



The impossibility and the disagreement: the non-dialogue with God in two religious poems by Blas de Otero and Alfredo R. Placencia.

La imposibilidad y el desencuentro: el no-diálogo con Dios en dos poemas religiosos de Blas de Otero y Alfredo R. Placencia.

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ABSTRACT

In this article, is made an approximation from the *Stylistics* and the *Comparative Literature* of religious poems of the Mexican poet Alfredo R. Placencia (1875-1930) and the Spanish poet Blas de Otero (1916-1979). Through analysis, it is identified in his works the configuration of the human and the divine being and the way they enter into dialogue.

The poems studied "La caña quebrada" (1924) and "Muerte en el mar" (1951) have as their common characteristic their apostrophic character, its means, that the verses are addressed to an interlocutor who, in all cases, will be an image divine, who by silence or absence, does not respond to the questioning of the poetic subject.

The interpretation of the poems through *Comparative Literature*, after the stylistic analysis, allows to observe common features with a type of religious poetry characteristic of the Hispanic environment, as well as more universal aspects of religious poetic production in the first-half 20th century.

Keywords: Religious poetry. Stylistics. Comparative Literature. Alfredo R. Placencia. Blas de Otero.

RESUMEN



En el presente artículo se hace una aproximación desde la *Estilística* y la *Literatura comparada* a poemas religiosos del poeta mexicano Alfredo R. Placencia (1875-1930) y del poeta español Blas de Otero (1916-1979). Por medio del análisis se identifica en sus obras la configuración de lo humano y lo divino y de la manera en que entran en diálogo.

Los poemas estudiados "La caña quebrada" (1924) y "Muerte en el mar" (1951) tienen como característica común su carácter apostrofico, es decir, que los versos están dirigidos a un interlocutor que, en todos los casos, será una imagen divina que sea por el silencio o por la ausencia, no responde a la interpelación del sujeto poético.

La interpretación de los poemas por medio de la *Literatura comparada*, luego del análisis estilístico, permite observar rasgos comunes con un tipo de poesía religiosa característica del entorno hispánico, al tiempo que de aspectos más universales propios de la producción poética religiosa de la primera mitad del siglo XX.

Palabras Clave: Poesía religiosa. Estilística. Literatura comparada. Alfredo R. Placencia. Blas de Otero.

Introduction

Languages were, and are until today, the means through which the human being has domesticated his emotions, desires and, in general, his thought, so that the organization that they make of human nature has made it possible to achieve what is called civilization; they are, to put it metaphorically, the "invisible garments that envelop our spirit" and, obviously, are "the raw material of literature" (Sapir, 1954, pp. 250-251).

And the origins of language and literature are closely related. Beyond the speculation that arises from suggesting the precedence of orality to writing, if we stick to verifiable claims through the written preservation of the word, according to the historiographer of scripture, A.C. Moorhouse, that scripture that arises in the Sumerian world and, more accurately, in the Babylonian temples, whose wealth and administration was based on clay tablets (1961), is used at the same time to preserve the sacred songs; this means that Assyrian and Babylonian literature was primarily religious, arising in the temple and for the worship of the gods (Moorhouse, 1961).



This sacred literature begins to be written, according to Moorhouse himself, in the year 2000 BC. C. was the way to fix for posterity a long preceding oral tradition (1961), in the same way that happened with the Homeric songs in Greece, dated to the sixth century BC. C.; the *Rig-Veda* in India whose origin dates back to 1400-1100 BC and the *Upanishad* of the sixth century BC.; the Egyptian chants to Aten, dated near the fourteenth century BC.; the *Psalms*, from the sixth century BC. and many more. Thus, a human-self raises vivid words to a you, where two spiritual realities converge that arise from the very content of those words (Ebner, 1995), and in this way, the sacred hymns become bridges between matter (the word) and the spirit (the ethereal and that which is spiritual and immaterial has the word), between the man who challenges and the celestial forces or the gods.

The poetic-religious lineage, as we have already seen, breaks with the borders of years and creeds, and we find manifestations of it in all civilizations and in all times. Those first expressions fixed by writing, will be the first of many others that will sing, from all latitudes; thus, we find the *Teocuícatl* or Aztec divine songs, the Islamic mystical poems, such as those of the mystic Rūmī and the *Greater Edda* or poetics of the Nordic peoples, as examples.

The idea of the numinous and the suprahuman that arises in the Neolithic (Hauser, 2009), and that would give rise to artistic expressions aimed at dialoguing with that beyond the human, beyond in power and presence, beyond in materiality and time, transcends the epochs and civilizations and reaches Blas de Otero and Alfredo R. Placencia, who join a millenary poetic lineage that tends its origins to imprecise dates, if we assume that oral singing precedes writing.

