the poet’s desire to liberate language from unnatural rigidity and from false and harmful predetermined content. Not only is grammar put into question but also cultural formulations embedded in language.

Terry Eagleton affirms that Wittgenstein was a precursor in emphasizing the cultural content of language (10). The philosopher recognized that the cultural construction of the individual is complicated, involving not only social class but also ethnicity, nationality and gender (Perloff 74). García Valdés is aware of the potentially harmful cultural content of language and, by making its presence visible in her poetry, expresses a desire to be free of it. For example, the poet posits the hierarchical construction of gender in terms of differentiated access to and use of language. The legacy of language places limitations on how and what women can say and bestows on men the power to shout authoritatively. The following lines from the poem “la voz, la de esta niña” ‘the voice, the little girl’s voice’ emphasize how young children assume the cultural burdens of language; girls learn to sing softly and boys to exude power through boisterous obscenities:

la voz, la de esta niña
 que canta sola ahí
 la del muchacho
 que por la noche da gritos y repite
 obsesivo *hijo de puta*, las voces
 de los niños que juegan (*caza* 15)

the voice, the little girl’s voice
 that sings alone over there
 the boy’s
 that at night shouts and repeats
 obsessively *son of a bitch*, the voices
 of the children at play¹

Gender is not the only cultural content in language that the poet scrutinizes. Religion (“icono u oración” ‘icon or prayer,’ *caza* 22), social class (“acodados en la barra” ‘leaning on the bar,’ *caza* 60) and power structures (“Todo dice poder, calla” ‘Everything says power, silence,’ *Y todos* 157), for example, constitute other attempts to release language into a playful labyrinth.

For García Valdés, the recognition of language’s unstable, evolving nature means not only questioning embedded social constructs but also picking apart basic elements of grammar, scrutinizing nouns,

verbs, adjectives, prepositions. Wittgenstein affirmed that the first requirement of philosophizing is to distrust grammar, and this distrust of grammar, “in the sense of interrogating it as stringently as possible,” aligns him with the avant-garde (Perloff 18). He was preoccupied with the strangeness and mysteries of ordinary words and with contemplating disconnected sentences and playful grammar. As if taking to heart Wittgenstein’s affirmation that “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (*Tractatus* 5.6), García Valdés extends the boundaries of expressivity by enticing readers to slow their pace, contemplate word usage, and doubt the reliability of what is said. Recognition of language’s refusal “to stay in one place” (Perloff 8) informs a section of *Del ojo al hueso* entitled “El libro de los líquenes o el decir” ‘The book of lichen or telling.’ The section gives the impression of a notebook because each entry has an annotation of the place and date of composition. Collectively the entries formulate a poetics that mirrors Wittgensteinian thoughts on language. For example, in the first entry—“Valladolid, 30. mayo. 1996”—the poet considers “modos de la conversación” ‘ways of conversing,’ and it is evident that she views language as slippery. Words do and do not mean the same to all participants in the conversation. In another entry—“Valladolid, 30. diciembre. 1999”—the metamorphic nature of meaning is highlighted: “la frase pudo acabar significando cualquier cosa, incluso lo contrario de lo que en su origen quería decir” (59) ‘the phrase could have ended up meaning anything, even the opposite of what it originally meant.’ In his introduction to the collected works of García Valdés, Eduardo Milán underscores uncertainty: “La poesía, para García Valdés, está vinculada a un área no de la certeza sino de posibilidades. O a una ambigüedad radical: el poema no es justo, siempre puede haber más o menos” (9) ‘Poetry, for García Valdés, is not linked to an area of certainty but rather to one of possibilities. Or to radical ambiguity: the poem is not exact, it can always mean more or less.’ Indeed, as a skilled player of the language game, García Valdés toys with ambiguity and fluidity, as she makes explicit in a statement of poetics: “Comienzo y final abierto, con frecuencia suspendido, versatilidad en el uso de las personas gramaticales, deslizamiento de una a otra, deslizamiento también de los tiempos—los del pasado y los del presente—, indistinción (en cuanto a grado de realidad) entre

imágenes de la memoria, del sueño o de la percepción actual” (*Esa polilla* 437) “The beginning and end open, frequently suspended, versatility in the use of personal pronouns, sliding from one to another, sliding also between times—past and present—, absence of distinction (with respect to the degree of reality) between images from memory, from dreams or from present perception.’

