

## The Trees: Selected Poems 1967–2004

EUGENIO MONTEJO was born in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1938. He is the author of numerous books of poetry: *Élegos* (1967), *Muerte y memoria* (1972), *Algunas palabras* (1976), *Terredad* (1979), *Trópico absoluto* (1982), *Alfabeto del mundo* (1986), *Adiós al siglo XX* (1992), *El azul de la tierra* (1997), *Partitura de la cigarra* (1999) and *Tiempo Transfigurado* (2001). He has also published two collections of essays: *La ventana oblicua* and *El taller blanco*. In 1998 Eugenio Montejo received Venezuela's National Prize for Literature.

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# The Trees

SELECTED POEMS 1967–2004

EUGENIO MONTEJO

Translated from the Spanish by PETER BOYLE

Introduced by MIGUEL GOMES



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*a Aymara y Emilio*



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## Acknowledgments

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“At one time I wrote that poetry is a melodious chess game we play in solitude with God, maybe because I believe it approximates to a certain type of prayer in its dialogue with the mysterious. The fact is that in our times it constitutes the only religion that is left for us, at least the only one we can place against the omnipresent religion of money. Nevertheless, in recognising its closeness to prayer it is necessary to make it clear I’m referring to a naked prayer, a monologue with nothing in common, very distant from the political ritual of churches. It’s a matter of a prayer spoken to a God who only exists while the prayer lasts. The only prayer finally adequate to invent that portion of God which everyone denies daily . . . ”

— EUGENIO MONTEJO



## Eugenio Montejo's Earthdom

*By Miguel Gomes*

Eugenio Montejo has written some of the most memorable poetry ever published in Venezuela. Since the late 1960s, a large number of demanding readers have been drawn to his work. The reasons are to be found in both his own stylistic mastery and the peculiar configuration of the Hispanic lyric tradition of the second half of the twentieth century.

Following the decline of the avant-garde and the quick canonization of those authors who reacted against it (Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, and Jorge Luis Borges, among others), the poets who began their careers in the 1960s have usually taken one of two opposite paths in their attempts to renew the expressive repertoire of the Spanish language. Some have chosen an extreme pathos reminiscent of what César Vallejo imagined as the unbearable "sickness of God". Others have resorted to a purely cerebral approach, manifested sometimes as prosaism (the so-called "anti-poetry" and its "urban" or "colloquial" offshoots) and sometimes as sheer addiction to the epigram (and any other means of cultivating a hyper-intellectual attitude).

Montejo, however, has shown a third way: undoubtedly contemporary, but free of modern poses (including the most modern of them all – the postmodern); full of human insight, but making no concessions to mawkishness; calm and sober, but with none of the severity or solemnity so often associated with the masters. This exemplary lack of interest in being fashionable or respectable has earned him the praise of numerous critics, who often qualify him as a timeless poet.

Timelessness, though, does not mean avoidance of history or its concrete social configurations. In fact, Montejo's complete indiffer-

ence to fashion may be linked to a certain kind of political behavior I would term “oppositional”.<sup>1</sup> According to such a perspective, the best way to prevent poetry from becoming one more article in a market of intellectual goods is to dissociate it from any linear conception of time that might impose itself upon the creative process. Since capitalism depends on the irrepressible production of novelty, deferring any passion for newness constitutes, at least symbolically, a negation of the capitalist world view and, more specifically, its main instinct – consumerism.

Montejo’s commitment to autonomy, though, should not be equated with that of the symbolist or avant-garde poets, since it does not long for a verbal domain completely free from the transience and fragility of human experience. As a Spanish critic has stated, Montejo “has opted for memory, and such an option attests to his lack of faith in progress. Progress has killed our dead; it has favored the future over them. When we read his poetry we succumb to the sensation of being reached by the past, which has become a hidden aspect of the present, something we must uncover in order to reconstitute both memory and immediacy to their original state of communion”.<sup>2</sup> According to this view, there is nothing conservative in Montejo’s poetry because its goal is not a mere return to the past. His dead do not control the living, but are fully reintegrated into their current experiences. The resurrection of the past never freezes the present; rather, it enriches our desires and perceptions, and, moreover, gives us a feeling of continuity otherwise constantly lost in the feverish cult of the future. Although Montejo does not oppose chronology, he certainly opposes its modern capitalist version, one that persists in defining today as an abolition of yesterday. Unlike many cultural objects available nowadays, his poetry does not accuse other literary efforts of having ominous expiration dates. It never reminds us of the overwhelming power of products to come.

