Abstract: this article argues that the ultimate failure of the early 20th century Latin American avant-garde to carry through its original promise of transforming reality through art, as viewed through the vanguardista poetry of Vicente Huidobro and Pablo Neruda, is only a failure if we measure it against Hegelian expectations of an artistic vision of unity or totality. On the other hand, if we accept that contradictions in an artist or an artistic body of work can exist without being “problematic” or necessarily demanding resolution then arguably the poetry of Huidobro’s Altazor and the first two cycles of Neruda’s Residencia en la tierra is a more faithful and accurate record of “lived experience” than more “realist” post-vanguardist works such as Neruda’s Canto general or España en el corazón.

Introduction
The two Chilean poets Pablo Neruda and Vicente Huidobro have been characterised by many scholars as representative of two rival, antagonistic tendencies within the 20th century literary avant-garde. On the one hand, the poetry of Huidobro is generally seen as tending towards abstraction and the exaltation of the poet’s ability to transcend reality, while on the other the poetry of Neruda (at least in his pre-1935 vanguardista phase) is perceived as tending towards dissolution and self-negation (see for example Yurkievich “Los avatares de la vanguardia” 352-353). Other scholars have identified these two rival tendencies as belonging not exclusively to particular poets but rather to two different “phases” of the avant-garde – the first (optimistic, affirmative) corresponding with the initial publication of various revolutionary manifestos, the second (pessimistic) with the production of the major poetic works themselves (see for instance Shaw 32-33).

However, this article will contend that on the contrary these two opposing tendencies (of self-affirmation and self-negation) can be seen to be present simultaneously in the avant-garde poetry of both Neruda and Huidobro, and that as such the similarities between these two poets are more significant than their differences. This despite the well-documented, bitter decades-long literary rivalry between Huidobro and Neruda (also involving a third party in the form of their fellow Chilean Communist Party member and vanguardista Pablo de Rokha) that came to be known as “la guerrilla literaria” (Zerán 23-26). Ultimately it will be argued that it was the perceived incompatibility of this artistic disunity or contradiction with a commitment to orthodox Marxism that led Neruda (along with many other avant-garde poets such as the Peruvian César Vallejo and the Spaniard Rafael Alberti) to renounce vanguardismo in favour of a more “realist” aesthetic. As a result, only Huidobro and a handful of other Spanish American poets such as Octavio Paz and Oliverio Girondo were left to continue with the so-called “vanguardist experiment”.

This view is based on fact that orthodox or “classical” Marxism, due to its Hegelian origins, is predisposed to seek unity in any given set of contradictions, and as such cannot reconcile itself to an aesthetic (such as that of vanguardismo) which is inherently unstable, hermetic and self-contradictory. In the world of Hegelian dialectics, thesis plus antithesis must necessarily lead to synthesis. However, the argument put forward here is that, contrary to the Hegelian view, resolution of the many inherent contradictions within the literary avant-garde was neither inevitable nor necessarily desirable.

In this respect this author does not reject a dialectical approach to art so much as the Hegelian version of the dialectic, following the neo-Marxist philosopher Theodor Adorno who famously argued against the concept of dialectics and in particular the “negation of the negation” as an instrument allowing the reconciliation of mutually antagonistic elements into a positive totality (an application of the dialectic typical of leading orthodox Marxist practitioners such as György Lukács). As Adorno says in his Negative Dialectics:

To equate the negation of the negation with positivity is the quintessence of identification; it is the formal principle in its purest form. What thus wins out in the inmost core of [Hegelian] dialectics is the anti-dialectical principle: that traditional logic which, “more arithmetico”, takes minus times minus for a plus (Negative Dialectics 158).

In what follows then, we shall attempt to show that the conflicted and often contradictory poetry of Huidobro and Neruda written in the period between 1916 and 1935 constitute an example of this “Negative Dialectic” in motion – that is to say, that far being merely (in the words of Huidobro’s Altazor) a “paradoja fatal” the contradictions of these poets represent the only rational response to the fragmented and irrational nature of capitalist modernity.
Defining the avant-garde

The so-called vanguardia literaria or literary avant-garde is a phenomenon that almost defies definition. As Renato Poggioli noted in his seminal 1962 work The Theory of the Avant-Garde:

The particular poetics of various movements in the avant-garde do not lend themselves to study under the species of a single aesthetic concept, and the difficulty is even greater because of the lack of temporal distance necessary to establish a fair historical perspective. They are to be examined, if at all, case by case (5).

In the context of the two Chilean poets under discussion here, this problem of definition is made even more acute by the fact that their works reveal the overlapping influence of literary schools (Cubism, Surrealism, Futurism etc) whose aesthetic principles were often inconsistent and contradictory in nature. Nevertheless, a number of general characteristics of these avant-garde works have been identified by scholars that may serve as a descriptive - if not definitive - guide.