Our poets, who have Castilian as their common language, join, together with the universal tradition, a vast poetic tradition in Spanish that, from its origins, has had outstanding religious expressions that continue to be read and referred to to this day. Such is the case of those written in the thirteenth century by the monk Gonzalo de Berceo (1190-1270); the hymns to Christ and the Virgin Mary included in the *Book of Good Love* of the Archpriest of Hita, written in the mid-fourteenth century. This was continued by a wide religious poetic production that was framed in a theologized environment, so to speak, which is well portrayed in *History of the mysticism of the golden age in Spain and America*, where its author offers us a detailed list of one thousand two hundred "spiritual



works" appeared between 1485 and 1750 originally in Spanish or translated, among which are works by San Buenaventura, San Bernardo, San Gregorio Magno, San Ignacio de Loyola, among other saints, by Tomás de Kempis, Girolamo Savoranola, Fray Luis de Granada and many more; among the texts cited, poetic works such as those of San Juan de la Cruz, Fray Miguel de Guevara, Fray Luis de León and Santa Teresa de Ávila, Francisco de Quevedo, Lope de Vega and Luis de Góngora (Andrés, 1994) stand out.

Spanish is a language that entered the modern age under political-religious circumstances that favored the production of a literature closely linked to God and religion. While the human condition, social problems and fantastic and philosophical literature were germinating in France, Italy, Germany, Russia, the United States and England, at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century in Spain and Latin America were writing pictures of customs and poems in which the central figure of religion and God were recurrent, Why? for if the Protestant Reformation in Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands and England and the *Enlightenment* in France, gestated already since the Renaissance in Italy, changed man's eyes from God to himself and his concerns, in the case of Spain and its colonies, the Catholic counter-reformation resisted and continued with its eyes set on transcendence beyond death, in the experience of a self-contained, ritualistic and uns rational religiosity, in a faith fearful of itself.

Heirs of this history, and despite the distance that the most outstanding currents of poetry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries kept in relation to the themes of the religious, both the Bilbao poet and the jalostotitlense bard produced a poetry of a religious nature due, on the one hand, to the school conservation of this type of poetry, that they received prayer in a Jesuit college or in a seminary, respectively; and on the other hand, due to the particular interests of poets.

Method

Methodological route

The approach to the poetic corpus was made with epistemic and methodological basis in *stylistics* and *comparative literature* studies.



Stylistic studies are studies based on linguistic and structural analysis (tropological or rhetorical). And it is Leo Spitzer, one of the three pillars of German stylistics, who suggests in the presentation of his book of essays *Linguistics and History of Literature* (1968) how it is that the tools of linguistics come into contact with those of the study of literature in his work, a work of stylistic signature; he affirms that the illumination that comes from the discovery of the origin of a word also happens when the sense of a poem through the "sum total of each of its words and sounds", of the parts united in a whole (p. 15). With this he presents one of the fundamental elements of the stylistic method: the fragmentation of the literary whole in its parts to analyze them and thus, of the set of parts, find the full meaning of the work.

For the analytical approach of the work of both poets I began with the stylistic study of each of the poems, always introduced by some reference that I have considered pertinent for the reading of the text and later I made an interpretation of the data derived from the formal analysis – either about the intertextuality in the poem or the appearance of stylistic recurrences of form or meaning.

Once the analyses were made, at the end of the set of those corresponding to the work of each of the authors, some partial conclusions were made in which the results derived from the individual analysis are synthesized, which are those presented in this article.

On the other hand, *comparative literature* is one of the disciplines that, according to Yves Chevrel, arise when recognizing the importance of the intellectual process of comparison for the progress of knowledge (2009). In the particular case of the comparatist method for literature, analysts "voluntarily confront works coming from practices and from 'other' cultures: the foreign is their touchstone"¹ (Chevrel, 2009, p. 5). In this way the comparison allows to understand the particularity of a national literature or a genre, but also to construct a universal literature reasoned in terms of its similarities and differences; literature that contributes to the construction of a "(truly) universal humanism" (p. 15)

¹ "Ils se heurtent volontairement à des œuvres venues de pratiques et de cultures 'autres': l'étranger est leur pierre de touche." Translation by the author.



In this sense it is that I have used the tools of *comparative* literature: in order to face the particularities and similarities between the work of both poets; for this I started with the stylistic analysis of the poems of each author, because, as Suggested by Manfred Schmelling in his book *Theory and praxis of comparative literature* (1984), the comparatist study is influenced by the scientific disciplines related to certain literatures, in this case poetry. Thus, *comparative literature*, understood by M. F. Guyard in 1951 as "the history of international literary relations" (Backès, 1994, p. 4) starts, from the outset, from the analysis previously made based on a method that is proper to the type of literature, whether narratology, semiotics, hermeneutics, sociocritics or, as here, the stylistics.

It is relevant here to emphasize that the study of the subject is one of the central objectives of comparative literature: the subject as a subject that has different treatments throughout the history of literature; the theme as a structuring element of the work; the subject that is not scriptural content, but motive that orders that writing; the theme, which in poetry implies form and content and thus leads to the encounter with intertextual relations and the intratextual sense (Guillén, 2005).

Thus, after the stylistic analysis, we proceed to the encounter between the work of Placencia and Otero through the comparative study, divided into two parts: formal coincidences and thematology. In this way, the analytical and interpretative results are ordered to, in conclusion, discuss them.

Works analyzed

The selected works, religious poetic works, have as a common quality their apostrophic character, that is, that the verses are addressed to an interlocutor who, in all cases, will be a divine image that, praying for silence or for absence, does not respond to the interpellation of the poetic subject.

