The Quest(ioning) of Epistemological Ground: The Spanish Generation of 1956

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Much of the critical literature on the poetry of the Generation of 1956 asserts that for Claudio Rodríguez, José Angel Valente and Francisco Brines, among other members of this group, writing poetry is a means to knowledge. The various *poéticas* written by many of these poets, especially during the 1960s, corroborate and advance this fundamental view. As Andrew Debicki explains, in this generation we find that the stress has been placed on poetry as "an act of discovery and knowledge rather than mere communication" (*PD* 7). Margaret Persin later observes: "Virtually all of the poets of this generation view the act of writing as their best method of knowing reality" (*RSP* 22). Carole Bradford elaborates: "For the majority of the poets of the second post-war group, art is a means to knowledge . . ." ("Dialectic" 1).[1]

For poets such as Valente, the process of poetry *is* the process of knowledge: "Escribo poesía porque el acto poético me ofrece una vía de acceso, para mí insustituible, a la realidad. Quizá no es difícil desprender de ahí que veo la poesía en primer término como conocimiento y sólo en segundo lugar como comunicación" ('I write poetry because the poetic act offers me a path of access, which for me is unique, to reality. Perhaps it is not difficult to deduce that I see poetry firstly as knowledge and only secondly as communication' *PEC* 489). Rodríguez explains his view of poetry and cognition in this way: "El proceso del conocimiento poético es el proceso mismo del poema que lo integra" ('The process of poetic knowledge is the same process as that of the poem that integrates it' *PU* 87). Finally, Brines affirms that by writing poetry "el poeta trata de conocer, de indagar una oculta verdad" ('the poet tries to know, to inquire into a hidden truth' *PEC* 528).[2]

Since knowledge, however, alternates with its apparent opposite,

ignorance, and because the trace assures that these dichotomies forever will be linked, forever will be accomplices of each other, forever will be undermined by each other, it is not possible to focus on knowledge in isolation. Neither knowledge nor ignorance can have meaning without the other. As Atkins points out, since the trace keeps "language forever in play" and insures "the perpetual oscillation of meanings" it thus deconstructs "our usual way of thinking in simple oppositions" (81). When scrutinizing selected poems of Rodríguez, Valente, and Brines, we shall discover-investigate poetry that is not a process of knowing but rather a process of questioning the grounds of knowledge.

As critics we must rethink the concept of knowledge in textual terms. When we do, Valente's famous dictum, "todo poema es un conocimiento haciéndose" ('every poem is knowledge becoming' *PU* 158), which long has served as the foundation both of his generation and the critical literature written about this generation, is itself reconstituted in terms of ignorance. If knowledge and ignorance continually imply one another, then Valente's assertion at once underscores *and* undermines the privileged term in the hierarchical opposition knowledge/ignorance because, as we shall learn, "todo poema es un conocimiento haciéndose" ('every poem is knowledge becoming') its own *différance*.[3]

In each of the poems studied in this essay the poet tries to master knowledge through language. This mastery, however, is subverted by the "warring forces of signification" (Johnson "TI" xiv), and what is known remains inexact. In Rodríguez's "Alto jornal" ('Superior Day-Wages,') the literal reading of a key phrase unravels the figural reading as the poem's protagonist arrives at (in)sufficient knowledge. The "conflictuality of *différance*" (Derrida *Pos* 44) inherent in language undermines the protagonist's mastery of "el canto" ('the song') in Valente's "Primer poema" ('First Poem'). Finally, the shadow presence of the "Esplendor negro" ('Black Splendor'), which is also the title of Brines' poem, subverts the process of coming to know examined in the text.[4] By questioning the referential grounds of language the critic, in turn, questions the grounds of knowledge sought in and through both the poetic and the interpretive texts.

A passage from Rodríguez's "Unas notas sobre poesía" ('Some notes on poetry') summarizes clearly his view of poetry: "Creo que la poesía es, sobre todo, participación. Nace de una participación que el poeta establece entre las cosas y su experiencia poética de ellas, a

través del lenguaje. Esta participación es un modo peculiar de conocer" ('I believe that poetry is, above all, participation. It is born from a participation that the poet establishes between things and his poetic experience of them, through language. This participation is a peculiar form of knowing' *PU* 87). This cognitive "participation" is the underlying theme of Rodríguez's "Alto jornal" ('Superior Day-Wages'), from *Conjuros* ('*Conjurations*') (1958).[5]

1	Dichoso el que un buen día sale humilde
2	y se va por la calle, como tantos
3	días más de su vida, y no lo espera
4	y, de pronto, ¿qué es esto?, mira a lo alto
5	y ve, pone el oído al mundo y oye,
6	anda, y siente subirle entre los pasos
7	el amor de la tierra, y sigue, y abre
8	su taller verdadero, y en sus manos
9	brilla limpio su oficio, y nos lo entrega
10	de corazón, porque ama, y va al trabajo
11	temblando como un niño que comulga
12	mas sin caber en el pellejo, y cuando
13	se ha dado cuenta al fin de lo sencillo
14	que ha sido todo, ya el jornal ganado,
15	vuelve a su casa, alegre, y siente que alguien
16	empuña su aldabón, y no es en vano (*DMP* 97).