The Symbolist poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé and the philosophy of Henri Bergson have been noted as one set of influences shaping the aesthetics of avant-garde writers (Perdigó 120-121) as has the invention of the X-ray machine that revealed for the first time the existence of the "fourth dimension" (Bohn, The Rise of Surrealism 8). As Amado Alonso observed in his pioneering study of the poetry of Pablo Neruda, another characteristic of the avant-garde was its hermetic or "trobar clus" quality (Alonso 9). This tendency towards "ensimismamiento" or opaque introversion has historically been one of the biggest obstacles to the reception of avant-garde poetry by both readers and critics alike, and has fuelled criticism (including by some of its former practitioners) that it was fundamentally elitist.

The turn inward from external reality must though be understood in the context of the desire of the literary avant-garde to radically alter the nature of the relationship between art and reality (Harris 3-4). In place of the conventional mimesis according to which art was a mirror held up to nature, the avant-garde sought instead to imbue artistic creations with their own autonomous, generational capacity (Pérez 50).

However this autonomy was essentially negative in nature - as the critic Peter Bürger points out the avant-garde sought to stress its independence from bourgeois society primarily as a reaction against the set of capitalist economic relations that the avant-garde artists saw as undermining their status within that society (Bürger 85). Whereas in feudal society art had performed a vital role in legitimating the power of the aristocracy and the Church, in the age of capitalism the artist was deprived of the security of noble patronage and condemned to eke out an existence as a producer of commodities whose success or otherwise depended on the vagaries of the market.

No wonder then that Adorno should feel moved to make the provocative claim that "art is the social antithesis of society" (Aesthetic Theory 8). Given the prevailing state of "unfreedom" and irrationality in bourgeois society, Adorno argues that rejection of the empirical world is for the artist the only logical choice. In opposition to the champion of Marxist realism Lukács, Adorno stressed the impossibility of objectivity or "disinterestedness" in art, for as he points out in a society riddled with so many antagonisms and so much irrationality the very idea of an artistic conception of organic unity or totality seems manifestly absurd (Bürger 84).

On the other side of the ledger, the continuity that existed between the 20th century avant-garde and earlier schools such as Symbolism, Romanticism and Hispanic Modernism (in particular the poetry of Rubén Darío) has led to some scholars casting doubt on the notion that the avant-garde constituted a radical or revolutionary rupture in the history of Western literature. While most would not go as far as Poggioli in concluding therefore that the real starting point of the avant-garde should be pushed back to the mid-19th century, there appears to be a general consensus that many of the literary techniques and motifs employed by the poets of the avant-garde were borrowed from writers like Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Whitman and Darío (Yurkievich, “Los avatares” 359; Costa, “El creacionismo pre-polémico” 262). Moreover, while the profound political and spiritual crisis of the First World War is often credited with a crucial role in the formation of the avant-garde, in fact its two founding documents (Marinetti's Manifesto del futurismo and Apollinaire's Les peintres cubistes) were published before 1914.

Undoubtedly the key figure in the birth of the avant-garde in the Spanish-speaking world was the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire. While the other great literary revolutionary the Italian Filippo Marinetti was not without influence (especially in the area of poetic imagery) the core aesthetic of his Futurist credo was criticised by leading Spanish American vanguardistas such as Huidobro, who famously observed that "cantar la guerra, los boxeadores, la violencia, los atletas, es algo mucho más antiguo que Pindaro" ("Futurismo y maquinismo" 744).
Even in Spain itself, Futurism - despite gaining wide currency during the second decade of the 20th century thanks to the proselytising efforts of its chief local adherent Ramón Gómez de la Serna - was superseded from around 1920 onwards by the followers of Apollinaire (Bohn, Apollinaire and the International Avant-Garde 170). Against the "cult of the new" proposed by Marinetti, Apollinaire and the literary cubists grouped around the Parisian review Nord-Sud stressed the key role of the poet in not merely imitating the new reality but also in fundamentally transforming our perception of it. As Apollinaire put it in his 1917 manifesto L'esprit nouveau et les poètes:

*Même s'il est vrai qu'il n'y a rien de nouveau sous le soleil, il ne consent point à ne pas approfondir tout ce qui n'est pas nouveau sous le soleil... Il y a mille et mille combinaisons naturelles qui n'ont jamais été composées... Il est tout dans la surprise.* (391)

(Even if it is true that there is nothing new under the sun, it [the new spirit] does not consent to abjure the discovery of new profundities in all that is not new... There are thousands upon thousands of natural combinations that have not yet been composed... Everything is in the element of surprise)

The practice of the juxtaposition of seemingly antagonistic or contradictory elements to form new images is without doubt one of the most important contributions of Apollinaire to the literary avant-garde, as René de Costa underlines in his biography of Huidobro (Costa, Careers of a poet 49). To be sure, this practice had certain historical precedents in the baroque poetry of Gongora and the English metaphysical poets, however as Renato Poggioli points out despite the sense of disillusionment or desengaño present in both the poetry of the baroque and avant-garde schools there is a fundamental difference in terms of their attitude towards the literary past. While the poets of the 17th century looked back to a lost "Golden Age", the 20th century avant-garde had its eyes firmly fixed upon the future (Poggioli 209-212).