The best example of Montejo’s critique of such a desperate *Weltanschauung* is “At the End of Everything”, a piece unique in the poet’s work for its openly sardonic vein. The denunciation of the tireless jumping forward proposed by the modern mind becomes a sort of cyclical labyrinth that soon wears out any attempt to avoid contradiction:

*Nothing will remain of anyone or anything  
but time circling and circling through itself;  
time alone, invention of an invention,  
that was invented also by another invention,  
that was invented also by another invention,  
that was . . .*

Non-modern continuity, on the other hand, presupposes a strengthening of the links between men and cosmic rhythms. Nature's cycles shape those "ancient rites and celebrations" to which Montejo's poetry returns, according to one of his most authoritative critics.<sup>3</sup> And nature's cycles are also replicated and honored in Montejo's tendency toward thematic repetition and subtle variation, a tight system of self-quotations or self-allusions wonderfully termed *menciones migratorias* ("migratory mentions") by another critic.<sup>4</sup> The poet's work makes repeated mention of birds, trees, insects, horses, seasons, and landscapes, all of which are different but the same, because repetition underscores the fundamental and surprisingly minimalist cohesion of the universe. The secret connection of one bird to another and of one bird to its tree or to its song escalates into the universal synthesis of nature and human beings. It is no wonder that countless cities, myths, and historical characters and facts – as well as language itself – all become interwoven in the fabric of this cosmic poetry (or, as Montejo chooses to call it, this "Alphabet of the World").

The poet's decision, from this point of view, is still political, because it precludes the chance of conceiving any "non-human" (and, therefore, any "non-social") entity. As soon as nature is reached by our feelings or ideas, it is also assimilated into a dialogue in which myth and personal memory unite – and in which the divide between "self" and "other" is erased. This is why Montejo needs to coin the neologism *terredad* ("earthdom" or "earthness"). The new term springs not from some avant-garde attempt to astonish the reader; it is, rather, the only way of expressing the poet's belief in a primordial and always necessary union between culture and anything material existing independently of human beings. *Terredad* evokes a deeply socialized understanding of space, which is irreducible to

merely physical, biological or geographical terms. It reminds us that people cannot conceive of anything around them without immediately marking it with subjective expectations; that space, as Henri Lefebvre would put it, can be and has been produced because it is both an embodiment and a medium of social life.<sup>5</sup> This concept of space as something that is neither strictly psychological nor strictly physical (but that, by the same token, cannot be completely separated from either mind or matter) is termed “spatiality” by Edward Soja; it implies, among other things, the end of the dichotomy nature/history as well as the notion that nature is also “filled with politics and ideology.”<sup>6</sup>

Some of Montejo’s most emblematic poems deal with the exchange of such apparent opposites in the midst of the main reversal that his work illustrates: the transformation of traditional objects into subjects. Thus, a bird-poet transfers its own qualities to a “song” that becomes a tangible thing in the world – one that might easily be identified with the poem enunciating such a possibility:

*The earthdom of a bird is its song,  
what leaves its breast and returns to the world,  
the echoes of an invisible choir  
in a forest long dead.  
Its earthdom is its dream of finding itself  
among all those absent ones [ . . . ].  
In the dimension of time it is not a bird  
but a single ray in the night of its species,  
an interminable hunting for life  
that the song may endure.*

Montejo’s reconfiguration of object and subject also allows us to experience a de-centered status such as the one described in the poem “Earthdom”. The lyrical subject partakes in the multiplicity of life by avoiding the “I” and by using impersonal forms of the verb. What is usually small or insignificant becomes the equal of what is usually large or significant because there is a new cosmic order that is more just and less oriented by hierarchies. It is a cosmology in which nothing is central – and nothing is peripheral:

*To be here on earth; no more distant than a tree,  
no more inexplicable;  
thin in autumn, laden in summer,  
with what we are and are not, with shadow,  
memory, longing, until the end  
(if there is one) voice to voice,  
from house to house [ . . . ]  
each time dividing our common bread  
in two, in three, in four,  
without forgetting the share for the ant . . .*

