



Sonnets for a City on a Hill¹

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1. POSADA DE SAN JOSÉ

La ciudad que vuela. City that flies.

Millennium of hidden hearths ensconced
on clifftops beetled to the sky. Balanced on
the fulcrum of the wind this tiny wooden balcony.

Space, the play on weathered stones of burning
light, spires and eyries phantom fingers whittled:
these,
the naked elements where Zóbel riddled out
the shimmering foundations of the world.

Wind's eye into vertigo. Swallows sink
beneath my feet. Love's sweet body slumbers
there within, rapt in love's sweet dreams. Two
silver threads to follow, and one mystery.
What comfort from these ochre noons of summer?

Huécar's vortex pulls me to the brink.

2. LA CIUDAD ENCANTADA

What meaning in those brooding fantasies?
Revenants sustained in vetoed motion.
Listing behemoths. Karstic demons
looming in the flotsam of petrified sea.

What meaning in these human forms for you?
Footfalls – crackle of leaf and twig? Voices –
a fugitive hiss? Bodies of flesh – a
half-seen mist of disappearing attitudes?

City of silent witnesses, sculpted actors,
intimate recorders of forgotten time.
Hushed among the summer vines, you suffer
our inconstancy. We visit you and die.
And yet, our senses lend our sense to your
display,
this unintended pantomime.

3. RONDA DEL HUÉCAR

“*Tu em cuidaràs?*” You smiled. Your tone was
almost frivolous. What could I reply?
Above, stone houses perch on stone, and lean
as they have always leaned, against the sky.

How could I pronounce, “I have heard too many
lies, have sloughed too many skins, have lost too many
lives, to tell you what you want so much to hear,”
and make my speech sound credible in my ears?

El Puente de San Pablo lay ahead, our only
road. Its iron girders trembled, beating
with the wind. Mine did too.
I needed your solidity when breath drew
thin with fear. Beneath the planks beneath our feet
was only air. Air,
and a cacophony of crows.

4. EL MUSEO DE ARTE ABSTRACTO

Zóbel in his notebook wrote – how vegetation
clinging to a sombre wall in early spring
quivered – through the mind – to bright imagining.
Why have we squandered the gift of inspiration?

What scalpel has inflicted this incision
on the world? Our wound.
Silence, wordless, murmurs.
The ruin – the blank installed around us – is
projected by the axis of our vision.

This moves me to see – as Zóbel saw –
Perception tinged by love engenders care.
(A meaning glimmers in the face of things.
Impassive, solid as the skull, it sings:
The habitat we make is what we are.)
Essences. Principles. Structure. Law.

SUNDAY AFTERNOON: CUENCA

The light that day was as limpid as light can be. It came from the west, over half of the peninsula, to print the pointing forms of cypresses on stone escarpments where trees and bushes have clung to life since memory began. *La Hoz del Huécar*. Its peaceful ravine curves by, and reaches out to the horizon. The wooden posts and beams of the balcony where we sat were like a triptych's frame. Beyond us, everything glowed.

Clouds lazed in from the left. Their rolling volumes altered the sense of the sky; their shadows changed the look of the land. A still solemnity. The wrinkles in the face of the world grew deeper with the final steps of day. And then, as we watched, piece by piece, an arch of ordered colors built itself from hilltop to hilltop across that gorge where a vigilant city had grown from time-riddled cliffs.

A rainbow!

Remember? We hardly have time to see them any more: bands of brightness bending through the air, a perfect arc in the darkening sky.

But we weren't fooled. Not one moment of doubt.

We knew that we knew what it was. We'd learned about vapor and globules, waves and refraction. We knew this wasn't personal. It wasn't a pledge, or a finely-crafted gift dropped down from some uncanny zone whose beauty it only partially revealed. But we also knew where that kind of knowing leads.

So of course we kept on looking – just as though it had been painted there in that one place, at that one time, especially for us. *Imagine that it somehow had*. That bright, spontaneous phenomenon was ours, until it disappeared, to use as best we could. One more chance to cultivate a serviceable illusion.

All of it was ours. How many more will we get?

This is where we are, at least for a while, and where we have to be – to stare into the face of the world on empty Sunday afternoons, to try to feel the heartbeat of the clouds. And afterwards, to stutter what we almost learn from reading hoards of scintillations, vanishing emblems drawn by pulses of light against the sky.

SOME KEYS TO THE COMPOSITION OF
SONNETS FOR A CITY ON A HILL

One factor – one among many – that lends a work of art dynamism and interest is tension. Both the making and the reading of poems can be thought of as dynamic processes. Processes that begin with the gradual discovery of their own obstacles and, in finding satisfactory ways to overcome them, achieve completion by integrating resolved conflicts into an expanded field of understanding.

This short sonnet sequence, and its accompanying prose poem, were inspired by two visits to the small Spanish city of Cuenca. Each poem is set in a definite location there. The overarching theme of the group is the intrinsic human problem: how do we make ourselves a positive element in the world? Or, put differently, how do we found a viable dwelling-place? How can we construct a lasting home? I have tried to infuse these poems with as many kinds of tension as I could.

In Sonnet 1, for example, the contemplating I is being drawn in two opposing directions: toward interior, domestic spaces (as announced by the “hidden hearths” in line 2) and toward an emotional/intellectual immersion in nature (as announced by the “Space” (line 5) described in stanza 2.