1	Blessed is he who one fine day humbly departs
2	and goes down the street, like so many
3	other days of his life, and he doesn't expect it
4	and, suddenly, what is this?, he looks up at the sky
5	and sees, he puts his ear to the world and listens,
6	he walks, and he feels rising from among his footsteps
7	the love of the earth, and he goes on, and he opens
8	his true workshop, and in his hands
9	his occupation shines brightly, and he hands it over to us
10	sincerely, because he loves, and he goes to work
11	trembling like a child who goes to communion
12	but without getting fat, and when
13	he has realized, finally, how simple

14   it has all been, now his day-wages earned,
15   he returns to his house, happy, and he senses that
          someone
16   grasps his large door knocker, and it is not in vain.

The poem records a day in the life of the workman-protagonist.
His active and enthusiastic participation in his everyday world leads
to what could be described as a reverent understanding not only of this
world (ll. 5–7) but also of the next, as the poem's title and final lines
suggest. As a single, extended sentence, divided into hendecasyllabic
verses with assonantal mono-rhyme of *a-o* in the even numbered
verses, the poem records the rhythmical footsteps (l. 6) of the work-
man as he departs from his home, arrives at his workshop, and returns
home again. Anaphorically linked throughout the poem, many of his
actions reinforce the measured two-syllable verbal pattern evident in
the poem: "sale, se va, mira, pone, oye, anda, sigue, abre, ama,
vuelve" ('departs, goes, looks, puts, listens, walks, continues, opens,
loves, returns' ll. 1–15). On this particular day, however, something
out of the ordinary occurs (ll. 4–13). The protagonist discovers the
deep-seated meaning of his daily existence: "y abre / su taller
verdadero, en sus manos / brilla limpio su oficio, y nos lo entrega / de
corazón . . ." ('and he opens / his true workshop, in his hands / his
occupation shines brightly, and he hands it over to us / sincerely' ll. 7–
10). His work, as humble as it may be, is of value, he comes to learn,
because it is done for others. The emphasis is thus placed on the posi-
tive act of discovery and the positive value of the protagonist's
"oficio," that is, the "service" he performs for others, as the Latin
source *officium* underscores (*Harper's* 1260).
       The revelatory experience of comprehending "lo sencillo que ha
sido todo" ('how simple it has all been' ll. 13–14) is the workman's
figurative remuneration (l. 14). The protagonist's cognitive participa-
tion in his everyday life leads to a profound understanding both of his
present and future "jornal" ('stipend, reward') *and* his present and
future *jornada* ('working day, journey'). The workman's daily trip to
his workshop thus serves as a metaphor for both his passage through
life here on this earth and his future passage from this life to the next.
The verb "comulga" ('goes to communion' l. 11) further stresses not
only the protagonist's active participation in his daily life and the
union he has achieved with his community of clients (ll. 8–11), but
also the revered importance of the series of events taking place on this

extraordinary day, events culminating in the poet's own sharing with others of knowledge acquired in the poetic process.[6]

Rodríguez describes the act of coming to know in both sacred, as it were, and profane terms: ". . . y va al trabajo / temblando como un niño que comulga / mas sin caber en el pellejo . . ." ('he goes to work / trembling like a child going to communion / but without getting fat' ll. 10–12). The underlying colloquial phrase, "no caber uno en el pellejo," carries the figurative meaning "to be very fat, to be very proud" (*DLE* 1000). In the poem, this revised common phrase, expressed in the everyday terms of a workman, quietly calls attention to both the vast amount of knowledge gained and the protagonist's complete satisfaction in gaining it. In the context of the poem, the use of the colloquial expression is at once humorous, especially if we consider the size of the host metaphorically alluded to in line 10, and revealing. The poet's demythification of "comulga," by means of everyday language, underscores the process of acquiring knowledge of, first, everyday life and, later, of eternal life: "se ha dado cuenta al fin de lo sencillo / que ha sido todo . . ." ('he has realized finally how simple / it has all been' ll. 13–14). When the *underlying* idiomatic expression in question is used with the function word "no," which expresses the negative of an alternative possibility, then what is conveyed is that, literally, the person involved does *not* fit into his skin anymore because, figuratively, he is getting so fat that his skin is bursting and no longer fits him. Or, if pride is involved, he is so filled with pride that he no longer fits into his own skin. Or, if knowledge is involved, as it is in the Rodríguez poem, then the protagonist is, thus, more than satisfied with the discovery that was made and the resultant understanding gained.