Martin Buber once suggested that the origin of human consciousness is the recognition of a taut relationship between space and individual. The notion of being human grows from realizing the existence of a rift between what we are and everything else, between a space that we are and a space that we are not; inside and outside relate as strict opposites. But there should be, after such a primal setting-at-a-distance, a new phase in the process of becoming conscious: the recovery of what we once banished from ourselves. To be human means not only to create distances, but also to attempt to cross them, to re-appropriate them through emotion and involvement. Humanity arises from the interplay of distancing and the urge to overcome detachment. The reconnection of inside and outside materializes in a dialectical tension that produces a humanized second-nature.<sup>7</sup> This is what Montejo, in his wisely transparent language, calls “earthdom.”

Of course, there is more to his vision of spatiality than metaphysics. He is a poet, but also a Venezuelan or Latin American poet – which entails a very concrete set of social references. The oppositional direction of Montejo’s writing, in fact, can be situated in a precise context. When his first books were published, in the 1960s and 70s, Venezuela was showing many signs of a vigorous capitalist spatiality: the decadence of feudal property relations and the strengthening of a proletariat freed from its former means of subsistence (a transformation already in progress since the 1920s, when the dictator Juan Vicente Gómez gave the North American oil industry the monopoly of extracting and commercializing national gas reserves); the uprootings caused by the new commodification of rural and urban land; the

geographical concentration of both labor and industrial production in urban centers, with the concomitant disintegration of earlier forms of urban and rural life; and, last but not least, the divorce of residence and workplace. Moreover, by the end of the 1950s, but very noticeably during the 1970s, the country was undergoing a number of remarkable changes due to a favorable international oil market. A prodigal State was fueling the development of a democracy prone to boast about its material resources, a democracy whose demagoguery and nouveau-riche spirit hailed the national present as an uninterrupted path of endless progress.

It is hardly surprising that Montejo chose to speak of trees, birds, roosters, oxen, horses, forests, and cicadas – topics having little or nothing at all to do with the only political or material reality imaginable back then. Such a choice was, in effect, the poet's subtle way of manifesting his disapproval without falling into a pamphleteer's rhetoric (or losing the equilibrium of someone attuned to a lucid and harmonic cosmos). "Venezuela is rolling, and it is rolling in cars and trucks made in Venezuela; Chrysler is rolling along in step with the progress of a great democratic nation" – to this kind of optimistic assertion coming from both transnational corporations and Venezuelan oligarchies Montejo replied by questioning the meaning of modern urban life through anti-advertisement pieces such as "Mural Written by the Wind":

*Cities promise themselves to every new arrival  
but love no one.  
When seen through the windows of a plane  
all of them draw you in  
with their blue heights  
and long noisy boulevards,  
but with time they become bitter shadows.  
Their buildings make us lonely,  
their cemeteries are full of suicides  
who didn't even leave behind a note.*

Sometimes Montejo's approach is more indirect. His poems celebrate places imbued not with material opulence but with myth and poetical

richness. “Iceland,” for instance, maps the contradictions of an encounter between everyday life and the imagination. “Lisbon” evokes a city founded, according to ancient legends, by Ulysses. Montejo’s own Venezuela is suddenly once again “Manoa”, the capital of the golden kingdom sought by the Conquistadors.

The rural world is also central in this poetry, and for the same reasons. The remembrance of a provincial youth or of a now-remote original land of ancestors (see “My Ancestors” or “Güigüe 1918”) offers multiple opportunities to reassert the basic advantages that a realm of emotions and deeply rooted feelings has over a “rolling nation” full of contempt for the past. In some poems, and even in the lyrical atmosphere of his essays, Montejo’s reminiscence of his father, Eduardo, who had a bakery (a “white workshop”), opens a venue for recreating a space that is “other” but still possible. It is real because, contrary to utopias, it exists in our conscience, in our memory, and in certain private portions of our awareness of what we are.

