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"Con una herida que no mana sangre": desire and death of the other in Xavier Villaurrutia's *Nostalgia for Death*

"Con una herida que no mana sangre": el deseo y la muerte del otro en *Nostalgia de la Muerte* de Xavier Villaurrutia

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Abstract

This article explores the connection between death and sexual desire in Xavier Villaurrutia's volume of poetry Nostalgia for Death. The analysis shows that in Villaurrutia's poetry, death is linked to eroticism and the impossibility to satisfy desire due to its mutable nature: the passing of time and impending death make us want to grasp the moment yet, at the same time, prevent us from doing so. The insatiable nature of desire moreover prevents us from reaching the other, that is, our lover: we want to conquer the other yet their impending death prevents us from doing so.
Keywords: Latin-American studies, Mexican studies, French literary theory, death in literature, eroticism.

Resumen

Este artículo explora la conexión entre la muerte y el deseo sexual en *Nostalgia de la Muerte*, un volumen de poesía del poeta mexicano, Xavier Villaurrutia. Este análisis muestra que en la

poesía de Villaurrutia, la muerte está conectada con el erotismo y la imposibilidad de satisfacer el deseo por su carácter mutable. El pasar del tiempo y nuestra muerte inminente causan que queramos captar el momento, aunque al mismo tiempo nos impiden lograrlo. Además, el carácter insaciable del deseo nos impide llegar al otro, o sea, a nuestro amante, queremos conquistar al otro aunque su muerte inminente lo evite.
Palabras clave: Estudios latinoamericanos, estudios mexicanos, teoría literaria francesa, la muerte en la literatura, erotismo.

Nostalgia for Death[1]

The Mexican poet Xavier Villaurrutia (1903-1950) was part of the Contemporáneos, a group of young Mexican poets and intellectuals who were active in the first half of the 20th century. They were writing during a time which Rubén Gallo referred to as "la otra revolución mexicana", namely, the period of cultural and societal transformations in Mexico City after the Mexican Revolution in 1920 (Potter 132). As Octavio Paz recalls, the Contemporáneos organised monthly literary gatherings or *tertulias* in which they discussed their poetic tastes, political opinions and societal issues (1993, 97).[2] These poets would influence later generations of poets such as Paz himself, and represented Mexico's *modernismo* and *vanguardia*.

Eliot Weinberger was the first and only to translate Villaurrutia's poetry to English. He recalls how, when he was

1 This article is partly based on the MA thesis ""With a wound that doesn't bleed": Death and Alterity in 20th century Mexican Literature" (2019) by Marie Devlieger from Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

2 Poets associated with the *Contemporáneos* are Ortiz de Montellano, José and Celestino Gorostiza, Samuel Ramos, Octavio G. Barreda, Jaime Torres Bodet, Enrique González Rojo, Elías Nandino, Father Mendoza, Carlos Pellier, Novo and Gilberto Owen (Paz 1993: 97).

translating Villaurrutia's volume of poetry *Nostalgia for Death* (1993 [1938, revised 1946]) in the 1990's, the conservative Senate cut funding for museums in the US that promoted, disseminated or produced "obscene or indecent materials" which included, amongst other things, "depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts" (qtd. in Weinberger 1). Besides the obvious psychological refutations and consequent discrimination of homosexual artists, Weinberger points out that "any erotic art is based on the irrelevancy of its object of affection" (1). For example, in erotic poetry the human body is abstract: it is an act of imagination and, more specifically, an imagination of desire. The only tangible object for the senses of the reader is the poem itself, nothing else. Villaurrutia was one of the only writers in Latin-America in the first half of the century who was openly gay and his poetry expresses a deep sexual desire from the speaker of the poems for his lover. This is why it is often defined as homoerotic poetry (Weinberger 1). As Saúl Villegas notes, Villaurrutia's poetry is characterized by a language that is impregnated with allusions to the 'forbidden' and 'secrecy' which Villegas links to homosexual symbolism (47). Even though his poetry undoubtedly belongs to the tradition of homoerotic and queer literature, it moreover offers an exquisite exploration of the nature of human desire in general in which the primary lover is not a man, but Death itself.

Nostalgia for Death was firstly published in 1938 and later revised in 1946 when some poems were added. This last version is divided into three parts: "Nocturnes", "Other Nocturnes", and "Nostalgias". Paz, a disciple of Villaurrutia, was one of the first to analyse Villaurrutia's work. In *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1991 [1950]), Paz argues that his poetry expresses a nostalgia for the past, that is, a temporality before our birth when we were still one with the maternal womb (1991: 62). He develops this idea in his essay "Hieroglyphs of Desire" (1993 [1977]) in which he ar-

gues that the sexual desire expressed in the poems could be interpreted as a desire for communion and reunion with the lover. He compares this to the communion between the foetus and the maternal womb before birth. As Paz argues, Villaurrutia presents and perceives death as a possibility for this reunion or as a return to the past. More recently, *Nostalgia for Death* has received novel academic attention and various articles have been published that elaborate on various topics such as Villaurrutia's obsession with death, and (homo)erotic and nocturnal imagery amongst other things (e.g. Baez Pinal 2008; Dorantes Moreno 2012; Potter 2012; Villegas 2016). Most of these articles, however, seem to depart from Paz's analysis or conception of death and desire in *Nostalgia for Death* in which a reunion with the other is possible.