If we scrutinize the underlying idiom, however, we see that it is introduced by the adversative conjunction "mas" ('but'), a connective that "joins" two dissimilar, opposing, different propositions. "Mas" is also an anomaly because in almost every line of the poem preference is given to the coordinating conjunction "y" ('and'), repeated fourteen times. Difference is signaled immediately, however, not only because of the presence of "mas" but also due to the poet's liberal substitution of "sin" ('without') for "no" in the now revised idiomatic expression, "sin caber en el pellejo" (l. 12). "Sin" denotes absence or want, thereby adding to the idiom the notion of lack that it did not have with the underlying presence of the function word "no." Looking at the altered idiom and its appearance in the text,

we see that it is not the case that the protagonist no longer fits into his skin after "ingesting," figuratively speaking, knowledge of the meaning of his existence but rather that he "ingests" this knowledge *without* fitting into his skin, perhaps because he has taken in too much, or perhaps because he has taken in not quite enough and, thus, there is still more room, more capacity.

It turns out that the grounds of the first reading of the text are undermined when the critic pursues the duplicitous nature of the altered idiomatic expression "sin caber en el pellejo" (l. 12). Both the expression itself and its alteration call attention to the work of the supplement. "Sin" not only replaces "no" but also adds to the idiom, and the theme of sufficient knowledge of the first reading, the notion of absence thus foregrounding the possibility of insufficient knowledge. Perhaps, then, it is because the workman-protagonist is (in)sufficiently satisfied that he both seeks and accepts the "alto jornal" of the poem's final lines. The holding of, the capacity for, and the comprehending of the meaning of daily existence, of the first reading, are undermined by the second reading when the notion of absence, marked by "sin," comes into play.[7]

Additionally, we face in the word "pellejo," in the idiom of which it is a part, and in the text as a whole, what Barbara Johnson calls "the proliferation of plays of the signifier" ("TI" xxix). If "pellejo" originally conveyed the meaning of a small skin or hide, literally reading line 12, then some object (concept) might not "fit into" it because the "skin" itself is too small.[8]

If that is the case, then, the revised idiom, as it appears and functions in the poem, points to not only the possibility of insufficient knowledge but also, and importantly, the added possibility that the container, the synecdochic skin-body and/or the mind-receptacle of the seeker of knowledge, is simply too small to hold what is learned, and what is known will never be comprehended fully.

The figural reading advanced in the first reading of particularly lines 10–14, and of the text in general, is subverted and reconstructed in terms of the literal reading of the altered idiomatic expression advanced in the second reading. It is the literal reading of the revised idiom that leads to not "todo lo sencillo / que ha sido todo," as the text asserts and the first reading of the poem suggests, but rather widespread and duplicitous complications of expression and meaning engendered by the direct confrontation of the figural and literal levels

of language and, consequently, the warring thematic forces of sufficient knowledge and insufficient knowledge.[9]

José Angel Valente's "Primer poema" ('First Poem'), from *Poemas a Lázaro* (1960) ('*Poems to Lazarus*'), affirms his view of poetry: ". . . el proceso de la creación poética sea un movimiento de indagación y tanteo en el que la identificación de cada nuevo elemento modifica a los demás o los elimina porque todo poema es un conocimiento haciéndose" ('. . . the process of poetic creation is a movement of inquiry and approximation in which the identification of each new element modifies all the others or eliminates them because every poem is knowledge becoming' *PU* 157–58). Valente considers poetry as a means to knowledge, and for him and others of his group knowledge can neither be separated from inquiry nor understood without it. His poetry displays a systematic investigation into his own various attempts at poetic creation, viewed repeatedly as "un movimiento de indagación y tanteo."[10] This is especially evident in "Primer poema" where the act of writing is first described as one of combat, and the poem's speaker, who could be viewed as a poet-writer, sees himself in constant conflict with and questioning his medium: "Y, sin embargo, cuento mi historia, / recaigo sobre mí, culpable / de las mismas palabras que combato" ('And, however, I tell my story, / I fall back on myself, blameworthy / of the very words that I combat' *PC* 61 ll. 6–8). The struggle, however, is not solely for mastery of the word but also for knowledge, more precisely, mastery of knowledge through language. Ultimately, the protagonist of "Primer poema" comes to learn:

33   . . . el canto, al fin,
34   libre de la aquejada
35   mano, sea sólo poder,
36   poder que brote puro
37   como un gallo en la noche,
38   como en la noche, súbito,
39   un gallo rompe a ciegas
40   el escuadrón compacto de las sombras. (*PC* 62 ll. 33–40)

33   . . . the song, at last,
34   free of the afflicted
35   hand, may be only power,
36   pure power that rushes out

37   as a rooster in the night,
38   as in the night unexpectedly,
39   a rooster blindly breaks apart
40   the dense squadron of shadows.

When the final lines of "Primer poema" are interrogated, the critic finds that the speaker's struggle lies *not* with language, as the text first led us to believe (ll. 6–8, 19–24), because, after all, the speaker's "canto" ('song') emerges both free and all-powerful (ll. 33–36). Rather, the struggle lies with ignorance. What is discovered, as the poem develops, is that ignorance will be vanquished by means of the illuminative "song" which is, in Valente's poetry, "un conocimiento haciéndose" ('knowledge becoming'). The poet underscores the elucidating potential of the poem-song with the metaphor of the vigilant rooster of the dawn that vociferously greets the sun of illumination. Persin puts it this way: "the poet must resort to metaphor in order to describe the momentary success of 'el canto.' It is the unexpected suggestion of light—'un gallo en la noche'—that is able to break, if only fleetingly, 'el escuadrón compacto de las sombras' " (*RSP* 30).