By the end of the 1980s the apparent prosperity of the petroleum-rich Venezuela faded away like a mirage. As continuous devaluations of the currency took the middle and lower classes by surprise, their consumer habits had to change. Disenchantment and anger were the prevalent attitudes in the new era. The 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s have been marked by the obvious dismantling of the demagoguery of progress and the unexpected return of an older form of demagoguery, one rooted in the semi-feudal Venezuela of the nineteenth century and its cult of military heroes. Although superficially refurbished with eye-catching and ear-pleasing “revolutionary” imagery, the current Venezuelan *neocaudillismo* (that is, the adoration of a strong ruler with a highly individualized and egocentric leadership style) imposes upon the present a cult of the past. But this past, instead of the spiritual environment often recreated by Montejo’s poetry, has proven to be a solemn and archaic idolization of founding fathers with no positive effect whatsoever on the country, now officially renamed *República Bolivariana de Venezuela*. The “Bolivarian Republic” created by Hugo Chávez’s regime in 1998 amounts to a new mirage, a grotesque cover-up for an undoubtedly reactionary revival of old ghosts. This is the past that Montejo’s poetry abhors:

*The same sun-washed countryside remains,  
untamed landscapes, fast music,  
mines, wide plains, petroleum,  
this land of ours flowing in our veins  
that's never managed to bury Gómez.*

“A Photograph from 1948,” from which the above excerpt is taken, is one of the few poems that make specific references to the country’s history. Juan Vicente Gómez, the old dictator of a backward land, seems to be alive after so many years; long forgotten problems and tribulations, despite all the promises of change, are suddenly seen to have survived.

We should remember, however, that nature and culture are both part of the same reality. Wide plains, music, and petroleum intermingle chaotically and coexist in a land “flowing in our veins” that is not necessarily doomed; since nature has a way of renewing itself, the reader could surmise that hope is also available for people’s deeds. In fact, Montejo’s tone, even in the worst circumstances, sings to calmness and peaceful harmony. Such is the score of his cicada and, undoubtedly, his own, because tomorrow “there will be other voices on earth” and the cicada “is dreaming in our blood.”

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In the sense Edward Said uses the word. See *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1983, p. 29.
- <sup>2</sup> Francisco José Cruz Pérez, “Eugenio Montejo: el viaje total” in *Eugenio Montejo, Antología*, Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1996, p. 8.
- <sup>3</sup> Francisco Rivera, “La poesía de Eugenio Montejo”, *Inscripciones*, Caracas: Fundarte, 1982, p.90.
- <sup>4</sup> Pedro Lastra, “El pan y las palabras: poesía de Eugenio Montejo” in Pedro Lastra and Luis Eyzaguirre, eds. *Catorce poetas hispanoamericanos de hoy*, special issue of *Inti* 18–9 (1984), Rhode Island, U.S.A. p.213.
- <sup>5</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *La Production de l'espace*, Paris: Anthropos, 1974.
- <sup>6</sup> Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, London/New York: Verso, 1989, p. 121.
- <sup>7</sup> Martin Buber, “Distance and Relation”, *Psychiatry* 20 (1957): pp. 97–104.

## Translator's Preface

It has been both a great joy and a great responsibility to have worked for some six years now on translating the poetry of Eugenio Montejo. To discover a great poet is always something joyful. On the other hand, knowing how little of Montejo's poetry has been translated into English, I have felt a very strong responsibility to remain as close as possible to the meaning and spirit of the original. Of course literal fidelity is not always the most important form of fidelity and, as a poet, I have been equally concerned with the other dimensions of sound, imagery, pacing, and (perhaps above all) tone.

Responsibility for the choice of poems presented here is also my own. The poems translated come from the collections *El azul de la tierra* (Bogotá, 1997), *Adiós al siglo XX* (Sevilla, 1997), *Tiempo Transfigurado* (Valencia, Venezuela, 2001) and *Partitura de la cigarra* (Madrid, 1999), apart from two earlier poems: "Caracas" from *Terredad* and "La tierra giró para acercarnos" from the Mexican edition of *Alfabeto del Mundo*. However, these four later collections themselves gather poems written over Montejo's entire career as a poet, from the 1960s through to the close of the last century. I have made no attempt to reproduce a chronological order – something Montejo himself does not do in his collections, preferring to let each poem greet the reader as if it was written in the same time frame. In this way, the ordering can set up resonances and echoes, whilst maintaining variety for the reader.