Mysticism, which is always expressed in a peculiar discourse: metaphorical, symbolic and preferably erotic (De Santiago, 1998) – which can clearly be called poetic – suggests the passage through a series of steps that go from a self-conception and self-representation of a fragile subject and susceptible to temptations to, consciously, get rid of them (ascetic) through meditation on divinity and its greatness (contemplation), in such a way that purified and free, the mystical soul can



unite or merge into the divinity it contemplates (union) (De Santiago, 1998) it is thus that it transits through the different stages of mysticism: purgative, illuminative and unitive (De Santiago, 1998; Ramos, 2003).

Made this definition of what is not religious poetry, in order to avoid possible confusion, since it is not my goal to analyze mystical poetry or what poetry allows it to constitute itself as mystical, but, in a broader sense, religious poetry. In this way it is religious poetry both "Prayer for Marilyn Monroe" by Ernesto Cardenal and a biblical *Psalm*, it is a mystical poem by Rūmī as it is "The Black Heralds" by César Vallejo, it is the Spiritual *Canticle* of Juan de la Cruz and "I love God" by Jaime Sabines.

All are even when they use religious motives to deny the religious or with irony (Cervantes-Ortiz, 2004); thus, religious poetry is so as long as poetic language takes as its theme the objects of religion as the figures of spiritual realities or events proper to the religious phenomenon.

The unified criteria for the choice of both poets are the following:

- A. Poems were chosen that adhered to the parameters of definition of religious poetry presented in this section.
- B. Among the wide spectrum of possibilities offered by the concept of *religious poetry* that has been chosen, poems of an apostrophic nature were chosen, whose interlocutor constituted was an ethereal figure, which here will be the figure of god in all cases and not another.
- C. The two poems chosen were selected, in addition to their apostrophic nature, in which the word is addressed to a second person, for the intensity of the exclamations uttered to the divine interlocutor, bordering on imprecation and execration.
- D. Unlike the previous three, general criteria, particular reasons for the selection of the poems were also considered:
 - a. In the case of Alfredo R. Placencia, the selection was made on his poetry books published in his lifetime, these are: *Ciego Dios*, *El paso del dolor* and *Del cuartel y del claustro*, all from 1924.
 - b. For Blas de Otero, the criterion was to choose a poem from among the books that constitute the stage of his poetic production focused on themes of a religious, intimate and existential



nature, exposed in: *Ángel fieramente humano* (1950), *Redoble de conciencia* (1951) and *Ancia* (1999).

The selected poems are therefore the following: "La caña quebrada" by Alfredo R. Placencia and "Muerte en el mar" by Blas de Otero.

Results

The religious in twentieth-century literature

The twentieth century found the world involved in the effects of the cultural, political, economic and social revolutions that emerged from the thought of the eighteenth century, conceptually developed in the nineteenth century and that had their most important social manifestations in the first half of the twentieth century: the European political-economic restructuring generating the world wars, on the one hand and, on the other the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Civil War and, of course, the Spanish Civil War and the Mexican Revolution. This same era saw the death of empires such as Austro-Hungarian, saw the birth of socialist countries and saw the emergence of philosophical movements such as existentialism.

Some of these intellectual and social phenomena will be fundamental in the objective reality of Alfredo R. Placencia and Blas de Otero; the first will reflect in its verses the social circumstance generated by the Mexican Revolution and the second will be crossed by the Russian Revolution and socialism, existentialist philosophy and, mainly, by the Spanish Civil War, which will suffer in its own flesh.

This historical, social and cultural panorama will generate a hostile reality for religious literature, as Cervantes-Ortiz affirms in his anthology of religious poetry of the twentieth century; for him, modern poets find it unthinkable to address the themes of the religious, derived from the fear of turning poetry and art back into spokesmen of the church (Cervantes-Ortiz, 2004), especially after the romantic, positive and atheist nineteenth century (Ramos, 2003).



For Charles Moeller, the twentieth century is one of those periods in which men notice most clearly the "apparent absence of God in the world" (1981, p. 23), all this considers to be caused by:

Millions of victims who suffer: two men out of three do not have enough to live. Justice becomes a sinister caricature, since it manages to transform into automatons, which repeat a lesson, those whom it drags before it. Even children dream of war. Life grows endlessly. And we are deafened in propaganda. It has already been said: we live in the twenty-fifth hour, the hour when not even a Messiah could save us (1981, p. 23).

It is this bleak panorama that drags with it a silence that suffocates and that leads to the suffering of men. This silence weighs terribly on men (Moeller, 1981) and can be verified in the poems we read by both poets.

The divine silence that he presents here, provoked in the twentieth century different responses that guided literary production. The first of these is the simplest indifference to the divine, such is the case of aesthetic works as much of modernist production; the resistance or confrontation that seeks to break through that silence to find the divine, which is how it happens in Placencia; the disillusionment and disenchantment as in Blas de Otero or that kind of atheist literary proselytism that seeks to raise the death or non-existence of the divine given its unverifiability, as Sartre's work points out.

However, religious literature was not completely blurred from the literary panorama, as these poets verify and, in addition, the wide tradition of creating poetic contests linked to religious festivities sustained religious poetry with great vitality (Herrera, 2013).