This article aims to offer an original perspective on *Nostalgia for Death* by challenging and arguing against the idea that death represents a possibility for reunion or communion. Rather, the poems reflect upon the insurmountable distance between the speaker and his lover, and the consequent impossibility of reaching each other. It seems as if the lover is transformed into a stranger who remains out of the speaker's control. As becomes clear in the poems, the distance between the two lovers and their sexual desire is inhabited and consumed by death.

To demonstrate this, I will rely on the theory of French philosopher Maurice Blanchot who does not merely interpret death as the biological end of life. Rather, he links death with a radical alterity due to the indeterminate experience he refers to as *dying*. The experience of dying – which I will explain in detail in the following sections of this article – entails an infinite process in which one is forever dying but never dead. Consequently, our life will never be 'fulfilled' or 'complete'. Throughout this process, we are transformed into *something else* which, from now on, I will refer to as an Other, namely, someone or something that

endlessly escapes our full comprehension and grasp.[3] That is to say, some philosophers such as Heidegger argue that when our life is completed, it is possible to know who someone really was and give meaning to their existence. Nonetheless, in Blanchot's theory this meaning is suspended since he argues that our life will never be fully completed. Hence, for Blanchot, death constitutes the space or distance between the self and a meaningful comprehension of oneself or a fixed identity as it constitutes the distance between the self and the Other. This Other can be interpreted as everything that differs from oneself such as, for example, another person. In that sense, death becomes a liminal space of the in-between: it is that which separates the one from the Other yet at the same time creates the condition for the possibility of potential engagement. Space here should be understood as something fluid and unstable; it is a state of change and movement. Thus, for Blanchot, death is an unstable and, consequently, opaque space.

I will explore death as this space-in-between in Villaurrutia's poetry by considering the connection between death, desire and the impossibility of reaching one's lover who, as I will argue, is transformed into an unreachable Other. Additionally, I will link the notion of the unreachable Other and the way this is represented in the poems to the relation between death and sexual desire which, since the Renaissance, has been linked to mutability (Dollimore XIII). The temporality of our lives makes us want to capture the moment and drives our desire for our lover yet it is exactly the brevity of our life that prevents us from doing so: we cannot capture the moment since, as soon as we think we have captured it, time has moved on and the moment disappeared.

3 When written as such with a capital letter, Other refers to 'the Other' in the sense of Blanchot.

Firstly, I will consider Paz's interpretation of death in Villaurrutia's poetry and have a look at how more recent analyses have, be it indirectly, responded to this. Subsequently, I will contrast this with Blanchot's perception of death after which I will elaborate on the connection between death, desire and eroticism as well as the link with mutability. Finally, I will analyse a selection of three poems, each from a different section of the volume, in order to demonstrate how this is represented in *Nostalgia for Death.* In my analysis of the poems, I will occasionally refer to other recently published articles to support my argument.

Nostalgia for Reunion

In his essay, "Hieroglyphs of Desire", Paz offers an elaborate analysis of *Nostalgia for Death.* In order to clarify his interpretation of death in Villaurrutia's poetry, Paz refers to the work of the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke calls for a reflection upon death and an awareness of one's own death instead of turning our back to it. For Rilke, death is an opening where contraries – light and dark, death and life, past and future etc. – are reconciled; it is a space in which they are reunited. In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Paz distinguishes between three different spheres of time: the pre-natal world where life and death are merged, our world where they are opposed, and the world beyond in which they are reunited again (1991, 61). From this he deduces two attitudes towards death: one pointing forwards, that conceives it as a creation, and the other, pointing backward that expresses a nostalgia for a return to the pre-natal phase (Paz 1991, 61). Rilke represents the first attitude and perceives death neither as a limit nor as a transition into eternal life. Rather, it creates an opening that brings us unity; a unity between life and death (Paz, 1993, 135). According to Paz, Villaurrutia's conception of death is the complete opposite of this. As he argues, Villaurrutia's death

is closed, not open: "it is a death that locks us in as it closes" (135). As he explains, it is a representation of the second attitude towards death: a nostalgia for the life before life, the life before birth. It is a return to the maternal source or communion in order to transcend man's existential solitude (Paz, 1991, 62). Paz refers to Villaurrutia's representation of death as an exile that is simultaneously a return: "our true homeland is death and that is why we feel nostalgia for it", because it is a return to the pre-natal phase which is a temporality of communion with the maternal womb (1993, 145).