In making my selection I was guided initially by what I felt most drawn to as a poet and what seemed to go over most successfully into English. Over time I have added poems like "Elegía a la muerte de mi hermano Ricardo" and the excerpt from "Partitura de la cigarra", poems which, despite the many difficulties in tone and balance they present to an English translator, seem essential to any just appraisal of Montejo's work. There have also been late finds, poems which I overlooked for a long time but which in the final months of preparing this book impressed me with their resonant imagery, emotional force and subtlety of tone. Among such poems are "En el Café", "Final de lluvia"

and “Medianoche”.

I first met Eugenio Montejo at the poetry festival in Medellín, Colombia, in 1997. Reading with growing absorption his collection “El azul de la tierra” I made my first attempts to translate the poems “Islandia” and “Los árboles”. What impressed me immediately with Montejo’s poetry was its moral authority, its emotional depth, the humanity and humility it displayed, along with great poetic subtlety and beauty. The attractions of Montejo’s poetry are many. Perhaps the key attraction is that his poetry is so authentic and open. It addresses without shame the experiences of ageing, of loss, of disappointment, as of disinterested love, of the simple joys of living, the early morning coffee and the stars at night. Poetically-speaking Eugenio Montejo’s poetry creates for itself a space very difficult to find in late twentieth century English-language poetry: it borders on the romanticism of a Yeats or Wordsworth yet it is distinctly modern. Often marked by irony and disillusionment, it speaks of an immense faith in the beauty and unity of life. Montejo manages to sidestep fashions and poses to get down to what in his prose piece “Fragments” he terms “the emotional nakedness of the world”.

Subtle modulations of tone seem to me all important in this poetry – as if, whilst being entirely natural and unselfconscious, the poet is also walking a tightrope between a lush romanticism and a bald matter-of-factness. This can be sensed in the rhythm of the language itself. To consider the Spanish of “Los árboles” (“The Trees”):

*Hablan poco los árboles, se sabe.  
Pasan la vida entera meditando  
y moviendo sus ramas.  
Basta mirarlos en otoño  
cuando se juntan en los parques:  
sólo conversan los más viejos ( . . . )*

The opening line is a kind of matter-of-fact intimate speech heightened just slightly by the inversion of the word order but then brought to earth by the edge of colloquialism in “*se sabe*”. The next two lines stretch wide in their rapture – “*la vida entera*” and that wonderfully mimetic word “*meditando*”. “*Basta miralos en otoño*” continues this deli-

cate off-play between everydayness and an edge of lifting picked up first in the voice. The perils of translating this into English can be seen if we said: "It's enough to look at them in autumn/when they join together in parks:/only the oldest converse . . ." Translated in this way, a dull flatness has replaced the limpid tension of Montejo's Spanish. An astute reader may well notice that I often have more words than are there in the original. One factor influencing this is rhythm. Polysyllabic Spanish words can produce an abrupt flatness when replaced by monosyllabic English words. That edge of lushness, of a wider rhythm, seems to me an important dimension in Montejo's poetry, even though it is often held in check by irony and colloquialism. Another factor that has led me to add slightly here or there is the need to match shifts in tone and attitude, to put back into the English poem something lost as we go into the sometimes one-dimensional world of English. For me the major consideration has been that these poems start as engaging, forceful poems in Spanish and, if the translation is to be worth anything at all, must end up as poems that work in their new-found language.

Montejo's poetry is strongly marked by his concise, elegant, slightly elliptical use of language. Part of the difficulty in translating his poetry arises from the way words in the two languages occupy different spaces. Often in Spanish the one word has both a formal and an everyday usage, whereas English has two distinctive words. A poet like Montejo gains brevity and force by skillfully using words that are formal and elegant yet steeped in a lived reality, neither abstract nor narrowly colloquial. "Adiós" is both "farewell" and the familiar "good-bye". "Fiesta" can be a party, a festival, a celebration, perhaps a carnival, and of course a fiesta. English requires us to choose one of these words, fixing ourselves more narrowly. Likewise to give a spoken "feel" to English it is often necessary to add more words – the small qualifiers we use to build in attitude. Simplicity is also helped by the rich music of the Spanish language. Often sound alone achieves in Montejo's poetry what requires an added word or image in the English. When in the poem "Caracas" Montejo describes ibis feathers as "egipcias claridades" he doesn't need to use the word "soft", the sounds do that already. Even when the dictionary seems to affirm identity, like the Spanish "tatuados" and the English "tattooed", much

of the Spanish word's poetic force in a poem like *Adiós al siglo XX* lies in its richness as an open-voweled, four syllable word. Thus, to translate "pequeños guijarros/ tatuados de rumor infinito" I opted for "small pebbles/ chipped and rounded by infinite echoes", as a closer match in syllables and sounds, giving a better sense of the tactile feel of the original.