That will be the twentieth century, a century of "great spiritual emptiness" (Herrera, 2013, pp. 52-53) produced by the historical and cultural maelstrom; in the social circumstance of our poets, the tensions between the religious and the civil given the position of the Second Republic in Spain and the position of the Mexican government emanating from the Constitution of 1917 and heir to the liberalism of the Reform. However, that first half of the twentieth century, daughter of the methodological and pragmatic atheism of the nineteenth century, will be the propitious space for a



peculiar literature in which, to a greater or lesser extent, religious themes will continue to retain their millenary presence and, even, on many occasions, their prominence.

A varied protagonism that ranges from innocent and deep intimacy to violent rejection, from firm belief to disturbing doubt; this polyhedral nature has in one of its faces the poetic works of Alfredo Placencia and Blas de Otero, who succumb to fear, desolation and painful rejection and with it to impossibility and disagreement.

The poems. Synthesis of stylistic analysis

In poems such as "La caña quebrada" and "Muerte en el mar" by Father Placencia and Blas de Otero respectively, we find ourselves before the fragility of the bridge and its suggested rupture.

No ashes, not anything...
Only the memory
of the home he turned off.
Nothing else has left
relentless justice
of the scourge of God.
A cane just
I stayed in my garden,
And I cried out to the Lord,
"Don't break my cane,
already waterfall, of his own,
by time and the sun." (Fragment of "La caña quebrada" in *El paso del dolor*, 1924)

If we fell into the sea, they would grab us
of the feet and stretch, stubborn, of them
non-human hands, such as those
viscous octopuses that are added to the skin...



Ah, if dying the same thing were: kick out
our bodies to God, naked, beautiful,
and his hands, horrible, our necks
They would mercilessly drown us... (Excerpt from "Death at Sea" in *Redouble of Consciousness*,
1951)

Silence as the only response, divine violence, the construction of the poetic self and the construction of the divine you, all lead to a great last catalytic theme of the above: the impossibility of encounter.

The break with the divine, or at least with the traditional idea of the divine, occurs when the poetic self-confronts the divine you in the midst of violence and silence, which leads to disenchantment and, precisely, to rupture. The discussion established in these apostrophic poems has two recipients: the first is precisely the divine-you to which the poetic subject questions without finding an answer, the other is the traditional and orthodox discourse on the divine, in which there is no coherence.

On "The Broken Cane", let's start by quoting Rudolf Otto, who in the section "The aspects of the numinous" of his book *The Holy. The rational and the irrational in the idea of God* (1980) cites a concept of the German Protestant philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), which is translated as a feeling of "absolute dependence" (p. 17) and in it concentrates a definition of religious dependence, different from any other type of dependencies, with which, however, it is related, where the human being perceives his smallness and "sinks and floods into his own nothingness and disappears before him who is above all creatures" (p. 18); the poetic voice of "La caña quebrada" responds to this concept, since it recognizes the governing faculty that has above all that exists that repeatedly called Lord. However, recognizing this "feeling of creature" (p. 18), as Otto also calls it, will not imply in the poem the absence of protest before the actions of the absolute will of the divine, assumed, but not fully assented.



Thus, the poem is, in the same tone as others by Alfredo R. Placencia, a song of pain that recognizes in divinity the attribute of omnipotence, but that does not accept what is derived from said attribution.

"La caña quebrada" is, as defined by Rafael Lapesa, a set of six sextinas (2008, p. 92) anomalous, because they do not have rhyme and are also not of endecasyllabic verses, so it could rather correspond to what was defined by María Moliner as "sextilla" (2006, p. 1078); however, I insist that they are anomalous because they are verses of minor art, but not of a consonant rhyme as Moliner affirms. Due to the absence of rhyme, rhythm is achieved by alliteration, as we find in the following cases: "Ni cenizas, ni nada..." (e. 1 v. 1), "No me rompas mi caña" (e. 2 v. 4), "con el alma en los ojos" (e. 3 v. 5), "se entretenga soñando" (e. 5 v. 5). The poem acquires cadence with the repetition of close consonants.

The figure of the divine is constructed through a network of metaphors that revolves around the image of the luminous and the warm and that gives consistency to the poem. In stanza number three, we find the verses "A single candle / smoked indecisively / between extinguishing and not" (vv. 1-3) where a metaphorical fabric that is completed with stanza two, with the image of a reed, metaphor of a fragile hold; both images build a universal sense of loss from misery, from the desolation of running out of what little is at the hands of the inclement divine action that, like the irrational forces of nature – primitive divinities – whips, like a storm or volcano, without regard, destroying everything in its path.

The definition of the divine, in this way, dissolves all Christian characterization, belies it, to prefigure another image, much more primitive.

It is by means of the *apostrophe*, as a rhetorical figure, that the poetic voice is expressly addressed to a receiver (that primitive divinity) that is constituted within the textual system and with whom a dialogue is engaged (Beristáin, 2006); the apostrophe is present in the poem and is the rhetorical mechanism by which the poetic voice stops talking about the divine and its intervention in death, to speak with the divine through expressions of great impetus, such as pleading or shouting. With descending intensity between the first and second apostrophe, the first of them will be



constituted when in the second stanza the poet makes an aside in verse three to give rise to the last three verses of the sextilla, he will say: "and I cried out to the Lord". The cry as a means of addressing the divine, recurrent in the poetry of Alfredo R. Placencia, is here the channel where despair and the desire to stop the natural flow of things are condensed, which are endowed *a priori* with that "absolute dependence" of Schleiermacher or "feeling of creature" of Rudolf Otto, with what is understood that that implacable justice of which we speak at the beginning is irrepressible, is the insurmountable destiny of everything.