In addition, it should be stressed that although the literary movements to which Apollinaire gave birth generally rejected the triumphalism of Marinetti and the Futurists, it could not be fairly said that they were uniformly pessimistic. Instead, as the scholar Saúl Yurkievich has noted, we must recognise that within the avant-garde both "modernolatría" or the cult of the modern and the tendency towards philosophical/historical pessimism co-existed in equal measure (Yurkievich, "Los avatares de la vanguardia" 352-3).

This is hardly surprising given the many contradictions inherent in Western society at the time - as Ana Pizarro notes one of the most interesting things about the literary avant-garde of the early 20th century was precisely the way in which it managed to bring to the surface "...a través de su sintaxis las contradicciones de la complejidad cultural e ideológica de un momento de crisis" (Pizarro 109).

In terms of chronology it can also hardly be coincidental that the publication of the first poetic work by a Spanish American poet that could properly be called "vanguardist" - Huidobro's El espejo de agua - occurred in 1916, at the height of Apollinaire's literary career and on the eve of Huidobro's embarkation from Buenos Aires for Paris to enrol himself in the ranks of the literary Cubists.

Hugo Verani in the introduction to his book Las vanguardias literarias en Hispanoamérica advances the view that: "en el continente latinoamericano los límites temporales de los vanguardismos son, aproximadamente, 1916 y 1935" (13). Derek Harris in his study of the Spanish avant-garde proposes 1936 as a logical end point, and within the framework of Spanish history it is easy to see why this would seem an obvious choice (Harris 8). Other critics suggest a timeline that extends out into the early 1940s (Shaw 31).

However as the subject under discussion here is the poetry of Vicente Huidobro and Pablo Neruda, Verani's end point of 1935 seems the most logical given that 1935 saw the publication of the second cycle of Residencia en la tierra and with it the closure of Neruda's vanguardista phase. The following years, 1936-37, saw him consciously reject the avant-garde aesthetic in favour of a simpler, more didactic style - typified in the following lines from the poem "Explico algunas cosas" from Tercera Residencia (1947):

*Preguntaréis: Y dónde están las lilas?  
Y la metafísica cubierta de amapolas?  
Y la lluvia que a menudo golpeaba  
sus palabras llenándolas  
de agujeros y pájaros?  
Os voy a contar todo lo que me pasa...* (Neruda, Obras completas 369)

Huidobro on the other hand despite sharing Neruda's membership of the Chilean Communist Party and commitment to the anti-fascist cause did not feel the need to subordinate his art to political expediency,
remaining true to the avant-garde aesthetic even though his creacionista enterprise failed ultimately to realise its original Promethean promise.
Huidobro’s “Cubist” poetry – *El espejo de agua* and *Poemas árticos*

We begin our investigation with the two volumes of Spanish-language poetry published by Huidobro during his “literary Cubist” phase, that is between the years 1916 and 1918 when he was either heavily influenced by or in active collaboration with the group of poets (Apollinaire, Reverdy, Dermée, Jacob) around the Parisian review *Nord-Sud*.

In affixing the label of literary cubism to *El Espejo de agua* and *Poemas árticos* we do not mean to suggest a lack of originality on the part of Huidobro in producing these works. Rather, it is merely a recognition that throughout his career Huidobro’s aesthetic was a constantly evolving one which drew upon many different literary influences – moving from the Romantic and modernista models which underpinned most of his pre-1916 poetry, through literary Cubism to his later encounters with Surrealism and Dada in the form of André Breton and Tristan Tzara.

That Huidobro was capable of synthesising these divergent schools to create his own unique artistic works is beyond doubt, however in his desire to defend himself against accusations of plagiarism by his literary detractors the Chilean poet was often driven to make extravagant claims about the status of his work as an artefact created as it were ex nihilo. Examples of these claims can be seen in the various literary manifestos published by Huidobro after the death of Apollinaire and the break with Reverdy at the end of 1916 – for instance the famous defence of his literary school of “creacionismo” as: “Un hecho nuevo inventado por mí, creado por mí, que no podría existir sin mí” (“El creacionismo” 248).

Given this evidence of an ongoing and fluid process of evolution in Huidobro’s poetry we are tempted to agree with René de Costa when he says: “The only constant element in Huidobro’s complicated life and works is not his much touted Creationism, at best a banner of the 1920s, his personal label for literary Cubism, but rather change and the ferocity with which he defended the integrity of his thinking as it evolved” (Costa, *The Careers of a Poet* 4).

What then are the poetic techniques that make up these two collections – *El espejo de agua* and *Poemas árticos* distinctive?

In essence what Huidobro does in these poems is to create new and startling images through the union of seemingly unrelated elements – for instance those of the night/forest, mirror/water, dream/ship – which in turn work to form inter-textual patterns of connotative or evocative meaning. Thus although the significance of the various objects or images is not immediately clear when they are viewed in isolation, taken together they invite the reader to participate in a radical “re-visioning” of reality that goes beyond the level of surface appearances.

As Huidobro had earlier written in his 1914 collection of essays, *Pasando y pasando*:

Admiro a los que perciben las relaciones más lejanas de las cosas. A los que saben escribir versos que se resbalan como la sombra de un pájaro en el agua y que sólo advierten los de muy buena vista (qtd. in Caracciolo-Trejo, 33).