Working on translations, I am conscious I am moving not just between two languages but between two different poetic traditions with their own distinctive ways of giving a poem "lift off" and of conveying emotions. In Spanish (as in French and Greek) the rich sounds of the language create an oral texture that tends to favour a direct naming of familiar objects, feelings and experiences, whereas within English-language-poetry unusual images and metaphors can seem almost *de rigueur*. Writers of poetry in English battle with a century of our language being the international language of kitsch, of pop songs, of advertisements, of the degradation of words like "truth", "love", "pain", but equally words like "candle", "fire", "moon", "stars". Likewise English-language poetry since the close of the nineteenth century has favoured the earthing of all emotions in the detailed description of events or realities. A comparison of Montejo's poems dealing with his father or the loss of his brother with, for example, Sharon Olds' poems about her father in *The Dead and the Living* or Philip Levine's moving portraits of his family in *The Simple Truth* reveals the divide between Hispanic and Anglo-saxon poetic traditions. Such a comparison is not to devalue either side but merely to highlight different cultural assumptions about how poetry best speaks the truth about our lives.

Part of the charm and power of Montejo's poetry comes from the simplicity of his building blocks – both the words and images, and the syntax and poetic devices used. Consider the poem "Medianoche":

*Escribo tarde. Es medianoche.  
Ignoro cuándo he remontado este camino,  
cómo llegué donde me encuentro, qué buscaba.*

The plainness of the opening, the next two lines unobtrusively shifting the viewpoint from one evening to a lifetime, the slightly elliptical

feel of the Spanish, the heightened tone of “*me encuentro*” (“I find myself/ I am”) – all locate us in a deeply-lived reality, reached directly without the encasement of biographic detail. The poem then shifts to an image, the most obvious stellar image, the Southern Cross, in “*la radiante soledad nocturna*”: “the radiant (or shining or bright) nocturnal loneliness or solitude”. This last phrase exemplifies a dilemma frequently facing the translator. How to translate a word like “*soledad*”, with its varying meanings of aloneness, solitude and loneliness? At this point the poem’s protagonist is able to speak to us directly in an immediate personal voice: “*No estoy seguro aquí de nada*” (I’m not sure here of anything). The poem closes with one of Montejo’s favourite familiars, the roosters. Beyond Esculapius, Socrates and Christ appears the image of the poet’s father, scattering their cries “like crumbs of lightning”. This thirteen line poem with its sparse, almost minimal vocabulary and few images, manages to summon in a deeply authentic way both the quest for human goodness and the scepticism befitting most of its worldly, intellectual expositions.

Among the many personal favourites collected here, I would like to conclude with two examples of the authenticity and dignity I sense in Montejo’s voice as a poet. “*El rezagado*” (“Left Behind”) confronts death in a way both ancient and modern. Planes crossing the sky and shady suburban streets are as at home here as ghosts and the monologues of clouds. The dream, a common one perhaps, of witnessing one’s own funeral, is here lived through with a waking clear-sightedness that involves both all the skills of a poet and fidelity to the unspoken weight of being human. In a lighter vein is the poem “*En el Café*” (“In the Café”). What at first looks like a lament for ageing, for the transition from youth to mid-life, becomes instead, through the ambivalent image of rain, a wonderful reflection on the value of art. Such a summary, of course, passes over the poem’s great humour and delicacy of tone.

By coincidence, one Wednesday night in 1997 in Medellín – I have remembered this only recently – I was fortunate enough to hear Montejo read both “*El rezagado*” and “*En el Café*” – a measured clear reading to a crowded hall filled with people accustomed to grasping in a recital of poetry both its artistic shape and its emotional power. My head, at that time reeling from so much Spanish and shutting down from the effort required for me to follow it all, took in only so much of

the precise words – but the rhythm of the voice and the feel of what passed between poet and audience remain clear with me. If poetry is about speaking authentically of what genuinely matters, Eugenio Montejo’s poetry certainly does that.