The metaphor of the rooster, thus, figures prominently in the first reading of the poem. The entire scheme established by the first reading, however, is undermined in terms of a second reading when the duplicitous semantic effects of the figure "un gallo en la noche" ('a rooster in the night') are allowed to come into play. The text asserts the liberation of the "song" in lines 33–35, as we have seen, proclaiming the authoritative independence of the product of poetic creation. The mastery of the word, however, is only momentary (ll. 33–37). Despite the poet-speaker's claim that the poem is free from the synecdochic "hand" (l. 34–35) of its writer and despite the additional claim that the resulting "song" is "poder que brote puro" ('pure power that rushes out'), the simile "como un gallo" ('like a rooster') can call for a another, this time divergent, interpretation to the one advanced in the first reading.

The mastery of the song seems to rest *not* with the song itself, as the text asserts, but rather with its composer and singer, for the ubiquitous presence (absence) of the poet-singer underlies the figure "un gallo en la noche." As the composer of "el canto," the poet-speaker metonymically assumes the dominant, valiant, authoritative role of the bird of dawn and therefore is viewed as master not only of

the poem-song but also of the illuminative word that ultimately conquers ignorance. The poet-speaker, who at first struggled with his medium, emerges victorious in the poem's final lines 36–40, and the repercussions of his underlying presence are felt in each sound of the figural cock's crow. It is the vigilant poet-"gallo" who greets the day with and by means of *his* "song," thereby reclaiming his place as ruler of both song and knowledge. In his role as master he thus usurps the potential originally attributed to "el canto" (ll. 35–36).

The poem, however, also functions against its own assertions in yet another way. It is not the poet who combats language, as is claimed (l. 8). Rather, it is language that is combative chiefly because, as deconstructive reading shows, language is the play of conflicting differences. This conflict manifests itself, to use one example, when the noun "gallo" is interrogated. In Spanish, as we know, *gallo* denotes a rooster, a cock. The word, however, also carries the familiar and figurative connotation of a false note that occurs inadvertently in song, speech, or while declaiming (*DLE* 651). A dissonant and openly combative interpretation now arises when the poet-singer and poem-song, the metaphoric rooster and the revealing cock-crow of the first reading, are viewed "differently." If the "double-edged word" (Johnson "TI" xiv) "gallo" of the final lines is read as "false note" or "sour note," then the poem-song is not "pure power that rushes out" as the text asserts in line 36. The twists and turns of language take us to a discrepancy: the song is weakened by the sour note that is sung, even if sung unintentionally or unexpectedly (l. 38). The duplicitous "gallo" of both the poet-speaker's act of singing and of the resultant song undermines the metaphoric "power" of the poetic composition. The inscribed other message, at once caught up in and constituting the combative forces of signification, takes both poet and critic through the detours of language. Mastery of knowledge by means of language is always already subverted by the differential and deferential nature of language itself.[11]

Francisco Brines' *Insistencias en Luzbel* (1977) ('*Insisting on Lucifer*') interrogates the complicity of writing and knowledge. This questioning is especially evident in the opening poem, "Esplendor negro" ('Black Splendor'), where an answer is sought to the ever present (absent) query of both the poem and the collection: What is knowledge? This quest, in "Esplendor negro," is itself a question because the search for the grounds of knowledge is also a critique of both knowing and expressing what is known.[12]

1   Sólo una vez pudiste conocer aquel Esplendor negro,
2   e intermitentemente recuerdas la experiencia con
         vaguedad,
3   aproximaciones difusas, inminencias,
4   y así, desde tu juventud, arrastras frío,
5   un invisible manto de ceniza escarlata.
6   Y no fue necesario cegar los ojos,
7   pues de las luces claras de los astros
8   llegó el delirio aquel, la posibilidad más exacta y sencilla:
         en vez de Dios o el mundo
10   aquel negro Esplendor,
11   que ni siquiera es punto, pues no hay en él espacio,
12   ni se puede nombrar, porque no se dilata.
13   Valen igual Serenidad o Vértigo,
14   pues las palabras están dichas desde la noche
         de la tierra,
15   y las palabras son tan sólo expresión de un engaño.
16   Volver al centro aquel es ir por las afueras
         de la vida,
17   sin conocer la vida, un no mundo imposible,
18   pues sólo el no nacer te pudiera acercar a esa experiencia.
19   Crear la inexistencia y su totalidad,
20   no te hizo poderoso,
21   ni derramó tu llanto, y nada redimiste.
22   La misma incomprensión que contemplar el mundo
23   te produjo el terror de aquel Esplendor negro,
24   y aquel desvalimiento al cubrirte las sábanas.
                                    (*ED* 203–04)