A purposeful lack of confidence in the exactitude of language manifests itself in García Valdés’s serious play with punctuation, fragmentation, juxtaposition, excision, pronoun ambiguity, the rupture of images and semantic constellations, ellipsis, narrative disconnects, hyperbaton, enjambment, omission of conjunctions and articles, the intermingling of distinct registers, avoidance of adjectives, and a general distilling of language to essentials. From among the techniques on the list—a compilation of critics’ observations (Blesa, Casado, Drey Müller, García, García Fernández, Mora, Rico, Trueba)—the author underscores juxtaposition: “De los mecanismos lingüísticos, el que mejor identifico como mío es, en un sentido amplio, el de la *yuxtaposición*. Es el *trope* del cine y de la vida: *ella, los pájaros*. La extrañeza y el sentido proceden de ese trabajo de *montaje*” (*La poesía* 14-15) ‘Among linguistic mechanisms the one I best identify as mine is, in a broad sense, juxtaposition. It is the trope of film and of life: *she, birds*. Strangeness and meaning derive from montage work.’ Like Wittgenstein, García Valdés appreciates the aesthetic value of placing things side by side in new ways. In a 1932 lecture, the philosopher broached the subject of aesthetics and remarked: “What it [aesthetics] does is to *draw one’s attention* to certain features, to place things side by side so as to exhibit these features. ... Our attention is drawn to a certain feature, and from that point forward we see that feature” (*Lectures 1932-1935* 38). In contrast to poems that capture an essence, unveil truth, or posit unitary subjectivity, García Valdés’s constitute a relational space, open to the changing nature of the situational. Distinct temporal moments, spaces, objects, subjects and linguistic registers bump against each other. Poems flow towards significance but disparate elements implant seeds of distrust about meaning. The sidelining of the first person further underscores the notion that the meaning of words cannot be pinned down: “estamos ante una poética antiesencialista en la que no hay un *yo* que se apropie de un objeto

de deseo, sino alguien impersonal que se desplaza entre las cosas, entre el sucederse de las cosas” (Trueba 151) ‘we are facing an anti-essentialist poetics in which there is no *I* that possesses an object of desire, but rather someone impersonal that moves among things, among what happens to things.’

Procedures that foreground the instability of language are a mainstay of Garcia Valdes’s poetry, as “La turquesa persa en un dedo corazón” (*Y todos* 89) ‘The Persian turquoise on a ring finger’ illustrates. Without orienting preliminaries the reader is thrust into a series of juxtapositions: a close-up of a ring worn by a peasant woman; a meditation on art; the memory of musicians playing on the streets of Madrid; observations about the shape of the ring and the human eye; childhood memories of folk musicians. The poem expresses the painful absence of comforting childhood surroundings, but the road toward unified significance is not smooth. Fragments jump around the poem’s meaning. Miguel Casado describes this characteristic as a “montaje de pequeñas piezas que no se organizan de acuerdo con una lógica narrativa” (114) ‘a montage of small pieces that are organized without any narrative logic.’ The experiences of the past and present commingle, and the warmth of the lost world collides with the coldness of the here and now. There are no precise boundaries, only the unresolved ambiguity of conflicting emotional states.

In “Un muchacho habla del cáncer” (*caza* 64) ‘A boy talks about cancer,’ the fragments of the montage surprise the reader and appear strange because logical connections between them are absent. The following segments, for example, are juxtaposed: A boy talks about his mother’s cancer; an invocation to the “Virgen del Bello País” ‘Virgin of the Beautiful Country,’ who appears to inhabit a folksy little crèche; and a glimpse of unreality located between a dream world and a 1912 photograph. The halting, thought-inducing reading process—How do these pieces of language fit together? How can the fluidity of subject and object pronouns be resolved?—distance and delay recognition of a definitive meaning. The counter-positioning of the same word in the final line, “hálito, no hálito” ‘breath, not breath,’ reiterates how words always mean something else. The imagination, dreams, and memories elevate—“hálito” in the sense of a soothing, pleasant breath of air—but they

do not remedy the uneasiness in the face of inevitable death, the “no hálito”, or absence of breath.