After that apostrophic cry will come a second call to the divine, now, again bounded, "I went and begged the Lord" (e. 3 v. 6): "Do not turn it off, wait" (e. 4 v. 1) will be the means by which it will be pleaded so that, just as when shouting so that the cane is not broken, neither the "Lord" extinguishes the candle.

Thus, there will be two apostrophes, two moments in which the poetic voice speaks frontally with the divinity, before both cries there will not only be silence as a response, but death will come as a breath and as a break to take everything and that will be the cause of an "exalted pain" (e. 5 v. 3).

Regarding "Death at Sea" it is worth mentioning that the Greek poet Simonides of Ceos (556-468.C BC) affirmed the following, as quoted by Plutarch in "Were the Athenians most illustrious in war or in wisdom?" which *appears* in Moral works and customs: "painting [is] silent poetry and poetry talking painting" (1989, p. 296). And it is in this tenor that we find, from the outset, with "Death at sea" by Blas de Otero from Bilbao, who offers us a poem of an almost pictographic, plastic nature, in which a kind of direct communication is woven between the visual and the verbal to, in this way, as Simónides said, get poetry to be a talking painting, and thus ensure that the result of the poem is not only emotions and feelings; that they are not only an evocation of transcendental abstractions, but that readers find the imperative need to build the world that, through words, the poem suggests and not only that, but urges to build with forms and volume and almost even with smells and sensations.

This poem, an endecasyllabic sonnet with a consonant rhyme, is thus a sum of images that are woven to give meaning to each other; in the poem we find a maritime and gray image that constitutes



the plastic reference of a universal and insurmountable fact: death. In this way, as we will see later, death and the deep and infinite sea become two synonymous images that cross each verse and frame it as a scenic setting.

"Death at Sea", contains in its first two stanzas, a pair of images that are built in the set of the four verses, respectively. The image, defined as the rhetorical figure consisting of the recreation of a sensation – visual, olfactory, taste, auditory or tactile – in this case is a visual image, since its semantic value draws the portrait of men who, falling into the sea, are held by the feet by viscous hands like octopuses. Thus, the almost pictographic nature of the first stanza serves as a scenographic exordium, in which the oceanic setting of the poem is woven with a gray and tragic palette, as of those romantic paintings of the nineteenth century: "If fallen into the sea, they would grab us / of the feet and stretch, stubborn, of them / non-human hands, like those / viscous octopuses that are attached to the skin ..."

In the following stanza we find an image that has an "anaphoric" relationship (Beristáin, 2006, p. 40) and "multívoca" (p. 497) with the first, that is: the second stanza is related to the first when it says "Ah, if dying the same were" (e. 2 v. 1), because when it uses the pronominal phrase "the same" it seeks to suggest that the image of the second stanza is equivalent to that of the first and, in this way, the conceptual contents suggested by both poetic images also equate, in such a way that dying could be the same as falling into the sea and being held by viscous hands or the same as throwing bodies at God so that his horrible hands the necks of men. Thus, the anaphoric and multivocal relationship of this stanza with the first constitutes a maritime isotopia of death in which they are equivalent to hanging from an inhuman grip in the sea and hanging from the "horrible"² divine hands in the immensity; and it also achieves the synthesis of God with the octopus – non-human realities and both repugnant, by semantic relationship. God and the octopus, representation of the *other* in relation to man, become agents of death in the dark and silent immensity of the sea and of the unknown eschatology. Here God appears as a merciless beast of stubborn (e.g. 1 v. 2) and horrible (e.

² That cause horror.



2 v. 3) hands that fit together, snuff, mercilessly in the necks of mankind until they drown (e. 2 vv. 3-4).

In these two poetic images we find an exclamation that lends its voice to become a collective cry in the name of humanity, it is a prophetic voice that rises in the name of all men, it says: "Ah, if dying the same were: cast^{our} body^s to God" (e. 2 vv. 1-2) and with that morphological plural condenses all its congeners, who, like the poetic subject, have the same destiny, the only common destiny: to die; but it is a cruel death, a death that is a symbol of contradiction between the religious tradition that assumes eschatological transcendence and a phenomenology that does not confirm the saying and, in this way, to die is to be suffocated by a discourse of the transcendent that consumes in its inverifiability, which sinks mercilessly into death that does not transcend death (e. 3 v. 1), that is, in nothingness.