1   Only once did you manage to know that black Splendor,
2   and intermittently you recall the experience with
         vagueness,
3   diffuse approximations, imminences,
4   and so, since your youth, you drag along,
5   an invisible, cold cloak of scarlet ash.
6   And it was not necessary to blind your eyes,
7   inasmuch as from the clear light of the stars
8   arrived that delirium, the most exact and the simplest
         possibility:
9   instead of God or the world

10   that black Splendor,
11   that is not even a point, since in it there is no space,
12   nor can it be named, because it does not expand.
13   Serenity or Vertigo are worth the same,
14   since words are said from the night of the land,
15   and words are only the expression of deceit.
16   To return to that center is to go along the outskirts of life,
17   without knowing life, an impossible non-world,
18   since only not being born could bring you close to that
        experience.
19   Creating non-existence and its totality,
20   did not make you powerful,
21   nor did it scatter your weeping, and you redeemed nothing.
22   The very incomprehension that contemplating the world
23   produced in you dread of that black Splendor,
24   and that helplessness upon covering yourself with sheets.

The progress of the poem depends on the unfolding of a series of answers to the fundamental query. At first, the text introduces its *tú*-protagonist 'you,' perhaps a poet-writer, as an example of someone who, at least on one occasion, managed to acquire knowledge, even though this knowledge was obtained with the assistance of the darkened understanding or, viewed another way, the obscured poetic inspiration of "aquel Esplendor negro" ('that black Splendor' l. 1). Recollection of the process of coming to know (l. 2) and the past as a vehicle for knowing (ll. 4–5) follow as responses.

The answering pattern changes in lines 6–12 when the text provides a series of examples of knowledge taken from the tradition of western philosophical thought. Knowledge is "Dios" ('God' l. 9), divine wisdom, divine illumination, the center or source of all knowledge. Knowledge is "el mundo" ('the world' l. 9), where understanding is viewed as esthesis. These two examples are then replaced by a third: "aquel negro Esplendor" ('that black Splendor' l. 10), a variation of the object that came to be known by the *tú* in the opening line. There is no overall, simple, exact response to the poem's underlying question even though line 8 asserts the opposite. There is only, and always, insufficient understanding, characterized in the poem in terms of metaphoric light and darkness.[13]

Another possible answer presented by the text is that of propositional knowledge, or knowledge expressed by words (ll. 14–15). At

first the *logos* is viewed as a mediating element enabling the end result of coming to know "aquel Esplendor negro" (ll. 1; 6–10).[14] In lines 14–15, however, this argument is refuted by the subsequent claim that what is known cannot be encompassed in a single expression or summarily described. Propositional knowledge, thus, is dismissed as a possible answer to the poem's underlying query.

The protagonist's developing skepticism is more and more pronounced as the closing examples unfold. Both as one who seeks knowledge and as a writer who attempts to express what is known with words, the *tú* is filled with wisdom that is forever obfuscated. The protagonist's illumination does not lead to understanding, rather it leads to "dread" of repeatedly experiencing doubt: "La misma incomprensión que contemplar el mundo, / te produjo el terror de aquel Esplendor negro, / y aquel desvalimiento al cubrirte las sábanas" ('The very incomprehension that contemplating the world / produced in you dread of that black Splendor, / and that helplessness upon covering yourself with sheets' ll. 22–24). Doubting both the possibility for and the expression of knowledge, the protagonist presents a twofold, interwoven answer to the underlying question of "Esplendor negro": knowledge is impossible and "las palabras son tan sólo expresión de un engaño" ('words are only the expression of deceit' l. 15). The interpretation of "Esplendor negro" advanced above is based on the opening assertion of the poem: "Sólo una vez pudiste conocer aquel Esplendor negro." Its starting point is the positive declaration that the *tú*-protagonist not only tried but also successfully managed to come to know "aquel Esplendor negro." If we view this figure as personification, the preterite tense of the auxiliary verb *poder* further stresses that the *tú* succeeded in meeting and becoming acquainted with "aquel Esplendor negro."

A discrepancy arises, however, when the critic questions the verbal phrase "pudiste conocer." The etymological root of the verb *conocer*, the Latin *cognoscere*, conveys the process of coming to know, of investigating, of learning by inquiring (*Harper's* 362). This cognitive *process*, however, both abruptly comes to an end and all at once begins, since "conocer," functioning as the verbal complement of the auxiliary verb "pudiste," assumes a preterite or perfected meaning. A further complication arises when the critic notes that the presence of "conocer" in the text is marked by absence. As it appears in the poem's first line, "conocer" is not marked grammatically for subject, time, and manner of action and thus it depends on the

auxiliary verb, "pudiste," to supplement these. In addition, as a transitive verb it requires its own object complement. In the poem, conceptually and figuratively speaking, "conocer" lacks the understanding, the direct awareness and the ability to discern that define it, since what comes to be known is the equivocal, uncertain, questionable, "Esplendor negro."