In preparing these translations I have been helped by many people. It was the Colombian poet and friend Guillermo Martínez who at the Medellín festival first suggested I pay close attention to Montejo’s poetry as something very special I was sure to respond to. Mario Licón Cabrera and Juan Garrido Salgado have helped out on several occasions by reviewing my versions, providing that most fruitful thing for a translator, the responses of a native speaker of the language. Martin Harrison discussed early versions of these translations with me, making me more aware of the strongly oral quality of Montejo’s verse. Judith Beveridge kindly read through the translations, making valuable suggestions on my wording in “The cicada’s score”. I owe thanks to Margie Cronin for listening patiently to my discussion of several poems where the choice between alternative versions had me confused. In the last phase of preparing this book for publication I have been greatly assisted by the generous advice of Jordi Doce who queried various places where I had strayed from Montejo’s literal meaning. Someone who has been of great assistance over the years, helping with unknown words or passages unclear to me, is Miguel Gomes. I am also deeply indebted to Miguel for his scholarly and insightful Introduction, as well as for preparing the bibliography.

The most important friend and assistant in the preparation of this book is, of course, Eugenio Montejo himself. Over many years through letters and emails, Eugenio Montejo has tirelessly answered queries, made suggestions about the meanings of words and phrases, explained personal or local references, and steered me in the way of friends and materials that might help me in my task of understanding his work. Both for his sincere friendship and for the depth and beauty of his work, I count myself very privileged to have encountered the poetry of Eugenio Montejo.

PETER BOYLE

# The Trees: Selected Poems (1967–2004)

## Los Árboles

Hablan poco los árboles, se sabe.  
Pasan la vida entera meditando  
y moviendo sus ramas.  
Basta mirarlos en otoño  
cuando se juntan en los parques:  
sólo conversan los más viejos,  
los que reparten las nubes y los pájaros,  
pero su voz se pierde entre las hojas  
y muy poco nos llega, casi nada.

Es difícil llenar un breve libro  
con pensamientos de árboles.  
Todo en ellos es vago, fragmentario.  
Hoy, por ejemplo, al escuchar el grito  
de un tordo negro, ya en camino a casa,  
grito final de quien no aguarda otro verano,  
comprendí que en su voz hablaba un árbol,  
uno de tantos,  
pero no sé qué hacer con ese grito,  
no sé cómo anotarlo.

## The Trees

The trees speak so little, you know.  
They spend their entire life meditating  
and moving their branches.  
Just look at them closely in autumn  
as they seek each other out in public places:  
only the oldest attempt some conversation,  
the ones that share clouds and birds,  
but their voice gets lost in the leaves  
and so little filters down to us, nothing really.

It's difficult to fill the shortest book  
with the thoughts of trees.  
Everything in them is vague, fragmented.  
Today, for instance, on the way to my house  
hearing a black thrush shriek,  
the last cry of one who won't reach another summer,  
I realized that in his voice a tree was speaking,  
one of so many,  
but I don't know what to do with this sharp deep sound,  
I don't know in what type of script  
I could set it down.

## Islandia

Islandia y lo lejos que nos queda,  
con sus brumas heladas y sus fiordos  
donde se hablan dialectos de hielo.

Islandia tan próxima del polo,  
purificada por las noches  
en que amamantan las ballenas.

Islandia dibujada en mi cuaderno,  
la ilusión y la pena (o viceversa).

¿Habrà algo más fatal que este deseo  
de irme a Islandia y recitar sus sagas,  
de recorrer sus nieblas?

Es este sol de mi país  
que tanto quema  
el que me hace soñar con sus inviernos.  
Esta contradicción ecuatorial  
de buscar una nieve  
que preserve en el fondo su calor,  
que no borre las hojas de los cedros.

Nunca iré a Islandia. Está muy lejos.  
A muchos grados bajo cero.  
Voy a plegar el mapa para acercarla.  
Voy a cubrir sus fiordos con bosques de palmeras.

## Iceland

Iceland and the distances which are left us,  
with their frozen mists and fjords  
where they speak dialects of ice.

Iceland so close to the pole,  
purified by nights  
where the whales suckle their young.

Iceland drawn in my exercise book,  
the illusion and the tragedy (or vice-versa).

Could anything be more ill-fated than this longing  
to go to Iceland and recite its sagas,  
to traverse its fogs?