In the recently published article "La representación homoerótica en "Nocturno amor", "Nocturno de la alcoba" y "Nocturno de los ángeles" de Xavier Villaurrutia" (2016), Saúl Villegas also notes how the main preoccupation in *Nostalgia for Death* is man's existential solitude and the interplay between the "encuentro/desencuentro" between the two lovers (41). Adriana Dorantes Moreno adopts a similar way of thinking in her article "El sueño y la muerte en *Nostalgia de la muerte,* de Xavier Villaurrutia, o de cómo definirse por la indefinición" (2012). In the article, she analyses the link between the nocturnal imagery and death used in the poems. As she argues, it is in the oneiric realm of sleep that an encounter or union with the other becomes possible (224). Nonetheless, neither Villages nor Dorantes Moreno indicate or go deeper into the theoretical implications of this distance between the lovers and possible encounter which I believe are necessary for a critical valorisation of Paz's interpretation.

La mort - Le mourir

Both attitudes Paz describes (closed and open) represent what Maurice Blanchot refers to as a *positive* side of death because they both have a *positive* outcome whether it is a union between opposites or a return to the maternal womb; they represent a pos-

sibility or a space of (re)union (320). In order to comprehend what Blanchot means by a *positive* death, it is necessary to understand the distinction he makes between what he refers to as the two sides of death: death (*la mort)* and dying (*le mourir)*.

Firstly, there is *death* as in *being dead.* Being dead represents a *positive* side of death: it allows for the possibility of gaining knowledge about one's life or, as Blanchot describes it, in this side of death "being is revealed as absolute" (320). That is to say, it is only after death that it is possible to look back at one's life and consider it as a whole. In that sense, death implies the completion of a singular life and a possibility to reach authentic self-fulfilment or a fixed identity (Haase and Large 45). German philosopher Martin Heidegger has referred to this as the *possibility of impossibility*, namely, the possibility that all our possibilities will come to an end and our life or existence can be perceived as something complete (Haase and Large 47; Critchley 68).

Nonetheless, even though he recognizes this aspect of death, for Blanchot death does not constitute the possibility to give meaning to one's life or existence. In order to explain this, Blanchot introduces another side of death he refers to as *dying*. Dying entails a passive act of infinite dying that never seems to come to an end; it is no longer something through which we can authentically grasp the significance of our life. Rather, it is something that wears us down (Haase and Large 52). In Blanchot's fictional work, this *other death* is often represented as an elongated agony in the form of an illness that does not hold the promise of deliverance, namely, the promise of reaching self-fulfilment or the possibility to give meaning to one's life (Haase and Large 53).[4] Blanchot reverses Heidegger's statement and refers to this second side of death as the *impossibility of possibility*: the impossibility of reaching finitude or, differently put, the impossibility of death

4 Blanchot was not only an essayist, he also wrote several novels.

as something absolute. Death is no longer a possibility that can be mastered, it is being condemned to an existence without exit (Critchley 32).

Blanchot argues that "death as an event no longer has any importance" (320). Individual death no longer means anything: we can no longer say "I die" since our death disappears within the bigger whole where *everyone dies*. Consequently, dying becomes an experience of anonymity: *'I'* never die, but *'one'* dies and it is in this experience of *'one'* dies that we lose ourselves. Instead of finding in death the ground of our individuality in which we cannot be replaced, 'our death' is no longer our own but exposes us to the dissipation of ourselves because we are lost in the experience of *'one'* dies. This causes extreme anguish since, behind the hope that death would make our life meaningful lies the horror of *'one'* dies which makes our life disappear into insignificance and meaninglessness (Haase and Large 53). Consequently, the experience of dying is the experience of an absence of meaning in which the *'I'* disappears in the passivity of dying: *'I'* never die, but *'one'* dies. Thus, one is forever dying in the sense that we cannot master or control our own death, and it is in this experience that the self is transformed into an Other one can never fully grasp; it is an infinite state of change and movement. In that sense, dying becomes a liminal space of the in-between: it is that which separates the self from finitude or fixed identity (Haase and Large 53). Like Rilke's perception of death, the second side of death – i.e. dying – is an open death yet, in contrast to the German poet's interpretation, it is not a space where opposites are dissolved. Rather, it is a vacant space or a void.

Paz calls Villaurrutia's death a closed death: it is a personal experience lived from within one's life, only concerned with one's own death (1993, 140). Nonetheless, I will argue that Villaurrutia's death is an open death. Not in the sense of Rilke that it is a union between opposites but open in the sense of Blanchot: death crea-

tes an open and vacant space which makes it possible to form a relation with the other. Villaurrutia's poetry is not exclusively concerned with one's own death since, as explained, in the anonymous experience of dying, one loses oneself and becomes an Other: *'I'* never die but *'one'* dies. Subsequently, I will argue that his poetry is concerned with the death of the Other. Nonetheless, before elaborating on this, it is necessary to consider the relation between eroticism and death and how this connection has been linked to mutability.