Even though the "process" of coming to know has been limited by the presence of the preterite of the verb *poder*, it could be argued that, after all, knowledge has been attained, as the opening line declares. But what was/is known? A possible answer lies in the opening assertion: "Sólo una vez pudiste conocer aquel Esplendor negro." When the critic interprets the figure "Esplendor negro" as the doubt engendered by the protagonist's skepticism, as a first reading of the poem suggests, a question arises. What ultimately was known, upon either completing or beginning (or both) the process of knowing, if what was known, ultimately, is Doubt?

The opening assertion leads to further complications. Scrutinizing the verb "pudiste," the critic finds that at its very root the verb implies "to have power" (*Harper's* 1404). Although the poem's protagonist seems to be endowed with both the power and the ability to know, what is known remains inexact (l. 1). The critic can, however, look at the underlying potential of the verb "poder" in yet another way. As a verb of incomplete predication, "poder" requires a complement. In one sense, then, "conocer" gives to "poder" something it did not originally have: understanding of the ability to know, even though what is known is uncertain. The semantic sense of "poder" leads the critic to believe, thus, that mastery of "conocer", not only is possible but also, as the preterite "pudiste" implies, took place. This mastery, however, is incomplete because it depends on an act of knowing that, in itself, always already is shadowed by "aquel Esplendor negro." As the supplemental accomplice of knowledge, ignorance makes understanding (im)possible.

For the *tú* of the poem, any advance in wisdom is simultaneously a movement of the mind inward and outward: "Volver al centro aquel es ir por las afueras de la vida" ('To return to that center is to go along the outskirts of life' l. 16). To progress in coming to know is to regress: "sin conocer la vida, un no mundo imposible" ('without knowing life, an impossible non-world' l. 17). The mind, opened and infused with the dim flash of "aquel Esplendor negro," becomes aware of the obscured illumination of incommutable truth-error. Both

marking the conflictual structure of opposition *and* the "interval between inversion," the figure "aquel Esplendor negro" manifests the "irruptive emergence of a new 'concept'" (Derrida *Pos* 42): the moment of suspended illumination *and* suspended ignorance. Possession of such "knowledge" leads the text's protagonist to "dread" (l. 23), perhaps because the *tú*, despite the declaration "pudiste conocer," teeters on the edge of illumination *and* ignorance. The text's protagonist discovers that the search leads to direct cognition of what is known *and* what is not known. The claim of managing to know, "pudiste conocer" (l. 1), the starting point of the poem's argument, is always already problematized by the presence of "aquel Esplendor negro." Knowledge of what is (not)known leads not to answering the text's fundamental question, but rather to (under)mining the epistemological ground of the text.

From the apparently inappropriate substitution of one word for another arises an additional concept appropriately marked by *différance*. Perhaps abusing the real functioning of substitution with the misuse of words, the catachrestic "aquel Esplendor negro" emphasizes the work of supplementarity by adding to *and* replacing the concept of knowledge.[15] No longer viewed as the condition for understanding or as the condition for apprehending truth, "pudiste conocer" remains suspended between illumination and ignorance, light and darkness, truth and error.

In "Esplendor negro," and in other poems of *Insistencias en Luzbel*, the quest for wisdom is also a questioning of the grounds from which the quest begins. In this search, language is not the means by which understanding is mastered, but rather the means by which the (im)possibility of understanding is explored: "pues las palabras están dichas desde la noche de la tierra, / y las palabras son tan sólo expresión de un engaño" ('since words are said from the night of the land, / and words are only the expression of deceit' ll. 14–15). This moment of suspension within the text, where the poem comments on its own medium, marks "the linguistic moment" and as such "breaks the illusion that language is a transparent medium of meaning" (Miller *LM* xiv). Foregrounding undecidable conceptual elements in the text, such as the catachresis of the title, "Esplendor negro," and the repetition of this metonymy, sometimes in variation (l. 10), emphasizes the poem's central problem: "referentiality in language is a fiction" (Miller *SR* II 29). Or, to use the words of the poet in "Definición de la nada" ('Definition of nothingness' *ED* 205),

". . . hablamos desde la ficción de la palabra" ('. . . we speak from the fiction of the word' l. 6). Viewed as such, "Esplendor negro" is a critique, a testing of the concept, scope and validity of both knowledge *and* meaning.

The opening claim, "Sólo una vez pudiste conocer aquel Esplendor negro," is refuted in another linguistic moment of the text when the *tú*, it seems, encounters difficulty in writing, in naming, in coming to know through naming: "ni se puede nombrar, porque no se dilata" ('nor can it be named, because it does not expand' l. 12). Despite his profession as a writer and the opening assertion of the poem, the *tú* realizes that naming is not within his grasp, perhaps because poetic inspiration is obscured due to the specter of "aquel Esplendor negro," or perhaps because "las palabras son tan sólo expresión de un engaño" (l. 15). The act of naming undermines the power to know by naming.