In addition to this fragmented ‘re-visioning’ of reality, we also often find in Huidobro’s poems a state of tension between a centrifugal force that tends towards separation and a centripetal force that tends towards unity – the forces which according to his most famous literary manifesto correspond to the “two personalities of the poet” (“El creacionismo” 245).

A good example of this tension can be found in the poem “Año Nuevo” in Huidobro’s 1916 collection *El espejo de agua*, in which the transcendental urge of humanity to be at one with the gods expressed in the first stanza:

> El sueño de Jacob se ha realizado  
> Un ojo se abre frente al espejo  
> Y las gentes que bajan a la tela  
> Arrojaron su carne como un abrigo viejo

…a stanza that reads as though it might have been written by one of the English metaphysical poets such as George Herbert or Henry Vaughan – is completely undermined in the closing lines:

Detrás de la sala
Un viejo ha roestado al vacío (Obra poética 403)

The tension between the transcendent projection and dissolution of the poetic “yo” is also reflected throughout *El espejo de agua* in the frequent references to sleepwalking or “sonámbulismo”. Nowhere is this more evident than in the collection’s title poem in which the poet is passive, an empty vessel propelled along by the turbulent seas of his own subconscious – here represented by the mirror/pool:

Mi espejo, corriente por las noches.  
Se hace arroyo y se aleja de mi cuarto…  
Sobre sus olas, bajo cielos sonámbulos,  
Mis ensueños se alejan como barcos.
Only in the concluding lines do we witness the return of the poetic “yo lírico”, the Romantic figure who recalls nothing so much as José de Espronceda’s pirate captain:

De pie en la popa siempre me veréis cantando.  
Una rosa secreta se hincha en mi pecho  
Y un ruiseñor ebrio aletea en mi dedo. (392)

In the next poem in the collection, “Arte poética”, the classic idea of art as a mirror held up to nature is contrasted with the voluntarist notion of inventing “mundos nuevos” and the idea of the poet as “un pequeño dios”. Yet as we progress through the other eight poems of Espejo de agua this exuberance diminishes and in its place there arises a prevailing sense of melancholy and unease. “El hombre triste” warns of the dangers of “puertas mal cerradas” while everywhere things seem to be in a state of decay – “todo se abate”.

The image of the “estanque verde” which we encountered first in “El Espejo de Agua” recurs in many of the poems that follow it such as “Nocturno”, but instead of existing as a space of dream-voyaging/liberation it becomes instead associated with death:

El miedo se esparce en el aire  
Y el viento llora en el estanque…  
En la casa alguien ha muerto (400)

This mood persists through the next few poems “Otoño”, “Nocturno II” and “Año nuevo” (see above) before the final enigmatic poem “Alguien iba a nacer” closes out the collection:

En la vida  
Sólo a veces hay un poco de sol.  
Sin embargo vendrá  
Alguien la espera. (405)

The contradiction between artistic dissolution and transcendentalism is further heightened in the next collection, Poemas árticos. The distortion of time in poems such as “Horas” “Luna” and “Campanario” is one way in which a sense of decay or paralysis is evoked – objects are suspended in motion and the relationships between them inverted – “las horas maduras / caen sobre la vida” (532), “la luna sueña como un reloj” (562) “Sobre la lejanía / un reloj se vacía” (580). Positive images of dream/memory and creativity/transcendence are also present in the form of ships and birds, yet in many cases the ships have become shipwrecks or succumbed to some other form of mischance, while the birds have frequently become lost or deprived of the ability to fly. Thus the “viejo marino / que cose los horizontes cortados” in “Marino” asks rhetorically in “Puerto”:

En dónde naufragaron  
Mis naves florecidas (590)

- while in “Ruta” we learn that:

Aquel pájaro que voló de mi pecho  
Ha perdido el camino (544)

Other images of dissolution/destruction that are repeated throughout the collection include the bird with broken wings, the bird who “agoniza en la garganta” and the absent, unnamed interlocutor to whom the poet often addresses himself, as in the following passage from “Égloga”:

EN DÓNDE ESTÁS  
Una tarde como ésta  
te busqué en vano  
Sobre la niebla de todos los caminos  
Me encontraba a mí mismo  
Y en el humo de mi cigarro  
Había un pájaro perdido (547)

Not all images of destruction are negative however. Along with the anguish and suffering of the “yo lírico” and its many-plumed birds of poesy there exists with the dawning of the “Machine Age” the possibility of an alternative route to transcendence through technology and in particular through powered flight. Thus in “Wagon-Lit” instead of a comet it is a train that breaks away from the stars and cuts across the heavens, while in “HP” the poet launches upon a paean to the possibilities of the new era that is almost Futurist in its conception:

Mi mano  
Dirige el automóvil  
igual que un autópiano  

La estepa  
80 caballos de fuerza (591)
Once again though there is no final resolution of the conflicting centripetal and centrifugal tendencies in this collection – no neat synthesis tying together all of the “loose ends”. Instead we find in the last, eponymous poem of *Poemas árticos* a return to the lyricism of Huidobro’s earlier work:

*Sobre los mares árticos*

*Busco la alondra que voló de mi pecho* (594)