Death and Desire

As mentioned in the introduction, Villaurrutia's poetry reflects upon the nature of desire and, more specifically, the sexual desire between the speaker of the poems and his lover. Nonetheless, as I will argue later on, this lover is not necessarily an actual man but Death itself. The relation between eroticism, sexual desire and death is not arbitrary, it has been crucial in the formation of Western culture. In the introduction of *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, Jonathan Dollimore quotes late author Oscar Moore who died of AIDS-related illnesses: "Sex and sexual knowledge have always been inextricably bound in an embrace with death" (qtd. in Dollimore XI). The dynamic between death and sex has been around for centuries: it was already present in Ancient Greece and was further developed in Christianity, the Renaissance, Romanticism, and has been revived in relation to homosexuality and AIDS (Dollimore XI). The connection is so omnipresent in our culture that we often tend to forget that it is there: it has become a commonplace and moves through our culture as such (Dollimore XVII).

In the Renaissance, the idea emerged that the connection between death and desire is founded upon mutability, that is, the endless passing of time which implies inevitable decay and

loss (Dollimore XIII). Mutability moreover implies that future loss, change and ultimately death, are somehow already present in the here and now (Dollimore XIV). In the tradition of *carpe diem*-poetry, the feeling of future loss and the transient moment is intensified by a desire to capture the moment (Dollimore XV). Nonetheless, besides expressing a desire to seize the day, *carpe diem*-poets moreover reveal the existential difficulty of doing so: the passing of time makes us want to capture the moment, yet, at the same time, prevents us from doing so (Dollimore XVI). On a more profound level, the inability to seize the day implies the inability to realise our desires in a world that is governed and destroyed by time (Dollimore XVI). On the one hand, mutability is the enemy of desire since it prevents its realisation or, as the 17th century poet Andrew Marvell put it: "Man is in love and loves what vanished" (qtd. in Dollimore XVI-XVII). On the other hand, change, inconsistency and movement are inherent not only to life but also desire: "mutability is also the inner dynamic of desire" (Dollimore XVII). Put differently, impending loss or mutability is that what drives our desire yet, at the same time, prevents its fulfilment. Thus, desire is subjected to mutability and, consequently, it is impossible to satisfy. Therefore, sexual pleasure becomes a kind of death itself: it is mutable and subjected to change since it only lasts for a short while after which it vanishes forever (Dollimore 68).

Throughout the centuries, death has become eroticised, that is, connected to sexual desire. As Hamlet famously meditates death is "a consummation / devoutly to be wished" (3.1. 53-54). Note the double meaning of *consummation*: it refers to a "desirable outcome" in addition to "sexual intercourse", "satisfying climax" and "vanishing into nothing" ("Consummation"). Sexual ecstasy is often referred to as a kind of death or an obliteration of the self. For example, in some languages like French, orgasm can be referred to as *la petite mort*, i.e. the little death. The French

writer Georges Bataille states that during a sexual embrace, one desires to lose oneself without reservation.[5] It demands the greatest possible loss: "to lose ourselves and look death in the face" (Dollimore 254). Thus, the sexual act fragments the coherence of the self and violates the ego since, as alluded to above, during sexual ecstasy we are beside ourselves: for a brief moment, our personality dies (254).

In eroticism, there is always an object of desire; there is always someone else. According to Bataille, love holds the promise of a total blending or a continuity between two beings. Nonetheless, in a sexual embrace this is prevented because of one's own dissolution:

> The totality of what is (the universe) swallows me […] nothing remains, except this or that, which are less meaningful than nothing. In a sense it is unbearable and I seem to be dying. It is at this cost, no doubt, that I am no longer myself, but an infinity in which I am lost […] I am embracing the totality without which I was only *outside*: I reach orgasm. (qtd. in Dollimore 255)

When having sex, we try to get as close to our lover as possible yet even then, the lover escapes our grasp because of the mutable nature of desire: time moves on and we will never be able to capture the moment, nor our lover. In that way, our lover is transformed into an unreachable Other in the sense of Blanchot that remains out of our control.

Additionally, we lose ourselves into infinity and we are outside ourselves. As Bataille puts it: "I am no longer myself". Bataille

5 Bataille was a French writer, poet and critic who became a close friend of Blanchot. Both have had an enormous influence on each other's work (Haase and Large 5).

compares this experience to *dying*: "In a sense it is unbearable and I seem to be dying". Thus, Bataille describes an experience similar to what Blanchot refers to as the second side of death. Dying is a process in which one is plunged into nothingness and the self is transformed into an Other. As I will argue, it is this experience of losing oneself through sexual ecstasy while the object of desire remains outside of one's grasp, that is expressed in Villaurrutia's poetry. In the following sections I will demonstrate this by analysing three poems. Each of the poems appears in a different section of the volume: "Nocturnes", "Other Nocturnes" and "Nostalgias".