For the poetry of Blas de Otero that we find in *Ángel fieramente humano* (1950), in *Redoble de conciencia* (1951) and in *Ancia* (1999), the idea of God, is a tortuous obsession that leads him to throw thunderous verses like those we read in "Death at sea". This is confirmed by Antonio Gil de Zúñiga in his doctoral thesis *El Dios de Blas de Otero. Religion and philosophy in a poetic key* (2010), where we read: "[God] is the backbone of his first poetics" (p. 12-13), but he does, as the author himself affirms, "from the metaphysical solitude of the human being, from his own loneliness and suffering and from the suffering of the other, materialized in the immediate tragedies lived by the poet" (p. 13). And so we find one of the fundamental features of "Death at Sea": the poetic voice does not engage in communication with the divine in a personal capacity, but like that Moses who prayed for his people or that Abraham who questioned Yahweh for the salvation of Sodom and Gomorrah, thus the poetic subject, through the grammatical we, he lends his voice to the men who live like him, the tragedies derived from living without the hope of transcendence in a world that also does not have grips to strengthen itself; the poetic voice is the voice of the prophet who speaks as multitudes

³ Bold from me.



and makes it his own, a collective voice that rises and throws itself on a God whose absence is stunned and who responds with "the tragic apathy of a God who is silent" (de Zúñiga and Muñoz, 2010, p. 14).

In the second part of the poem, God is called "Immortal Love" (e. 3 v. 3), then "Elusive Light" (e. 4 v. 1), and "Water and Thirst of Humans" (e. 4 v. 3). And so, the three circumlocutions, periphratic representations of the term "God," contain attributions to the divine; and they speak, on the one hand, of the transcendence to death of their nature and, on the other, of the inexistence of that same nature, which escapes from the possibility of encounter with man.

Another of the tropes that we find within the poem is that of the paradox, the first is found in the verse "Save O Yahweh! my death of death", in which the absurdity of claiming that death saves itself requires a deeper reading to discover its own logic, which shows that there are two different deaths referred to here: on the one hand physical death, that is, the end of life and, on the other hand, death as the finitude of everything in the material or as the impossibility of eschatological transcendence; thus, the prayer to save death from death results, beyond the paradox, in a cry that doubts and that, nevertheless, clings to the possibility that this "elusive Light" exists and confirms the hope of living beyond the end of everything material. On the other hand, in the phrase "Water and Thirst of humans" (e. 4 v. 3),⁴ which refers again to God, paradoxically conjugates what for the poetic voice is the divine: solace and freshness at the same time as desert and absence, that is, the possibility of what is sung by religious discourse with the impossibility annulled by the existential discourse that the poet then signified, and that more than the choice for one or the other discourse, it is the confrontation between the two that underpins the poem.

⁴ The representation of the divine in the figure of water is reminiscent of the *Psalm 42*, when in the second verse we read "As the doe gasps, behind the streams of water, so pants my soul, after you, my God." However, he opposes the biblical quote, also canonical in the aquatic representation of the divine, where Jesus, at Jacob's well, meets a Samaritan woman to whom he says, "Whoever drinks the water that I give him, will never thirst" (John 4:13). While in the Gospel phrase the divine is water that removes thirst eternally, in "Death at Sea" the God is a water that pours out infinitely and cannot be taken, an appetizing water, eternally beyond the reach of men, in the manner of water and fruit, whose unattainable presence eternally torture Tantalus.



Comparative analysis

Blas de Otero and Alfredo R. Placencia saw their works come to light in similar panoramas in terms of the social situation in their countries: the first suffered the effects of the Spanish Civil War and the second the Mexican agrarian, constitutionalist and religious revolutions. These social phenomena were evidently reflected in his poems. In the case of Blas de Otero, censorship caused the poet to opt for the use of terms that served as a veil for others in such a way that the censor filters allowed him to publish his works, as happens with the term "asembrinas",⁵ appeared in the poem "Ecce homo", on the other hand, we also find the creation of poems where the image of a homeland terrified by the horrors of war has a leading value, as some that appear in *Que trata de España* (1964); in Placencia, the social reality, of intimate personal effects, was translated into a complete collection of poems: *Del cuartel y del claustro* (1924a) and many eminently social poems of *La oración de la Patria* (1959).

The comparative study can begin with questions of a formal nature, that is, with the types of versification that are common to both poets or that, where appropriate, are the mark of difference and, as suggested by Jean-Louis Backès (1994), the conditions that have made these metric coincidences possible should be sought, in case there are coincidences. In the works that concern us, that both authors participate in the same language for their poetic production, Spanish, adds to the fact that they have written, according to their biographies and is verified in their poems, based on the academic training of Catholic education, which offered them in common the reading of the poets of the Golden Age, the Spanish romantics and mystics such as San Juan de la Cruz and Santa Teresa de Ávila and, in addition, the teaching of a classical normative poetics, focused on the strict modes of meter, versification and rhyme.

Alfredo R. Placencia, who would have completed his work before the publication of the first book of Blas de Otero (*Four poems*, of 1941), agrees in the use of forms with Blas de Otero because,

⁵ On the adjective "asembrinas" Julio Neira affirms in "Ecdótica of contemporary poetic texts" that, derived from Franco's censorship, Blas de Otero is forced to change the term "murderers" for the one we see in the edition of "Ecce homo" that appears in *Old age* 1958; this action will be recurrent in other of his poems (Neira, 2006).



as has already been said, he had a mandatory formation of literature similar to that of Bilbao. Both poets will resort, then, to versification schemes with a wide tradition and use in Spanish: Alfredo R. Placencia writes "La caña quebrada" with the structure of a sextina and Blas de Otero will have to write "Muerte en el mar" under the limits marked by the sonnet.