Freeing language from the pretense of absolute truth by focusing readers’ attention on its provisional nature is achieved not only through stylistics but also through explicit attention to grammatical structures. The poem “*un error de grafía...*” ‘a spelling error...’ is an example. The opening reference to spelling immediately foregrounds language, further emphasized by a contrast between the definite and indefinite article: “un error de grafía: era / un juego pero creían / que era el juego” (*caza* 17) ‘a spelling error: it was / a game but they thought / that it was the game.’ The grammatical distinction is critical: a matter of life or death. In the context of the poem “*un juego*” might refer to particularly difficult circumstances such as a grave illness; “*el juego*,” on the other hand, implies a mortal illness, *the* definite one. Another strategy is to insert words that collide with the predominant register in the text. In “Un muchacho habla del cáncer,” for example, two disparate registers, highlighted by italics, come into contact. One is characteristic of an intimate confession, “*cuando el médico lo dijo me caí*” ‘when the doctor told me I fainted;’ and the other, of parody (*caza* 64). The final line of the poem parodies a warning sign: “*En caso de ahogo busque el desierto*” (*caza* 64) ‘In case of drowning look for a desert.’ Rhetorical questions about the meaning of words, combined with italics, explicitly draw attention to the limits of language: “¿Qué significa / *dentro de ti*?” ‘What does *within you* mean?’; “¿Qué significa / *intersubjetivamente*?” (*caza* 45) ‘What does *intersubjectively* mean?’. Instilling doubts about referentiality has an even greater impact: “cuando comienza marzo y duda / del referente de algunas palabras, de *amigos*, / por ejemplo. De su referente en lo real, / de la necesidad de referentes, de lo real / de los referentes” (*Del ojo* 74) ‘when March arrives and doubts arise / about the referent of certain words, about *friends*, / for example, about its referent in the real world, / about the necessity of referents, about the reality / of referents.’

Perhaps the most emphatic formulation is showing how meaning varies according to context, a procedure that parallels Wittgenstein’s formulation in *Tractatus* (6.41-6.421) that only facts about the world can be told while what lays beyond—ethics, aesthetics, the ineffable—must be shown. The poem “Levanta la

taza” ‘She raises her cup’ utilizes the technique of showing to convey both the instability and limits of language. The subject of the poem is described as thinking about “la confusión al oír los mensajes” (*Y todos* 29) ‘the confusion when listening to the messages.’ The word “pena” ‘sadness’ is put into play by showing its unreliability. Initially *pena* refers to the experience of being awakened in the middle of the night by a phone call, an annoying or perhaps unnerving experience. When the word “pena” reappears in the context of a present-day observation of the poetic subject’s childhood town, it expresses poignant regret, sadness and anguish at life’s brevity: “miró el pueblo de lejos, y sí, ésa era figura de la pena” (*Y todos* 29) ‘she looked at the town from afar, and yes, that was the configuration of sorrow.’ It is the image of the town, more than a word, whose signifying capacity is limited and unstable, that conveys deep, irreparable sadness.