"Nocturno: Amor" / "Nocturne: Love"

The first poem I will discuss is "Nocturno: Amor". The poem depicts an erotic scene that occurs in a space cast in shadows and uncertainties: "El que nada se oye en esta alberca de sombra" (1). Throughout the poem, the image of shadows is repeated several times in addition to elements such as darkness, secrets, dreams and whispers which create an uncanny and mysterious atmosphere. Villegas links this with the tradition of gay literature and homoeroticism in which the obscurity and secrecy of the night is the ideal place to hide certain erotic appetites out of fear for a narrow-minded society (33). While this is certainly a plausible interpretation, in the following sections I would like to suggest that, rather than only referring to homoeroticism, sexual desire always moves through the uncanny spaces of mystery and obscurity.

A key element in the poem is the anguish of the speaker caused by the *crime* (3), namely, the sexual act committed by himself and his lover: he wonders how his arms are not bruised by the breath of his lover as he follows him in "la angustia del crimen" (3). Indeed, the speaker is suffering: "sufro al sentir la

dicha con que tu cuerpo busca / el cuerpo que te vence más que el sueño" (9-10). Thus, the speaker links pleasure with pain and suffering which is, of course, a contradiction.[6] Nonetheless, as Bataille explains, love promises a total blending of two beings yet this is a false promise: desire will never be satisfied due to its mutable nature. Consequently, this causes anguish which is why the speaker describes the whole scene as a long and cruel night: "larga y cruel noche" (28). Besides alluding to the *forbidden* which Villegas defines as a characteristic of homoerotic and gay literature, the crime mentioned in the first lines of the poem could also refer to this: besides pleasure, the sexual act moreover causes anguish and suffering.

Throughout the poem, the speaker alludes multiple times to sleep and the night: "[…] tu cuerpo busca / el cuerpo que te vence más que el sueño", "larga y cruel noche que ya no es noche" (9-10, 28). As psychoanalysis has argued, in the realm of sleep, unconscious desires are revealed. Dorantes Moreno follows this line of thought and argues that in the oneiric world of sleep, greater satisfaction is possible than in the vital world which is why waking up is a form of dying: "despertar es morir" (Moreno 218). As she argues, Villaurrutia adopts this attitude. While it is true that in Villaurrutia's poems and, especially, "Nocturno amor", the night unlocks a deep sexual desire, this desire is never satisfied: "y una sed que en el agua del espejo / sacia su sed con una sed idéntica" (25-26). The desire for the other remains identical. Nonetheless, desire is what drives the two lovers and the speaker notes how his lover would rather kill than surrender to sleep. This ties in with the initial crime at the beginning of the poem: "y antes que

6 For further research on the use of contradictions in *Nostalgia for Death*, I can recommend Gloria Estela Baez Pinal's article "La contradicción en la poesía de Xavier Villaurrutia: un acercamiento" (2008). Her analysis is, however, very technical and does not consider the thematic consequences of these contradictions.

compartirlo matarías el goce / de entregarte en el sueño con los ojos cerrados" (7-8). Killing in this context could be interpreted as reaching sexual ecstasy or orgasm. As Bataille explains, during orgasm we are detached from ourselves: an annihilation of the self occurs or, differently put, for a brief moment, the self-dies. Therefore, when the speaker refers to "killing", he could refer to reaching orgasm or making the other reach orgasm.

Sexual ecstasy is prepared from the beginning of the poem. Firstly, there is the reference to killing in line 7: "matarías […]" (7). Subsequently, the speaker notes that their bodies are affected by leprosy: "y el yeso de mis muslos con la piel de los tuyos / que la sombra corroe con su lepra incurable" (14-15). Leprosy is an illness that causes, amongst other things, a deformation of the body and body parts dying off. Subsequently, in these lines, their bodies are subjected to decay and change which confirms the mutable nature of desire. In addition to that, the deformation of the body implies that it is transformed into *something else*. This transformation is referred to later on in the poem: "junto a tu cuerpo más muerto que muerto / que no es tu cuerpo ya sino su hueco" (29-30). Being *more dead than dead* could refer to sexual ecstasy and, subsequently, the body of his lover is merely an impression of what it once was: his lover has become something different. Towards the end of the poem, the speaker also reaches sexual ecstasy:

> y es tan grande mi frío que con un calor nuevo
> abre mis ojos donde la sombra es más dura
> y más clara y más luz que la luz misma
> y resucita en mí lo que no ha sido
> y es un dolor inesperado y aún más frío y más fuego
> no ser sino la estatua que despierta
> en la alcoba de un mundo en el que todo ha muerto. (32-38)

He describes the moment of orgasm as something painful – "dolor inesperado" – or as anguish. The speaker moreover experiences a detachment of the self: he has become nothing more but a statue of himself. Thus, in this poem, sexual ecstasy entails a detachment since the self becomes merely an image, statue or impression of what it was before. In other words, the self has become something other. This is analogous to the process of self-annihilation one is subjected to in the anonymous experience of dying described by Blanchot. In addition to that, the speaker and his lover wake up in a bedroom of a world where everything is dead: "un mundo en el que todo ha muerto". Thus, death permeates the intimate spaces of desire where the scene takes place.