Despite the claim made in line 12, "no se puede nombrar," "aquel Esplendor negro" has been named (l. 1). However, catachresis problematizes not only the assumption underlying "no se puede nombrar," but also that of the poem's initial assertion. The text goes on to show that in this naming "aquel Esplendor negro" is substituted for other designations such as "Dios o el mundo" ('God or the world' l. 9). The denomination is further qualified by the adjective "negro" and thus made to be different from other possible manifestations of brightness, brillance and luster, as the Latin root *splendor* implies. The "power" to name, recalling the etymological sense of the verb *poder*, is undermined, however, both by the presence of "no" ("no se puede nombrar") and by the work of the supplement which undoes the binary opposition "Esplendor/negro." "No se puede nombrar" is further undermined by textuality, for in the semantic weavé of the the Spanish "nombrar," and the underlying Latin *nominari*, is enmeshed the root *gno* (whence *gnosco, nosco* [*Harper's* 1213, 1216]), and thus the etymological thread "to begin to know." Once again the trace insures the constant vacilation of meanings as it subverts the possibility of mastery of knowledge through language.

In "Esplendor negro," the poetic text is conceived as a critical inquiry where answers are indeterminate and questions become conundrums. In retracing this text, the critic repeats, questions, clarifies and obfuscates even further the critical inquiry begun by the poet in the poetic text.[16] Driven by "aquel Esplendor negro," the critic investigates not only its role in the poetic text but also its dissemina-

tion in the interpretive text. Suspended between illumination and darkness, knowledge and ignorance, answers and queries, the critical text repeatedly seeks its own ground while simultaneously engaged in the act of critiquing that ground. As it turns out, this search for ground often finds itself both without ground *and* on "groundless ground" (Miller *LM* 433) for the critic, like the poet, lacks the power to master knowledge ("pudiste conocer" l. 1) through language ("las palabras son tan sólo expresión de un engaño" l. 15). Writing, both the poet and the critic discover, is not a way of knowing but rather a means by which the quest(ioning) of knowing, meaning, and the meaning of knowing takes place. The critic's inquiry, like that of the poet, leads to *différance* which, as Johnson urges, "is not a 'concept' or 'idea' that is 'truer' than presence. It can only be a process of textual *work*, a strategy of *writing*" ("TI" xvi).

Since deconstruction, as Danny Anderson points out, "investigates the nature and production of knowledge," it can be viewed as a "mode of analysis" (137) particularly well adapted to this critic's critical inquiry into poetry and criticism concerned with knowledge. Knowledge is not *the* issue of deconstruction, nor of deconstructive reading. Rather, deconstruction questions the scope, the concept, the production of knowledge as the basis of mastery, power, authority. Viewed as such, deconstruction "examines the force of power and authority in the text as a desire for mastery—the attempt to master knowledge through language, and meaning through interpretation—a desire that textuality ultimately subverts, for writing always already has begun to deconstruct itself" (Anderson 138).

In this search for and critique of epistemological ground, the critic, in considering deconstructively the interrelation(s) between text and interpretation, discovers, albeit shadowed by ignorance, that in interrogating Rodríguez's "Alto jornal," Valente's "Primer poema," and Brines' "Esplendor negro," dissemination is born in language, and writing, like the medium it uses, is duplicitous. As a critical attitude, as a way of cross-examining knowledge and meaning, the deconstructive readings presented here call into question the ground of knowledge, the process of cognitive discovery, and the ground of language. Poetry, like criticism, is not a process of knowing but rather a method for questioning the activity of coming to know. Repeatedly, the poet and the critic are forced, as this essay emphasizes, to explore in writing a series of queries concerned with

the nature of knowledge and the nature of language, queries which, more often than not, lead to an impasse. Both the poetic text and the critical text, thus, forever point to epistemological and linguistic problems that stubbornly refuse to yield singular, unequivocal solutions. Even though the three poems examined in this article explore questions-answers concerned with the concept and meaning of knowledge each, like the critical text which tests and critiques their grounds, belongs to the sphere of the unanswerable. Here, suspended ignorance foregrounds knowledge in such a way that what is (not) known remains (un)certain. Deconstruction, like the poetic texts it questions, calls attention to knowing that is not knowing and writing that both keeps textuality forever in play and always already points to its own deconstructability.[17]

Notes

1.   Limitations of space do not permit me to summarize adequately the critical bibliography of the Generation of 1956. Suffice it to say that the works by Debicki and Persin are important contributions to the literature and contain exemplary bibliographies.

2.   See Debicki (*PD* 6–9); Persin (*RSP* 15–22); Cano (135–140); and Jiménez (*DA* 15–32) for summaries of the vision of poetry espoused by these poets.

3.   For a detailed consideration of *différance*, consult, Derrida, *Différance*, pp. 1–27. In the 1980s, Valente, Brines, and Rodríguez, among others of this group, began to rethink their earlier *poéticas* and, consequently, their approaches to poetry as knowledge. Valente, for example, observes: "Yo vería hoy la poesía más bien como un inconocimiento" ('Today I would see poetry rather as non-knowledge' Rubio 7). In "La certidumbre de la poesía" Brines affirms: "Creo que la evolución expresiva de mi poesía ha ido en dirección de ese encuentro conjunto de ambigüedad y lucidez" ('I believe that the expressive evolution of my poetry has gone in the direction of that conjunct encounter of ambiguity and clarity' *SP* 14–15). In "A manera de un comentario" ('In the style of a commentary') Rodríguez comments: "Si la poesía, entre otras cosas, es una búsqueda, o una participación entre la realidad y la experiencia poética de ella a través del lenguaje, claro está que cada poema es como una especie de acoso para lograr (meta imposible) dichos fines" ('If poetry, among other things, is a search, or a participation between reality and the poetic experience of reality by means of language, clearly every poem is a type of pursuit for obtaining (goal impossible) these ends' *DMP* 13).