The Mystical and the Mystery

In his “Lecture on Ethics” Wittgenstein speaks of the Creation Mystic Experience, “‘seeing the world as a miracle’ or ‘wondering’ at the existence of the world” (Nieli). A similar experience, described by Miguel Casado as “asombro y gratitud . . . hacia lo real” (115) ‘wonder and gratitude . . . toward the real,’ is prominent in the poetry of García Valdés, as is the mystery of death. The words mystic and mystery are bound together in their shared origin; both derive from the Greek *mýstēs*, an initiate into the unknown (“mystic,” org.; “mystery,” org.). The poet’s gaze is located precariously between the real and the ineffable, be it the mystical or the mystery: “Entre lo literal de lo que ve / y escucha, y otro lugar no evidente / abre su ojo la inquietud” (*Y todos* 117) ‘Between the literal of the seen / and heard, and another unknown place / uncertainty opens its eye.’ The ineffable lurks in the slowness of contemplation, in nature, in everyday practices and in memory. García Valdés’s poetic language challenges silence to express what lies beyond and what cannot be said: “qué puro el rostro de la pena o de la alegría cuando el habla que lo acompaña se ha desmembrado en sílabas y balbuceos, en una fonética exenta” (*Del ojo* 60) ‘how pure the face of sorrow or joy when the speech that accompanies has become dismembered into syllables, stuttering and unbound phonetics.’ The path to the expression of astonishment starts with deliberate, unhurried observation—principally visual,

but also auditory and tactile; thoughtful contemplation ensues, and then haltingly, words, distilled to a thought-provoking minimum or condensed to a flash of emotion, emerge. The poem “como si todos” ‘as if everyone’ elucidates the initial receptive state:

como si todos
 hubiéramos ya muerto,
 vestidos o acolchados para un film,
 vistos de lejos,
 tan
 irreal y preciso, así,
 como vestirse
 y sentarse ocupando
 una silla,
 salvo quizá
 un viejo pastor que hubiera ido
 a oír desde atrás, sólo
 a sentarse y escuchar
 alguna voz que hablara (*Y todos* 181)

as if we all
 had already died
 dressed or padded for a film
 seen from afar
 so
 unreal and precise, like that,
 like dressing
 and sitting occupying
 a chair
 except perhaps
 an old shepherd that might have come
 to listen from the back, only
 to sit down and listen for
 some voice that might speak

The poem contrasts those who are capable of allowing the astounding nature of the real—the intersubjectivity of everyday life—to penetrate their being with those who are not. The latter exist

as if already dead, sealed off from the world around them. Only the old shepherd, with his habit of sitting tranquilly and listening, might be capable of hearing the amazing pulse of life.

The importance of the eye, “una mirada hecha a base de lentitud y de perseverancia” (García Fernández 69) ‘a gaze formed of slowness and perseverance,’ in exploring the mystic experience of the real is emphasized in the title of the author’s fifth book: *Del ojo al hueso*. The title suggests movement from observation of the exterior world to the interior, where questions of the meaning and worth of life are confronted, and equally, from the mystic experience of the real to its lasting expression in art. The deliberate foregrounding of visual observation is achieved in part through frequent pictorial intertextuality, most notably in *caza nocturna*, a title derived from a painting by Paolo Uccello. Each section of the book is introduced with the name of a painter (Kasimir Malevich, Uccello, Arshile Gorky), and throughout there are allusions to paintings and painters. In addition, the poet makes a pact with colors, “pactar con el color de estas verduras / de invierno” (*caza* 29) ‘to make a pact with these winter / greens,’ and occasionally explicitly associates the poetic process with the art of painting. In the struggle to capture what has been gazed upon, words and masses of light are fused: “sin conocer la lengua, captar una ciudad / por las masas de luz” (*Del ojo* 29) ‘without knowing the language, to capture a city / by masses of light.’

By fixing the gaze on a particular detail, the observed object is momentarily extracted from the flow of time, and the observer experiences an instance of mystic awe. Elements of nature, often birds or other animals, and of daily life predominate. The poet fixates on “pequeños detalles, que saltan de la realidad al ojo” (García Fernández 69) ‘small details that jump from reality to the eye’ and lodge themselves in memory. Examples are plentiful: geranium leaves (*ella* 37), a cut on the back of the hand (*ella* 45), a red-tailed thrush (*Del ojo* 89), a potato sprinkled with red paprika (*Del ojo* 38), a scene of washing hair in preparation for a childhood New Year’s Eve (*Y todos* 147). Unhurried attention to what is seen and heard prompts astonishment at one’s existence in the world. When the wonders of life penetrate through the senses, one exists outside of time, free of the anguished consciousness of mortality. The poem