Another formal feature that must be emphasized is that, in the poems of two authors, encabalgamientos appear, which, in all cases, alters the own rhythm indicated by the versification models. An important sign, this one, of progressive liberation from the limits of the classical preceptive by the authors; which would later be more evident in poems from other later books by Blas de Otero, such as *Que trata de España* (1964) or in poems by *Redoble de Conciencia* (1958); in Placencia, in the same way, the poem sees modified the rhythm of the versification model through the riding, which gives rise to the break with classical versification, as we see in other poems of the same books, such as "Mi Cristo de cobre", which Borges knew by heart (Gutiérrez, 2011), appeared in *El Libro de Dios* (1924b), or in works of the posthumous book *La franca inmensidad* (1959), where the poem "Una ventaja" appears, written in free verse and which, according to Hugo Gutiérrez Vega, Rafael Alberti defined as one of the most direct and bloody poems heard by him (2011).

In this way, one of the most important coincidences lies in the fact that the poems were created under the criteria of classical versification in the Spanish language; but also, the two are affected by the metric limits by means of encabalgamientos that take beyond the verse the sense units that of their own must constitute those verses.

Both poets were assiduous in the use of colloquial discourse, from whose sources they drank for the creation of their work. In Placencia it is recurrent to find localisms and terms typical of the Mexican popular discourse, as we read in the poem "The first sign" of *The Book of God* (1924b): "La del volantnero hija pobre y pequeña/ [...] She was betrayed by a sword, reviewing a luck, / and she is intensely discolored, and dreams" (Placencia, 2011, p. 185); here the figure and the term "volantinero", traditional in Mexican life at the beginning of the century, appears as an image in this hagiographic poem that deals with a Marian miracle. In Blas de Otero, the popular discourse appears through phrases made or fixed syntagmas, which he takes to make them part of his poems, as we see



in "Ecce homo" by *Ancia*, where we read: "Grima me da vivir, pasar el rato" (de Otero, 2013, p. 276); the phrase "hanging out" is one of those expressions that he takes from the colloquial register to print that collective voice to his poems.

On the other hand, religious discourse, by its evocative nature of realities typical of other worlds or dimensions or of supernatural and spiritual aspects, which lack material properties, has the need to use rhetorical tools that facilitate the adaptation to earthly realities of that immaterial or ultraterrest that necessarily summons; that is why he constantly resorts to the *prosopopeya*, through which he will endow himself with human characteristics to the divine. Although the evocation of ethereal realities requires *prosopopeya*, this evocation, which most often involves dialogue with spiritual entities with which it seeks to link or link, demands that it be interwoven with expressions of the apostrophe. Thus, the apostrophe, as invocation, imploration or deprecation and, even, as execration and imprecation, will appear in the religious poems that concern us; both texts are crossed by the figure of the apostrophe, which will be the rhetorical mechanism that turns them into discourses directly uttered to the divinity.

The exclamation, that expressive manifestation of emotions, will serve the poetic voices to raise the intensity of their invocations towards the divine, as usually happens in religious discourse; in "La caña quebrada" (e. 2 vv. 4-6), by Placencia, and in "Muerte en el mar" (e. 3 v. 1) by Blas de Otero, the exclamation appears as a means by which god is pleaded, his name is invoked or even shouted; thus, this rhetorical figure, which raises the strength of words, appears at a time when poetic subjects, prey to despair to receive a response from their absent listener, intend this with greater vehemence.

Humanizations, apostrophes and exclamations, common in the discourse of the religious, appear in the poems of both authors, relating them not only to each other, but also to an extensive lineage of writers who over the centuries have made use of these figures to refer to the divine or direct their own voice.

On the other hand, in relation to thematic coincidences, in the aforementioned book by Claudio Guillén on *Comparative Literature*, the Spanish theorist and analyst lists the five groups of



topics that Siegbert Praver had proposed in 1973 in his Comparative *Literary Studies*; according to Praver the groups are: natural phenomena, fundamental conditions of human existence or perennial problems of behavior, recurrent motifs of culture and folklore, recurrent situations, social types and characters derived from mythology and literature (2005). In the works of Blas de Otero and Alfredo R. Placencia it is possible to distinguish five common themes, based on Praver's taxonomy, cited by Guillén. The names given to each of the topics, while not taken from a glossary of themology, or a specific thematic or topical taxonomy, are clear in themselves:

- a. Silence as the only response (from the group of recurring situations).
- b. Divine violence (from the group of characters derived from mythology and literature).
- c. The conception of the poetic self (of the group of social types).
- d. The construction of the divine you (from the group of characters derived from mythology and literature).
- e. The rupture and impossibility of encounter (of the group of fundamental conditions of human existence).

The two poets speak of and with God, in the framework of a cultural reality tormented by war and nonsense, where the desperate cry towards the divine becomes a means that reiterates the imprint of silence, because the contradiction between the traditional idea of the divine, loving and all-powerful nature, and the cruel reality that has no limits or is the object of mercy is translated in poetry as divine silence: a theme that runs through the poems and that marks them with a sign that confirms the Kantian theses, cited by Cervantes-Ortiz (2004), on the impossibility of reaching God or verifying its existence by rational means or, more precisely, through concepts, because it is a suprarational entity; First, it is verified that the divine cannot be verified because it does not act or hear or respond and, on the other hand, by exhibiting the incongruity between two discourses: that of the Christian religious that appeals to prayer as a vehicle of dialogue and that of objective reality in which the answer simply does not happen.