This initial (and fundamental) tension undergoes a number of transformations over the course of the poems and is at least partially resolved in the final stanza of Sonnet 4. One of the aims of the sequence is to afford its readers the opportunity to identify those transformations and to refine the more specific terms this sense of tension acquires in each of the four sonnets.

Tension, and its resolution, might also be detected in the handling of form. These sonnets were, on the whole, written to feel uncomfortable, and they feel uncomfortable with themselves. The requisites of the sonnet form are straining to pull the language toward the certainty of a tradition. Finding one’s place in the world, building instead of destroying, imply being rooted securely in the earth. One way to express this rootedness is through the use of solidly constructed prosodic forms. Here though, the form is threatened with collapse and exerts a force that resists the tendency of the language to fall into confusion.

That fear of an impending fall into meaninglessness provides the tone for the end of Sonnet 3.

In this respect, the much more settled tone of the prose of Poem 5 also suggests a tentative resolution of the various conflicting elements (feelings and ideas) in play within the sonnets.

The spatial arrangement of the group is also significant. The four sonnets are meant to be printed symmetrically, on facing pages. Each one has particular lines of resonance – or pathways of connection – with all of the others.

For example, Sonnets 1 and 3, aligned at the top of facing pages, share both horizontal and vertical axes of perception (which correspond with the forms of tension mentioned earlier). In each one the speaker contemplates an Other, which pulls him in one direction. But he is also pulled outward, into the surrounding environment, and both poems end with him staring downward into vertigo and the threat of fear and confusion. At the same time though, he also stares downward into Sonnets 2 and 4, respectively. These are in a certain sense contained within the vertigo, and potentially counteract it.

Sonnets 2 and 4, aligned at the bottom of facing pages, also share several characteristics. In both, for example, the I contemplates nature, or nature and art (with no encroaching sense of vertigo); and both of them end with moments of illumination.

There are, as well, diagonal pathways of resonance. Sonnets 1 and 4 are linked by the name and spirit of the abstract painter Fernando Zóbel, one of the co-founders of the Museo de Arte Abstracto Español in Cuenca. Sonnets 2 and 3 are linked by the attempt – whether successful or not – of the contemplating I to empathize with one or more real or imaginary Others.

Part of the pleasure of the poems should reside in the discovery and contemplation of these (and other) lines of connection and resonance – i.e., structure – within this symmetrical composition.

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In the fifth poem of the sequence, printed separately as a sort of epilogue on its own page, the shift from verse to prose (as already suggested), as well as the consistent use of the first-person plural, indicate several kinds of resolution. Here, the contemplation of the same natural landscape as in Sonnet 1 takes place from the same location. There is now, however, no bi-directional tension, nor a fear of vertigo before the expansive spaces of unmitigated nature.

Why?

This final step in the process calmly recapitulates, combines and extends those discoveries made, or lessons learned, at the end of Sonnets 2 and 4.

But notice this. Though lessons may have been learnt, nothing new has been found out here, nothing original passed on. The calling of art is different. Its promises, more modest. Maybe the best a writer can ever hope

to do is collect a handful of clues and intimations and try to arrange them in a form that may be fittest for the days we all inhabit together. If the evidence is valid, it might help us to recover those things we're constantly losing – the insights and attitudes we need to protect to keep ourselves whole and safe. Which is to say, when we human beings are thinking as we should, we're always learning the same old lessons, over and over again. The handsomest progress goes back, and discovers our complex roots in a world that we half perceive, half create. Recognitions, acknowledgements, flashes of light: those timeless things that we have to keep teaching ourselves – because we're so prone to forget.

THE AUTHOR

A native of South Carolina, PAUL SCOTT DERRICK has lived in Valencia, Spain, for the last 31 years and has taught at the University of Valencia, where he is a Senior Lecturer in American literature, since 1989. His main field of interest encompasses Romanticism and American Transcendentalism and their influences on subsequent artistic and intellectual manifestations of the 20th and 21st centuries.

His critical works include *Thinking for a Change: Gravity's Rainbow and Symptoms of the Paradigm Shift in Occidental Culture* (Universitat de València, 1994) and *We Stand Before the Secret of the World: Traces Along the Pathway of American Transcendentalism* (Biblioteca Javier Coy, 2003).

He has edited and co-translated into Spanish a number of critical editions of works by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson (Spanish and Catalan), Henry Adams and Sarah Orne Jewett. He is co-editor (with Viorica Patea) of *Modernism Revisited: Transgressing Boundaries and Strategies of Renewal in American Poetry* (Rodopi, 2007) and is, with Norman Jope and Catherine E. Byfield, a co-editor of *The Salt Companion to Richard Berengarten* (Salt, 2011). He has, in addition, published English translations of poems by Jorge de Montemayor, Luis Cernuda, Pablo Neruda and Jorge Luis Borges and, with Miguel Teruel, co-translations of Richard Berengarten's poems into Spanish (*Las manos y la luz*, València, 2008).

His critical essays, translations and poems have appeared in various American and Spanish journals since 1983 and, more recently, in several electronic publications. He is currently preparing a critical study and translation of Emily Dickinson's Fascicles 2–5.