“quizá de despedida, el monte se corona” ‘perhaps in farewell, the mountain is crowned’ illustrates the Creation Mystic Experience present in García Valdés’s *opus*:

quizá de despedida, el monte se corona
de brezos; como si fuera ciega,
mira sin ver, se acerca, sólo se fija
en el pomo brillante del paraguas,
un instante lo toca. (*Del ojo* 90)

perhaps in farewell, the mountain is crowned
with heather; as if blind,
looking without seeing, drawing near, only noticing,
the shiny knob of the umbrella,
touching it an instant.

The gaze does not tarry on the mountain, in spite of its beautiful heather, but rather fixates on an ordinary object, an umbrella, and then on a detail, the knob on the tip of the umbrella. The intense fascination with the brilliance and feel of the knob projects the subject momentarily into an otherworldly place. The beauty of the mountain is alluring but does not seduce the gaze as does the knob because the scene contains a reminder of temporal existence, the life-death cycle of nature. The attractive heather, associated with a farewell—“quizá de despedida”—is an unequivocal sign of passing time.

Ecstatic moments are infrequent but of overpowering intensity. The awe and wonder of the real is artfully communicated in “Sube el ruido de quienes asisten” ‘The noise of those in attendance increases.’ The shadow of temporality, rarely absent, is barely perceptible in the midst of an out-of-doors wedding celebration. The poem offers little in the way of a narrative; rather it magnifies perceptions of nature. By contrasting two ways of knowing the wedding site, viewing a photograph and actually being there in person, the exhilaration of the wondrousness of the real is transmitted with precision: “me perdería, / además de la brisa, la móvil levedad / de las hojas, los vencesos chillando” (*Del ojo* 22) ‘I would lose, / besides the breeze, the gentle movement / of the leaves, the screeching of the swifts.’ Indeed, what would be lost is life itself, the perception of its vital

pulse: “la vida, cómo suena, su fugitivo ojo” (*Del ojo* 22) ‘life, how it sounds, its fugitive eye.’

The poetic language of García Valdés transforms the mystic experience of the real into palpable forms, colors and sounds; the dark mystery of hopelessness and death, equally intense, acquires a haunting expression that lingers near silence, reminiscent of the dark shadow of the poetry of Rosalía de Castro. The poem “Deslumbra el cielo” “The sky dazzles” contrasts the wondrousness of the real with the somber mystery of mortality. The two intertwined spheres of the ineffable permeate García Valdés’s *oeuvre*:

Deslumbra el cielo
se mira fijamente
contra él una flor,
se hace negra y deslumbra.
No habla. Porque son inherentes
al hablar el oír
y el callar. Mira: tomates,
hojas, tallo, tierra. El cielo
es una bóveda, finito
mundo azul sobre el mundo,
los tomates son rojos. (*caza* 69)

The sky dazzles
looking fixedly
against it at a flower,
it turns black and blinds.
It does not speak. Because inherent
in speaking are hearing
and being silent. Look: tomatoes,
leaves, stem, earth. The sky
is a dome, finite
blue world over the world,
the tomatoes are red.

The poem is composed of three unmarked sections: the unfathomable mystery of death (lines 1–4); a synthesis of a poetics of contemplation (“callar” line 7); and the mystic experience of

the real (“Mira” lines 7–11). The image of the sky places the initial gaze beyond the concrete world, into the realm of the unknown. Against the dazzling sky a flower turns black and blinds the view. The disconcerting blackness suggests the incomprehensible enigma of death; a darkness that cannot be explored with the eye or the ear (“No habla”). Conceptual play with the verb “hablar” ‘to speak’ makes for a seamless transition between the first and second sections: “No habla” (5) refers to the silence of death, while “hablar” (6) refers to a poetic process. A poem comes into being through the close scrutiny of the strangeness of existence. The dark flower—death—cannot be gazed upon but the real—nature—seduces the senses. The sky is not black but blue and how extraordinarily amazing that “los tomates son rojos.”