It's the sun of my country  
which burns so much  
that makes me dream of its winters.  
This equatorial contradiction  
of seeking a snow that preserves heat at its core,  
that doesn't strip the cedars of their leaves.

I will never get to Iceland. It's very far.  
Many degrees below zero.  
I'm going to fold the map over and bring Iceland closer.  
I'm going to cover its fjords with palm tree groves.

Ésta es la tierra de los míos, que duermen, que no duermen,  
largo valle de cañas frente a un lago,  
con campanas cubiertas de siglos y polvo  
que repiten de noche los gallos fantasmas.  
Estoy a veinte años de mi vida,  
no voy a nacer ahora que hay peste en el pueblo,  
las carretas se cargan de cuerpos y parten;  
son pocas las zanjas abiertas;  
las campanas cansadas de doblar  
bajan y cavan.  
Puedo aguardar, voy a nacer muy lejos de este lago,  
de sus miasmas;  
mi padre partirá con los que queden,  
lo esperaré más adelante.  
Ahora soy esta luz que duerme, que no duerme;  
atisbo por el hueco de los muros;  
los caballos se atascan en fango y prosiguen;  
miro la tinta que anota los nombres,  
la caligrafía salvaje que imita los pastos.  
La peste pasará. Los libros en el tiempo amarillo  
seguirán tras las hojas de los árboles.  
Palpo el temblor de llamas en las velas  
cuando las procesiones recorren las calles.  
No he de nacer aquí,  
hay cruces de zábila en las puertas  
que no quieren que nazca;  
queda mucho dolor en las casas de barro.  
Puedo aguardar, estoy a veinte años de mi vida,  
soy el futuro que duerme, que no duerme;  
la peste me privará de voces que son mías,  
tendré que reinventar cada ademán, cada palabra.

## Güigüe 1918

*to Juan Liscano*

This is the land of my people who sleep, who don't sleep,  
wide valley of cane fields opposite a lake,  
and church bells mired with centuries of dust  
that ghostly roosters echo through the night.  
I am twenty years ahead of my own life,  
I will not be born now since there is plague in the village,  
carts laden with corpses move off;  
there are few ditches left open;  
the bells tired of tolling for the dead  
are brought down and lowered deep in wells.  
I can wait,  
I will be born very far from this lake and its miasmas;  
my father will set off with those who are left,  
I will wait for him further on.  
Now I am the light which sleeps, which does not sleep;  
I can see it through the hollow of the walls.  
Horses bogged in mud keep struggling forwards;  
I can see the ink that copies people's names,  
the wild calligraphy that mimics abandoned fields.  
The plague will pass. Books in that yellow time  
will imitate the leaves of trees.  
I can touch the candle flames as they tremble  
in processions passing by along the streets.  
I am not going to be born here,  
chalk crosses mark the doors  
of those who don't want me to be born;  
there is deep pain in the mud-brick houses.  
I can wait; I am twenty years ahead of my own life,  
I'm the future that sleeps, that doesn't sleep.  
The plague robs me of voices that are mine;  
I shall have to reinvent every gesture, each word.

Ahora soy esta luz al fondo de sus ojos;  
ya naceré después, llevo escrita mi fecha;  
estoy aquí con ellos hasta que se despidan;  
sin que puedan mirarme me detengo:  
quiero cerrarles suavemente los párpados.

Now I am that light in the depths of his eyes;  
I will be born later on, the date is already written.  
I stay here with them as they say their farewells;  
although they can't see me I remain in their presence;  
I would like so softly to close their eyelids for them.

## El Canto del Gallo

*a Adriano González León*

El canto está fuera del gallo;  
está cayendo gota a gota entre su cuerpo,  
ahora que duerme en el árbol.  
Bajo la noche cae, no cesa de caer  
desde la sombra entre sus venas y sus alas.  
El canto está llenando, incontenible,  
al gallo como un cántaro;  
llena sus plumas, su cresta, sus espuelas,  
hasta que lo desborda y suena inmenso el grito  
que a lo largo del mundo sin tregua se derrama.  
Después el aleteo retorna a su reposo  
y el silencio se vuelve compacto.  
El canto de nuevo queda fuera  
esparcido a la sombra del aire.  
Dentro del gallo sólo hay vísceras y sueño  
y una gota que cae en la noche profunda,  
silenciosamente, al tic-tac de los astros.