On the one hand, the fact that the scene takes place in a world of death refers to the mutable nature of desire: one's desire will never be satisfied since it is subjected to time and change. Therefore, it causes anguish: one wants to grasp the moment, yet the passing of time prevents this. On the other hand, the presence of death at the moment of intercourse refers to the process of self-annihilation during sexual ecstasy: the self is detached from itself and becomes other. As mentioned before, this is analogous to the experience of dying: the self loses itself during the process and, subsequently, is transformed into an Other. Thus, the becoming other of the speaker and his lover in the poem could be interpreted in the sense of Blanchot, that is, as in being transformed into an unreachable Other. The latter is clearer and more explicit in the next poem I will discuss: "Nocturno de la alcoba".

"Nocturno de la alcoba" / "Nocturne: The Bedroom"

"Nocturno de la alcoba" describes an erotic scene similar to "Nocturno: Amor". Nonetheless, besides referring to the anguish caused by the mutable nature of desire and sexual ecstasy,

it primarily focuses on alterity and the silent distance between the lovers. As I will argue, in the poem, death creates a space that makes it impossible to come or blend together. At the same time, death seems to be the only possibility to form a connection.

"La muerte toma siempre la forma de la alcoba / que nos contiene" (1-2). These lines evoke the same idea as the first poem I discussed, "Nocturno: Amor": death is intrinsically linked with eroticism and, consequently, the bedroom where the sexual act takes place, becomes a world of death. As such, the bedroom is transformed into a space of encounter and separation (Villegas 35) in which death creeps around to hide itself:

> Es cóncava y oscura y tibia y silenciosa,
> se pliega en las cortinas en que anida la sombra,
> es dura en el espejo y tensa y congelada,
> profunda en las almohadas y, en las sábanas, blanca. (3-6)

As in the previous poem, Villaurrutia uses adjectives like "oscura", "tibia", "silenciosa", "congelada" and "blanca" to describe death which create a similarly mysterious and uncanny atmosphere.

Both lovers know that death takes the shape of their bedroom: "Los dos sabemos que la muerte toma / la forma de la alcoba" (7-8). They moreover know that in their bedroom, there is a cold and silent distance or wall between them: "el espacio frío que levanta / entre los dos un muro, un cristal, un silencio" (9-10). This distance is a vacant space inhabited by death: "Entonces sólo yo sé que la muerte / es el hueco que dejas en el lecho" (11-12). The use of the word "hueco" reinforces the idea of the vacant space or silent distance between them. In her article "Nocturnos silenciosos y vacíos fructíferos: El sonido y el espacio en la poesía de

Xavier Villaurrutia" (2012), Sara Potter analyses how the thematic silences in *Nostalgia for Death* are also present on a typographical and phonetic level through the use of, for example, ellipses. These reinforce the thematic interplay between silence, distance, absence and death in the poems.

The speaker of the poem continues by saying that death is the sweat and heat between their muscles that embrace, fight and, eventually surrender: "el sudor que moja nuestros muslos / que se abrazan y luchan y que, luego, se rinden" (18-19). Thus, once again, death is linked to desire or sexual embrace which is represented as a struggle to which they should surrender or, in other words, reach orgasm. On top of that, death is linked to the impossibility of understanding the other:

> Y es la frase que dejas caer, interrumpida.
> Y la pregunta mía que no oyes,
> que no comprendes o que no respondes.
>
> Y el silencio que cae y te sepulta
> cuando velo tu sueño y lo interrogo. (20-24)

As in line 10 – "entre los dos un muro, un cristal, un silencio" – death is linked to the silence between the two lovers. They seem to misunderstand each other: sentences are being interrupted, questions are not being heard or misunderstood. Subsequently, the speaker links death with the moaning of his lover: "y solo, sólo yo sé que la muerte / es tu palabra trunca, tus gemidos ajenos" (25-26). As in line 11 – "sólo yo sé" – the speaker is alone in his knowledge as a consequence of the wall death has erected between them which impedes mutual comprehension.