For García Valdés, the difficulty of capturing the ineffable in poetic language increases when, rather than expressing the wondrous strangeness of nature and ordinary life, the poet attempts to decipher the mystery of death, or its preliminary states: fleeting time, illness, pain, misfortune and solitude. Miguel Ángel Ordovás emphasizes that when the poet confronts death, or what he terms “sentimientos existenciales” ‘existential emotions,’ “comienza a hacerse evidente la imposibilidad siquiera de *nombrar*” ‘the impossibility of even *naming* becomes apparent’ (7). Death presents itself as a disorienting enigma, as if speaking another language. Observation of the elderly hints at its incomprehensibility: “Veo cada vez más ancianos, / son distintos entre la gente / de la calle, miran como si hablaran / otra lengua” (*ella* 95) ‘I see more and more elderly / they are different from other people / they appear to speak / another language.’ Insistently, the poet explores the impenetrable riddle of mortality, honing expressive strategies of indirection to break the silence. Two derive from sixteenth and seventeenth-century Golden Age Spanish poetry. The first consists of a palate of dark tones—“negro” ‘black,’ “oscuridad” ‘darkness,’ “noche” ‘night,’ “nubes” ‘clouds,’ “oquedad” ‘cavity,’ “túnel” ‘tunnel,’ “sombrió” ‘somber’; and the second, of allusions to the cycle of nature. The initial poem of *Del ojo al hueso*, “Sigue el proceso” ‘The process continues,’ exemplifies the latter. The observant eye focuses on maturing pomegranates that hang over a wall, but the appearance of a cypress tree, a recognizable symbol of death, reminds readers that the ripe fruit is perishable, like all

mortals.

A third strategy, developed with admirable originality, is to speak of death in terms of the human body. The body locates death in the material, observable world. In García Valdés's poetry the body also expresses affective states associated with approaching death, such as sadness: "Tristeza no formulable, salvo las cejas" (*caza* 28) 'Inexpressible sadness, except the eyebrows'; and melancholy: "mordaz / melancolía, mal como se sabe / vinculado a bilis e intestino / que sentimos en el alma" (*caza* 17) 'scathing / melancholy, an illness as is well known / linked to bile and intestines / that we feel in our soul.' In "escribir el miedo es escribir..." 'to write fear is to write' the poet affirms that to express the fear of death one must describe the body: its fluids and its "dependencias carnosas, la piel / sonrosada, sanguínea, las venas, / venillas, capilares" (*caza* 72) 'fleshy quarters, pink / skin, blood, veins, / minute veins, capillaries.'

How can it be said? How can it be understood? In the end only silence remains to convey the spine-chilling arrival of death, but in the poetry of García Valdés, piercing silence speaks. The fourth strategy for conveying the mystery of death consists of placing a single, intense sound within an enormous silence. When the sound of a train invades the hush of a house ("hace viento" [*ella* 103] 'it's windy') or a bird breaks the silence of an afternoon nap ("suspendido y vocal" [*ella* 195] 'suspended and vocal'), the disturbing mystery acquires a voice. In the latter poem the alliteration of "s"—"sonoro," "silencio," "siesta"—and "l"—"lamento," "líquido"—adscribes a phonetic presence to the bird's solitary sound, associated with death in the final two lines of the poem:

suspendido y vocal,
el pájaro de las riberas
estuvo ahora entre los eucaliptos,
sonoro en el silencio de la siesta,
como un lamento líquido,
muy cerca de los muertos, en el aire,
de la carne descomponiéndose. (*ella* 105)

suspended and vocal
the river-bank bird

was now among the eucalyptus
 sonorous in the silence of the siesta,
 like a liquid lament,
 very close to the dead, in the air,
 to the decomposing flesh.