- albeit a lyricism that is now clouded by absence and negation. As was the case with the final poem in *El espejo de agua* we remain trapped in a state of limbo, waiting.
Neruda’s Tentativa del hombre infinito

Like those of his fellow Chilean Huidobro, Pablo Neruda’s early works (Crepusculario and Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada) can be classified as belonging very much within the Romantic and modernista traditions. However, as a younger man of more limited economic means (in contrast to Huidobro’s patrician background Neruda was the son of a railwayman who grew up in rural southern Chile) Neruda’s ability to participate directly in the latest cultural trends emerging from Europe was necessarily constrained and as such his entry into the ranks of the Latin American vanguardia literaria occurred somewhat later, with the publication in 1925-26 of Tentativa del hombre infinito (“Venture of the Infinite Man”).

Written in the wake of Breton’s publication of the first Surrealist manifesto in Paris. Tentativa reveals many stylistic and thematic similarities with the work of that poetic school. However, in contrast to Huidobro’s fondness for inventing new literary schools and movements Neruda was never much interested in labelling his work with some precise doctrinal label, though he was undoubtedly aware of and influenced by many of the various “isms” which continually vied for supremacy within the early 20th century avant-garde. As Neruda wrote in his memoirs:

“Algunos me creen un poeta surrealista, otros un realista y otros no me creen poeta. Todos ellos tienen un poco de razón y otro poco de sinrazón” (Confieso que he vivido 382).

The truth is that there existed not one but many different Nerudas, depending on which phase of his poetry we are investigating. This is generally acknowledged by most scholars, although some such as Greg Dawes still argue for the existence of a dialectical unity or “progression” in Neruda’s work (Dawes 15-21). In this way Dawes hopes to rescue Neruda’s earlier works from the charge of abstract Formalism or Aestheticism, while simultaneously implying their inferiority to more “mature” pieces such as España en el corazón and Canto general. Yet the Neruda who wrote the hermetic verses that make up Tentativa and the first two cycles of Residencia en la tierra is manifestly not the same Neruda who later complained that:

La burguesía exige una poesía más y más aisladá de la realidad. El poeta que sabe llamar al pan pan y al vino vino es peligroso para el agonizante capitalismo. Más conveniente es que el poeta se crea, como lo dijera Vicente Huidobro, “un pequeño dios”. (Confieso que he vivido 385)

Within each of the stages of Neruda’s artistic evolution (the course of which was neither linear nor inevitable) there existed also many contradictions – including in Tentativa. In the works by Huidobro already surveyed, one of the major contradictions was between the transcendental, Promethean spirit and the impulse towards entropy and dissolution. In Tentativa we find the same basic tension between a personal quest for/attempt to embrace the absolute on the one hand, and on the other the strong conviction that this attempt can only ultimately end in failure.

Throughout Tentativa there is a strong atmosphere of liminality or being between and beyond different times and/or spaces. This is accomplished right at the start of the poem in the first canto which concludes with the lines “sólo una estrella inmóvil su fósforo azul / los movimientos de la noche aturden hacia el cielo” (Canto I) and continues into the following two cantos with the references to twilight (“el crepúsculo rodaba”, Canto II) and the state of lucid dreaming (“el sueño avanza trenes”, Canto III). The dream-sense is heightened by lines such as “la luna azul araña trepa inunda” (Canto II), in which the chain of logical cause-and-effect seems to break down entirely.

The sense that we are confronted with a suspension of the laws of the natural world is further heightened in Canto IV where the poet addresses himself rhetorically to the star mentioned in the opening canto: “que deseas ahora estás solo centinela /corrías a la orilla del país buscándolo / como el sonámbulo al borde del sueño”. This sleepwalking motif deployed in this passage is also used later in the poem in Canto XII: “…quién te dice / sonámbulo de sangre partía cada vez en busca del alba”.

In Canto VI the Promethean dream of storming heaven seems about to be realised as the stars descend “a beber al océano” and “el corazón del mundo” unfolds. The night becomes “un pozo inverso” – reminiscent of the appearance of Jacob’s ladder in Huidobro’s poem “Año nuevo”.

Along with the night, another symbol of the poet’s quest for the absolute/infinito is the nameless woman to whom he frequently addresses himself throughout the work. Yet she too is caught up in the prevailing atmosphere of timelessness/liminality, as can be seen in the following lines from Canto I: “pero estás allí pegada a tu horizonte / como una lancha al muelle lista para zarpar lo creó / antes del alba”. This same image of the nameless woman (la ausenta) as a ship preparing to sail at dawn is repeated at various points in the poem, for instance at the end of Canto IX, after a brief union (real or imagined) between the poet and his “sefiorita enamorada”.

In Canto XI the poetic voice switches between past and present tenses, symbolising the distortion of time as the poet voyages on in his “inmóvil navío”. The closing lines of the canto – “apresura el paso apresura el paso y enciende las luciérnagas” also evoke obvious comparison with the refrain from TS Eliot’s The Waste Land – “HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME” (The Waste Land, line141). The sense of frustration is compounded in Canto XIII where we are told that “todo está perdido las semanas están
cerradas” and the poet-voyager finds himself confronted with “el otoño taciturno” and “la situación de los naufragios”, while suffocating in “los mares antárticos”.