Discussion and conclusions

I.

The religious poetry of the Spaniard Blas de Otero (1916-1979) and the Mexican Alfredo R. Placencia (1875-1930), object of the present work, are a cultural representation of one of the many spiritual situations of the twentieth century: situation sustained through confrontation, rejection and even denial of the divine; it is a poetry of high tension, based on emptiness and helplessness. A tension sustained under the scheme of impossibility and disagreement, as verified through the analysis of each poem and the two as a whole.

In addition to the construction of a poetic self that suffers, that is a victim of its doubts and of the immutable divine mutism, there is also a man who challenges, who is not satisfied with absence or violence. Placencia, as in the poem of Blas de Otero, weaves a relationship with the divine, no longer through verticality and veneration, but through confrontation, although in the poem of the Mexican it is more discreet and contained.

In this way, the rupture becomes the vehicle to show and underline the impossibility of dialogue and less of the encounter, because, if on the one hand the interlocutor does not respond to the voices that call him and, on the other, when he responds he does not do it with words, but with violence, the encounter, the fact of coinciding, it moves away from all possibility.

The struggle embodied in the poems confronts not man and God alone, but also two discourses about the divine; it is two objective cultural realities that conflict in the poems: on the one hand the attributes that Christian orthodoxy designates, as infallible, for the image of God and, on the other hand, a reality seen with critical eyes that calls into question that first discourse generating a new one, that of doubt, that of irreverence and confrontation, where that vertical ineffability is nullified by the horizontality that shouts, confronts and questions.

This new way of speaking with and of God is the consequence of two systems that the texts present: that of divine silence and violence, and hence, impossibility and disagreement.



II.

The rhetorical figures of religious discourse appear in a leading way in the corpus analyzed: they resort to the prosopopeya, through which the divine is endowed with human characteristics, which is an ethereal reality in the religious tradition that both Blas de Otero and Alfredo R. Placencia sign, Christianity; the exclamation, that expressive manifestation of emotions, will serve the poetic voices to raise the intensity of their invocations towards the divine, as normally happens in religious discourse and, finally, all the texts are crossed by the figure of the apostrophe, which will be the rhetorical mechanism that turns them into speeches directly uttered to the divinity.

The use of everyday language, whether popular lexical records, localisms or fixed syntagmas, makes them not only poets who drink from everyday language, but allows their poems to be a voice that is assumed prophetic or collective that speaks, as evidenced by the meaning of their works, giving voice not to an individual self, but to a collective being: humanity.

III.

The construction of the divine you is woven through the confrontation of the discourses of paternal love that opposes silence, the strong shoulder that holds becomes a hand that destroys and charity becomes a merciless scourge; the god is no longer an all-powerful figure to worship and to whom to humble himself, but a horizontal scheme is structured in which man can call god from you to you without discursive limitations or atavistic forms around dialogue with the divine.

And although there is no unified image of the divine, silence will be a common denominator, a silence that is accentuated due to the characteristic of the god, as a silent or absent interlocutor in the framework of the lyrical apostrophes that both the sonnet of Blas de Otero, and the sextine of Placencia constitute.

God becomes, after his silence and deafness, an absent interlocutor who leads dialogue to the edges of the monologue, by talking to someone who does not exist or, if he exists, does not attend to prayers. They are texts that manifest the rupture of man with the divine, of the self with the you,



there is silence and there is violence, a binomial that, conjugated, results, precisely, in impossibility and disagreement.

Faced with the impossibility of dialogue, caused by silence and absence, the centrality that takes the configuration of a self in the poems of both is evident, the poetic subjects are outlined through the discourses they emit in relation to the divine and also through the direct definition that they make of themselves. In this way, the theme of the conception of oneself unfolds in all the poems and becomes what Luján Atienza would call "referential anchorage" (2007, p. 41) and "axis of meaning that runs throughout the poem" (p. 44). The poetic self does not meet god and then concentrates on defining himself; in the poem of Blas de Otero, as in that of Placencia, god is not the central object of the works, but man is. Thus, we find a humanist religious poetry that seeks to define man, although a different figure of man in both cases: Blas de Otero offers us the image of a more violent and challenging poetic man-yo, a self in metaphysical solitude that denies it; while in Placencia's poem we find a self-clinging to believe, but full of doubts, a self that has a hope not based on certainties but on desires, a self that seeks to be overcome, but more than itself, seeks that uncertainty be overcome by the god. Finally, it is important to highlight the figure that runs through the work of the two authors, and it is the metaphorical synthesis of the profile of the poetic self: the image of the almsman, beggar or beggar.

Both works move from the impossibility of the encounter with the you to the self-definition of the self, although they have important differences: the sonnet of Blas de Otero reflects a poetic self-more social than that of Placencia; the poem of the Basque presents a more prophetic voice while that of Placencia has a more intimate voice, more of I-you and not of us-you.

The religious poems to which an analytical and interpretative approach has been made here through Stylistics and Comparative Literature are, in short: literary works through which the idea of the impossibility of dialogue with the transcendent-eschatological is woven because of violence, silence or non-existence. All through the rhetorical forms already mentioned, among many more, and through the use of cultural voices drunk from reality and that have faced each other within the verses.



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