In the poem, the speaker suggests that the distance between himself and his lover is inhabited by death when he remarks that death has erected a wall between them: "entre los dos un muro, un cristal, un silencio" (10). This idea is reinforced in the following lines: "La muerte es todo esto y más que nos circunda, y nos une y separa alternativamente" (29-30). Thus, death seems to bring them together, while, at the same time, prevents them from reaching each other:

> Entonces, sólo entonces, los dos solos, sabemos
> que no el amor sino la oscura muerte
> nos precipita a vernos cara a cara a los ojos,
> y a unirnos y a estrecharnos, más que solos y
> náufragos,
> todavía más, y cada vez más, todavía. (33-38)

Firstly, the first line expresses the existential solitude of the lovers: they both know alone – "los dos solos, sabemos". Secondly, the speaker explains how it is death and not love that makes them reach for each other even though they both know it is in vain: the more they reach for each other, the more stranded and alone they become. "Love smells like death", Bataille states (13). Indeed, in this last stanza desire and love are transformed into death: the dread of death makes us want to grasp the other person, yet the passing of time and impending death prevent us from doing so.

The poem describes an experience that is analogous to the second side of death: one is forever dying and in this process the self is transformed into an unreachable Other one will never master. As explained, death gives the possibility for an Other to arise and this Other becomes a possible addressee. Therefore, death is the condition for possible engagement with the Other. Nonetheless, in the experience of dying, which is the stretching

out towards one's nothingness, this Other becomes ungraspable. It is exactly this experience that is described in the poem: death drives the desire of the lovers and makes them reach for each other while, at the same time, it creates a distance between them they cannot overcome. Thus, the poem does not focus on the actual lover. Rather, it focuses on the idea of the unreachable Other and the distance that separates the two lovers:

> La muerte es todo esto y más que nos circunda,
> y nos une y separa alternativamente,
> que nos deja confusos, atónitos, suspensos,
> *con una herida que no mana sangre*. (29-32, my emphasis)

Consequently, by describing death as a wound that does not bleed, death remains open – i.e. it is an open wound – and, consequently, it is never finite; hence, in the poem, death becomes a space of alterity in which the two lovers are connected *and* separated by death.

"Décima muerte" / "Death in Décimas"

The last poem I will discuss, "Décima muerte", appears in the last section of *Nostalgia for Death*, "Nostalgias". In contrast to the other two poems in which the lover seems to be an actual person, this poem makes clear how one could argue that the lover or object of desire in *Nostalgia for Death* is not necessarily a human being but Death itself.

The poem contains ten stanzas consisting of ten octosyllables. Due to lack of space, I will not analyse every stanza in depth but highlight relevant sections. The poem starts as such:

¡Qué prueba de la existencia
habrá mayor que la suerte
de estar viviendo sin verte
y muriendo en tu presencia!
Esta lúcida conciencia
de amar a lo nunca visto
y de esperar lo imprevisto;
este caer sin llegar
es la anguistia [sic] de pensar
que puesto que muero existo. (1-10)

Thus, the speaker loves someone or something that is absent or unseen – "amar a lo nunca visto" – and dies in its presence – "muriendo en tu presencia". As in the previous poem, the process of dying and loving which, as in the other poems, become analogous, is an *open* experience: in "Nocturno de la alcoba" this is described as a wound that does not bleed – "una herida que no mana sangre" – while in this case, it is described as falling with no ending: "caer sin llegar". Once more, this *open* death is a cause of anguish: "la anguistia [sic] ". In the last verse, Villaurrutia could be hinting at the Cartesian proposition *Cogito ergo sum* and concludes that one's imminent death, entails proof of existence.

In the second stanza the speaker addresses a second person who, as becomes clear at the end of the stanza, is Death itself:

Si en todas partes estás
…..
y si a todas partes vas
conmigo en el pensamiento
…..
¿no serás, Muerte, en mi vida,
agua, fuego, polvo y viento? (11, 15-16, 19-20)

Death is chasing the speaker, haunting him everywhere in his thoughts and the heaving of his breath: "en el soplo de mi aliento" (17); Death lives within him. This idea is reinforced when, in the following stanzas, it seems as if Death has been the desired object or the speaker's lover all along: "Si tienes manos, que sean / de un tacto sutil y blando", "para no sentir un goce / ni un dolor contigo, Muerte" (31-32, 39-40). As in the other poems, (sexual) pleasure is connected to pain. The difference here is that it is Death that is entering into his bed: "te ven mis ojos cerrados / entrar mi alcoba oscura" (45-46). Indeed, it is as if Death were his lover which is reinforced by the fact that "Muerte" is written with a capital letter as if it were a name.

In the following stanzas, Death is connected to the void, opacity and nothingness, it is described as opaque, restless and unfixed with a voice that spills with silence: "opaca, febril, cambiante" (48), "tu voz que silencios vierte" (54). The speaker, so it seems, is making love to Death: he refers to their embrace – "abrazo" (68) – and wonders:

> Si te llevo en mí prendida
> y te acaricio y escondo;
> si te alimento en el fondo
> de mi más secreta herida;
> .....
> ¿qué será, Muerte, de ti
> cuando al salir yo del mundo,
> deshecho el nudo profundo,
> tengas que salir de mí? (91-94, 97-100)

Once more, making love is linked to dying –"cuando al salir yo del mundo"– as in other instances in the poem when the speaker refers to the ultimate caress — "la suprema caricia" (73) — which could be interpreted as reaching sexual climax or orgasm, as a hell of slow dying: "un infierno de agonía" (78). Additionally, the last verse of the poem concludes: "no hay hora en que yo no muera!" (100) which is comparable to Blanchot's second side of death: death permeates our life and existence in every instance. This idea is already expressed at the beginning of the poem when the speaker remarks how death is everywhere: "conmigo en el pensamiento / en el soplo de mi aliento" (16-17).