However, unlike other epic poems dealing with the idea of the Promethean quest such as Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the movement in *Tentativa* (and in Neruda’s *Residencia en la tierra* as well) is ultimately cyclical rather than linear. We can see this further down in Canto XIII where the conflation of interior and exterior space that is also characteristic of Huidobro’s *El espejo de agua* is found once again: “veo llenarse de caracoles las paredes como orillas de buques / pego la cara a ellas absorto profundamente” (211).

In Canto XIV, time becomes completely fluid (“el mes se junio se extendió en el tiempo con seriedad y exactitud”) and the even laws of elemental physics are overcome: “…y entonces / amanecía débilmente con un color de violín / con un sonido de campana con el olor de la larga distancia”. Then at last in the final canto the poet asks to be returned to the night and we are left with the image of him awaiting the onset of dusk and another attempt at the conquest of the absolute by “el hombre infinito”:

*espérame donde voy ah el atardecer*
*la comida las barcarolas del océano oh espérame*
*adelantándote como un grito atrasándote como una huella oh espérate*
*sentado en esa última sombra o todavía después*
*todavía* (213)
Huidobro’s epic poetry (Ecuatorial, Altazor and Temblor de cielo)

Like Neruda’s Tentativa del hombre infinito, Huidobro’s three great epic poems are all concerned with themes of love, loss and death. However while in Tentativa the prevailing motif is that of an endless cyclical journey, in Huidobro’s epic works the dominant image is that of a unidirectional fall into the abyss.

This is not to argue that the impulse towards transcendence or the Promethean quest which we have already noted in Huidobro’s previous poems is absent, only that it is effectively negated by the overwhelming presence of death. Death is a constant theme throughout these three poems – beginning against the backdrop of World War I in Ecuatorial before progressing to the fatality/fruitility of love in Temblor de cielo and finally the death of language in Altazor o el viaje en paracaidas. As Cedomil Goic observes in the introduction to his critical edition of Temblor de cielo, Huidobro’s work “…sostiene implícitamente la tesis posterior de Adorno: que el distanciamiento y la destrucción del establishment de las letras se corresponde con el rechazo del establishment politico-social” (Obra poética 833).

Notwithstanding the promise of a final grand synthesis – the realisation of “un hombre entero” which Huidobro would make in his 1931 manifesto Total – no such victory is achieved. Yet for Huidobro the poet (as opposed to the literary polemicist) this is not a cause for lament but instead for celebration – as he urges his readers in the preface to Altazor abandon themselves “…cayendo de nuestro zenit a nuestro nadir y dejamos el / aire manchado de sangre para que se envenenen los que vengan mañana a / respirarlo” (Altazor: Prefacio lines 131-133).

Huidobro’s 1918 work Ecuatorial forms the key to understanding Huidobro’s evolution from literary cubism/creationism to a more nuanced position that straddles many different avant-garde movements. It is also crucial to an understanding of the later works, as it was around this time that Huidobro began working on Altazor – as evidenced by Cansinos Assens’ 1919 newspaper article reporting the existence of “…un libro todavía inédito, Voyage en parachute, en que se resuelven arduos problemas estéticos” (qtd. in Huidobro, Obra poética 720).

In essence, Ecuatorial lays bare the origins of the twin impulses towards destruction and hope that were pregnant within the shell-cratered battlefields of Western Europe. While this setting is partially revisited in the later works (most notably Altazor), here it forms the dominant context for the poem. Some of its passages, such as the following one, read as though written under the inspiration of Oswald Spengler’s Decline of the West:

Los hombres de mañana
Vendrán a desfilar los jeroglíficos
Que dejamos ahora
Escritos al revés
Entre los hierros de la Torre Eiffel (Ecuatorial, lines 231-235)

However it is clear that unlike Spengler, Huidobro sees this spectacle not as a tragedy but rather something to look forward to and the tone is more ironic than melodramatic – recalling perhaps Macaulay’s famous sketch of a “…traveller from New Zealand…in the midst of a vast solitude” standing at some unknown future date “…on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul’s” (Macaulay 548). This is made clear by the juxtaposition of the apocalyptic scene quoted above with the following passage:

Una tarde
al fondo de la vida
Pasaba un horizonte de camellos
En sus espaldas mudas
Entre dos pirámides huevas
Los hombres de Egipto
Lloran como los nuevos cocodrillos (Ecuatorial, lines 243-249)

We are reminded again of the parallels with T.S. Eliot, who batedetically wrote in his work The Hollow Men “…This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper” (Eliot 80) or of the playful nihilism of Huidobro’s fellow vanguardista the Argentine poet Oliverio Girondo. The inversion of time – characteristic of the work of surrealist painters like Dalí – continues to fulfil an important role in this poem as illustrated in the passage above, as it also did previously in Espejo de agua and Poemas árticos. Another motif frequently employed by Huidobro in Ecuatorial that would later become associated with the surrealists is the “ojo desnudo” (line 50).