Ordinary, everyday sounds, if isolated, become unsettling, for example, the voice of a blind man hawking lottery tickets (“por la noche me viene algunas veces / su intensidad bajo el párpado” [*caza* 104] ‘sometimes at night its intensity / underneath my eyelid’); or the whistle of the knife sharpener (“Contigo / no sé qué hacer, / sobre todo por el sonido” [*caza* 104] ‘I do not know what to do / with you / above all, because of the sound’). In poems that combine the four strategies, such as “Este conocido temblor” (*caza* 31) ‘This familiar trembling,’ the enigma of mortality has a haunting presence.

The Balancing Act: Wonder/Trepidation, Instability/Unity

What predominates in the poetry of García Valdés is not the astonishment of the real—Wittgenstein’s Creation Mystic Experience—nor the menacing mystery of death but tension between the two: “el sí y el no, vida / sobre la vida, el sí / en los intersticios del no, el no / estallando las juntas del sí” (*Del ojo* 71) ‘yes and no, life / over life, yes / in the gaps of no, no / exploding the joints of yes.’ The ineffable balances on an axis of chiaroscuro, a poetic figure whose baroque origins do not negate present-day validity. Guillermo de Torre underscores the relevance of baroque writers of the Spanish Golden Age in the formation of vanguardist poetics (424), and Luis Martín Estudillo analyzes the baroque characteristics of the late twentieth-century poetry of Spain (21-31). In García Valdés’s texts, chiaroscuro becomes a visual manifestation of the prolonged tension between the amazement of being in the world and unsettling mortality. Marcos Canteli, borrowing a line from *Y todos estábamos vivos*, describes the tension as “raíz, pero que fluye” (110) ‘roots, but that flow,’ and Miguel Casado, as a “lugar sintético ... hecho de antagonismos que no pueden escindirse ni fundirse, de la máxima lucidez, de aguda desesperanza, de asombro y gratitud también hacia lo real” (115) ‘synthetic place ... made of antagonisms that cannot split or fuse, of maximum lucidity, of

piercing hopelessness, also of wonder and gratitude toward the real.' Chiaroscuro generates a gamut of contrasts that populate the Spanish author's work: light-darkness; heat-cold; humid-dry; slow-fast. In turn, each duality spawns variations. For example, bright colors such as red, blue and yellow enrich the connotative value of "luz" 'light'; "fiebre" 'fever' nuances heat and "noche" 'night,' darkness. Connotative and conceptual oppositions convey the unresolved tension that insistently resurfaces. Lines such as "ahora sé qué se esconde / tras sus nucas sombrías, cuánta / luz enmudecen" (*Del ojo* 76) 'now I know what hides / behind the gloomy backs of their neck, how much / light they silence,' and "La luz de ese color de sangre fresca / que dialoga con lo negro / (tizón y vida el diálogo pautado)" (*Y todos* 191) 'The light of that color of fresh blood / that converses with blackness / (charred remains and life the guided dialogue) exemplify how the artful construction of chiaroscuro creates a poetic language that is at once eminently concise, thought-provoking and playfully *conceptista*.

Chiaroscuro emphasizes the irreducibility of elements in conflict. Leo Spitzer explains: "The polarity is never resolved into a complete unity; the rose, although it may stand beside the darkness, is not darkness" (132). Wittgenstein's formulations of the nature of language, like García Valdés's poetry, are tinged with unresolved tension. Journeying on the labyrinthine paths of the language-game does not result in the complete breakdown of communication. The risk exists that if language is set free—exempt from—predetermination, Babel will ensue. The philosopher balances such destabilization with anti-skeptical attitudes; he endorses the multiple varieties of language-games but also recognizes the continuity of language selecting double-edged images "that respect the unity and variety of concepts, the repetition and revision of language games, the replication and renovation of meaning" (Quigley 219). For example, the image of a river that distinguishes "between the movement of the water on the river-bed and the shift of bed itself" illustrates the coexistence of the conflicting convictions of unity and change (qtd. in Quigley 224). García Valdés too is an accomplished juggler of inconsistent positions. The poet accommodates the instability of meaning freed from false truths and rigid grammatical prescriptions with a poignant expression of the wonders of existence

and the unsavory mystery of death. It's a matter of seeing (to) the irresolvable tension that exists in language and life.

Notes

1 All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

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