Dorantes Moreno argues that in this poem, Death has become something human, known and personal to the speaker: "la muerte humana, conocida propia" (226). She continues by saying that Death is no longer something foreign but that it belongs to the speaker, as if it is his property. Finally, she concludes that in this poem, Death does not imply an annihilation of the subject. Rather, it is an affirmation of life (226). Nonetheless, I would like to argue that Death does not belong to the speaker, nor is it something known or familiar. Like the lovers in the other poems, the speaker cannot master Death; their embrace is contained in a moment of space that is wide, deep and alone: "ancho, profundo y señero" (65). Again, there is a distance between the two that cannot be overcome. Death is not known, as the previously quoted lines indicate, it is opaque, restless and unfixed: "opaca, febril, cambiante" (48). Even though the speaker, at some point, believes himself to be Death's master – "saber que de ti me adueño (59) –, this is merely an illusion since, as explained, desire is fed by absence and, more specifically, the absence of one's lover who remains out of our control. Thus, by transforming death itself into the lover, namely, Death with a capital letter, the poem reinforces insights into the nature of human desire already touched upon in the previous poems and culminates ideas prepared throughout

the volume. Death is not something known, it is the ultimate unreachable Other as explained by Blanchot.

Nostalgia for Death: Nostalgia for Reunion?

In his essay on *Nostalgia for Death*, "Hieroglyphs of Desire", Paz defines death in Villaurrutia's poetry as a closed death. According to him, his poetry expresses a nostalgia for the pre-natal phase and a reunion with the maternal womb. He opposes this to Rilke's open perception of death: it is a movement towards the future in which all opposites are dissolved. Research nowadays has, for the most part, adopted Paz's interpretation as a starting point of analysis.

Even though Villaurrutia's perception of death defers from Rilke's since it is not a place where all opposites are dissolved – he uses opposites like cold, hot, ice and fire to describe death – it also does not describe a closed death that holds the promise of reunion.

In the three poems, there is another presence. In the first two poems there is the lover who cannot satisfy the speaker's desire and who escapes his grasp. In the last poem, the desired object is Death itself; it is an absence or a void. Subsequently, the poems are a space of alterity or otherness: there always is an Other the speaker cannot grasp, understand or control. In the three poems, this space of alterity is intrinsically linked with death. Death creates a distance between oneself and the other that makes it impossible to reach each other. One can merely try get as close as possible through sexual embrace even though, even then, the other will escape one's grasp. This is perhaps clearest in the second poem, "Nocturne: The Bedroom": death is the silent and cold space between the speaker and his lover that pulls them apart; hence the lover becomes an unreachable Other. Nevertheless, it is also what brings them together (ll. 30). Thus, death, which prevents them from reaching each other, is at the same time the condition for

possible engagement. In this way, the experience of the speaker in the poems could be linked to what Blanchot refers to as the second side of death: the experience of dying in which one loses oneself and is transformed into an Other; hence death gives the possibility for an Other to arise. Therefore, Blanchot argues, one is not so much concerned with one's own individual death as with the death of the Other.

Death in Villaurrutia's poetry is not a closed death. Indeed, it creates a distance between the speaker and his lover through which it is possible to form a relation even though they will never master each other. Hence, death does not hold the promise for a mythical, Pazian reunion: in the end, one will still be alone. The more we try to reach for the other, the further removed we will be. Thus, the poetry does not express a nostalgia for reunion since the speaker of the poems is aware of the fact that this is impossible. Again, this is clearest in "Nocturne: The Bedroom":

> Entonces, sólo entonces, los dos solos, sabemos
> que no el amor sino la oscura muerte
> nos precipita a vernos cara a cara a los ojos,
> y a unirnos y a estrecharnos, más que solos y
> *náufragos,*
> *todavía más, y cada vez más, todavía.* (33-38, my emphasis)

Thus, Villaurrutia's poetry is not merely an example of gay or queer literature reflecting on homoeroticism. It offers a reflection on the nature of desire by linking it to death and even transforming death into the desired object. By applying Blanchot's theory we have seen that death represented as such is open and other, that is, we cannot grasp it. Or, as the speaker in "Nocturno de la alcoba" remarks: "nos deja confusos, atónitos, suspensos, / con una herida que no mana sangre" (31-32).

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