4.   All quotations from Rodríguez's poetry are from *Desde mis poemas* (*DMP*).

Quotations from Valente's poetry are from *Punto cero*, hereafter *PC*. Quotations from Brines' poetry are from *Ensayo de una despedida*, hereafter *ED*. All citations are followed by page numbers. In this essay, the English translations of Spanish texts are my own.

5.   Critical studies of Rodríguez's poetry are numerous. Briefly, I shall mention only those works that have most influenced my readings of his poetry: Bousoño ("Poesía"); Bradford ("Poetic Creation" and "Transcendent Reality"); Debicki ("Language Codes"); M. Miller ("Elementos metapoéticos" and "Linguistic Skepticism"); Mudrovic; Persin ("Syntax of Assertion").

6.   See Debicki (*PD* 49); Bradford ("Poetic Creation" 31–33); Bousoño ("Poesía" 13–14); and Mudrovic (33–31), for commentaries on this poem.

7.   Etymologically, "caber" (from the Latin *capere*, to take in, to take, to hold) conveys having room or capacity for, containing one thing within another, and taking in with the mind or senses (Corominas 710; *DLE* 215).

8.   "Pellejo," derived from the Latin *pellicula*," which is the diminuitive form of *pellis*, denotes, at its root, a small skin or hide (*Harper's* 1325). In Spanish it is usually used when referring to skin that has been removed from an animal.

9.   See Paul de Man's "Semiology and Rhetoric" for an excellent discussion of the confrontation between the literal and the figural in Yeats's "Among School Children."

10.   Both Debicki ("Reading and Rereading" *PD* 102–22) and Persin ("Theories of Language" *RSP* 26–44) examine Valente's *poética* and emphasize the creative act as a way of coming to know reality. Additionally, Persin addresses the poet-text-reader relationship in "Primer poema" (27–31). Sherno also examines this poem stressing the poet's role in the search for knowledge and truth (166–68). Studies of Valente's poetry are many. In addition to the three listed above, I shall mention those essential to my approaches to Valente's poetic texts: Bousoño ("José Angel Valente"); Cañas (*Poesía y percepción*); Daydí-Tolson; Debicki ("Intertextuality"); Hart; Lertora; Persin ("Anxiety of Influence" and "Poem as Process"); Risco; and Ugalde.

11.   In viewing deconstructive reading Johnson explains: "sometimes the discrepancy is produced . . . by a double-edged word, which serves as a hinge that both articulates and breaks open the explicit statement being made" ("TI" xiv). Moreover, as Derrida has shown, a text not only functions against its own assertions but also inscribes a "systematic 'other message' behind or through what is being said" (Johnson "TI" xiii).

12.   "Esplendor negro" has attracted attention since most critics view it as a fundamental text of *Insistencias en Luzbel*. See Amusco ("Estética" 12); Benson ("Memory" 321–24); Bradford ("Dialectic" 2–3); Jiménez ("Esplendor y apagamiento" 16); Persin ("Toward the Limits" 48–49); Sanz Echevarría (36, 41); and Villena (217). The critical bibliography of Brines' poetry is lengthy. In addition to the works just cited, the following are worthy of note: Amusco ("Algunos aspectos"); Benson ("Convenciones"); Bousoño ("Situación"); Bradford ("Poetic Creation");

Cañas ("Introducción" and *Poesía y percepción*); Debicki ("Text and Reader"); and Jiménez ("La poesía de Francisco Brines" and "Realidad y misterio").

13. Brines reconstructs his own theory of illumination drawing on the intertextual context of Plato and Augustine. See the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Vol. 4, 129–30) for a summary of the role Illumination played in Plato's thought and also that of Augustine.

14. "The Greek noun *logos*, derived from the root found in the verb *lego*, 'I say,' in the classical period covered a wide range of meanings expressed by quite different words in most modern languages. Thus, *word, speech, argument, explanation, doctrine, esteem, numerical computation, measure, porportion, plea, principle*, and *reason* (whether human or divine)—all represent standard meanings of the one Greek word" (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Vol. 5, 83).

15. For views on catachresis see J.H. Miller (*SR* II 28); *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (104); and Quinn (55–56; 102).

16. See J.H. Miller ("The Critic as Host" 247–48). Paul de Man looks at deconstructive readings as those that can only repeat what "caused the error in the first place. They leave a margin of error, a residue of logical tension that prevents the closure of the deconstructive discourse and accounts for its narrative and allegorical mode" (*AR* 242).

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