Perhaps the most striking motif in Ecuatorial however is that of broken/burning wings – whether avian or mechanical. This theme is suggested in the very first lines of the poem: “Era el tiempo en que se abrieron mis párpados sin alas / y empecé a cantar sobre los lejanías despastadas” and recurs throughout the rest of the work. At times the images are threatening – for example at lines 102-3 where the fate of Icarus is evoked (“Quemandose las alas / cual dioses inexpertos”) while at other points it seems rather as though the fall is purely the result of fatigue (“Los aeroplanos fatigados” – line 103). Significantly the
only time that a bird is mentioned by name it is not the graceful swan of Darío but the owl (line 499), the bird of the night. Towards the end of the poem the image of the aeroplane becomes conflated with that of the crucifix — appropriately for Huidobro an image that connotes with both redemption/transcendentalism and death.

As with Huidobro’s shorter works, it is difficult to construct a narrative of events from *Ecuatorial* — rather it seems more of a disconnected/disjointed dream-like reverie on the theme juxtaposing historical events (World War I, the voyages of Captain Cook and Amundsen) with purely mythological ones such as the story of Icarus and the Fall of Man (the latter reminiscent of Huidobro’s 1916 work *Adán*). Interwoven with these meta-textual historical and literary references are purely fantastical or absurd images such as the shipwrecked angel weaving a crown of seaweed (lines 131-2) and submarine captain who forgets his mission and fails to return to land (lines 140-1). Everything is falling apart: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” as the similarly apocalyptic poem by WB Yeats' has it (“The Second Coming”, line 3. We are reminded also of Adorno’s dictum that “the darkening of the world makes the irrationality of art rational” (*Aesthetic Theory* 19). The arrival of 1917, the year of the Russian revolution, appears to offer some hope (“Signos hay en el cielo / dice el astrólogo barbudo” — lines 195-6) but it is all to no avail, as in the closing lines the angel reappears, bugle in hand, to announce the end of the universe.

The next two epic works — *Altazor* and *Temblor de cielo* — are inextricably linked together not only due to the fact that they were both published in Madrid in 1931 but also because in a fragment of an incomplete and unpublished work entitled *La gran visión* (also dated 1931) their two respective protagonists — Altazor and Isolda — appear together (*Obra poética* 727). Nor do the similarities end there — as one scholar has observed *Temblor de cielo* “...retiene esencialmente el plan básico de Altazor — un personaje lírico que se deshace por un espacio imaginario — pero con cierta pérdida de linealidad” (Gutierrez Mouat 62). The “pérdida de linealidad” is perhaps a reference to the lack of dramatic unity in *Temblor de cielo*, however as René de Costa has pointed out the existence of such unity in Altazor is more apparent than real — the product of “a patchwork combination of external ordering devices” such as its division into seven numbered cantos (*Costa, The Careers of a Poet* 137-8), a pattern also mirrored by the division of *Temblor de cielo* into seven (albeit unnumbered) sections.

As has been noted above, *Temblor de cielo* is at base a meditation on the themes of love and death, incarnated in the figure of Isolda — the woman who is the cause of so much heartbreak and tragedy in Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde* (Jimeno Grendi 1466). This opera — which has its roots in Arthurian legend — is referenced in many artistic productions of the 20th century avant-garde, including T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Luis Buñuel’s 1929 surrealist film *Un chien andalou*. The most probable explanation for this is that the core message of the fatality/futility of love and of human individuals to overcome their own tendency towards self-destruction accorded with the pessimistic zeitgeist of the interwar period. On a personal biographical level this tendency to self-destruction in Huidobro’s own life can be seen in his relationship with Ximena Amunátegui which began in 1926 when she was only 16 years-old and culminated in his subsequent elopement with her from Chile to Paris (via Buenos Aires) only two years later, an event that led to the break-up of his first marriage (*Zerán* 34-35).

Interestingly, the quintessentially Romantic opera by Wagner is held up by José Ortega y Gasset in his 1925 essay *La deshumanización del arte* as the antithesis of the artistic antithesis of the avant-garde, which according to Ortega is interested only in the disinterested contemplation of objects (*Ortega 26-32). Obviously this is one incidence where the usually percipient Ortega ended up shooting somewhat wide of the mark.

The very first lines of *Temblor de cielo* contain the declaration: “Ante todo hay que saber cuántas veces debemos abandonar nuestra / novia y huir de sexo en sexo hasta el fin de la tierra” (lines 1-2). The poet longs to be with his love, his “Isolda”, but at the same time knows that this attraction is dangerous — possibly even fatal to his metaphysical quest. Thus at lines 176-177 he says “Todas esas mujeres son árboles o piedras de reposo en el camino tal / vez innecesarias” while at line 214 in one of his frequent debates he warns himself “Estás malgastando el tiempo”. The poet recoils at the frightful prospect of “Dos cuerpos enlazados…en la eternidad” (line 260) and sets in motion a process of physical metamorphosis (lines 262-269) which symbolises his personal search for the absolute/infinite and his desire to avoid at all costs the condition of immobility/immutability:

*Cuantas cosas han muerto adentro de nosotros. Cuánta muerte llevamos en nosotros. ¿Por qué afirmamos a nosotros muertos? ¿Por qué emperñamos en resucitar nuestros muertos? Ellos nos impiden ver la idea que nace. Tenemos miedo a la nueva luz que se presenta, a la que no estamos habituados todavía como a nuestros muertos inmóviles y sin sorpresa peligrosa. Hay que dejar lo muerto por lo que vive. (Temblor de cielo, lines 113-118)*

Although “Isolda” appears to offer the hope of eternal transcendence (symbolised by the images of the oasis and the ladder reaching up to heaven), the poet is determined nevertheless to press on (lines 165-171). However at the same time the presence of death/stagnation is always lurking beneath the surface of the poem, in the form of skeletons and tombs (lines 276, 641-643) and the execution of a Christ-like figure in the fourth section (lines 335-387). Other symbols of death that appear frequently throughout the poem include the familiar motifs of the shipwreck (see for instance lines 621, 635) and the sea (lines...
The sky too has suffered death, stripped bare of its mystery and celestial awe by the advances of science and technology (lines 481-484).

The failure of the poet's quest is foreshadowed in section six where we are told that "...ese juego que habéis creído que es el juego de la vida, no es sino el / juego de la muerte" (lines 584-585) and sure enough in the following and final section of the poem the poet admits defeat:

...Sólo el ataúd tiene razón. La victoria es del cementerio. El triunfo sólo florece en el sembrad misterioso.

Así fue el discurso que habéis llamado macabro sin razón alguno, el bello discurso del presentador de la nada. (Tembloir de cielo, lines 960-963)

Although he has declared in true Romantic fashion that "...no hay Dios suficientemente profundo para mi corazón" (line 688) he is now "lento para morir" and tomorrow will be buried deep within the earth (lines 968-980). Yet paradoxically in his death there is a kind of triumph or at least Pyrrhic victory, as the physical death/disintegration of the poet's consciousness brings about the destruction of cities, civilisations and even time itself. There is a "derrumbe en el cielo" (line 991) causing even the birds of the air to fall leafless to earth and such is the scale of the destruction that those who look upon its aftermath will believe some deity to have been responsible (994-995) and the existence of both Isolda and the poet himself improbable (1002-1003). There is thus a kind of Nietzschean delight in the tragedy of human existence, in the noble but ultimately doomed attempt to dominate a universe in which all of the gods are dead and we are completely alone, trapped in this "Gólgota interminable".

The themes of the failure of the Promethean quest and of the paradox of love and death are also dominant in Altazor. The essence of this aesthetic of perpetual paradox that Huidobro proposes can be seen in the following bold declaration from Canto I:

No acepto vuestras sillas de seguridades cómodas
Soy el ángel salvaje que cayó una mañana
En vuestras plantaciones de preceptos.
Poeta
Anti poeta
Culto
Anti culto
Animal metafísico cargado de congojas
Animal espontáneo directo sangrando sus problemas
Solitario como una paradoja
Paradoja fatal
Flor de contradicciones bailando un fox-trot
Sobre el sepulcro de Dios
Sobre el bien y el mal… (Altazor, lines 387-400)

If as José Quiroga has claimed Altazor should be read as "una pugna entre la voz de Whitman y la de Nietzsche" it is clear that in the end it is the latter which achieves victory, albeit perhaps not of a lasting or permanent kind (Quiroga 344). Already in the Prefacio we have been warned that "...la tumba tiene más poder que los ojos de la amada" (line 44) from which the poet-protagonist draws the conclusion that he must depart his celestial realm and parachute down through the stars to earth – a voyage analogous to the Biblical expulsion from Eden (Schweitzer 413) or perhaps a retelling of Milton’s Paradise Lost in reverse. Thus our hero rejoices: "...háeme aquí solo, como el pequeño huérfano de los naufragios anónimos. / Ah, qué hermoso...qué hermoso..." (lines 86-87). What follows then is a celebration of this tragic sense of life, this hopeless paradox in which there is nothing certain other than the fact that all of existence is essentially meaningless.

From the meditations on the destruction of Western civilisation in the First World War8 at the beginning of Canto I we are offered a glimpse of hope in the possibility of a new utopian society as “Millones de obreros han comprendido el fin / Y levantan al cielo sus banderas de aurora” (lines 126-127) however the dream of storming heaven either fails to materialise, or if it does fails to last long enough to leave any traces of its victory. Instead the dominant tone is one of destruction and disintegration – religion is dead and morality along with it. Like the protagonist of Yeats’ poem "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" all possible course of action or hypothetical scenarios seem to have the same moral equivalency – "Que Dios sea Dios / O Satán sea Dios / O ambos sean miedo nocturna ignorancia / Lo mismo da” (lines 436-439).

The arrival of the nameless woman in Canto II appears to hold out the promise of some consolation, but the transitory, fleeting nature of this hope is already hinted at in the frequent uses that the poet makes of the conditional and subjunctive tenses, as exemplified in the concluding lines “Si tú murieras / Las estrellas a pesar de su lámpara encendida / Perderían el camino / Qué sería del universo” (lines 878-881).

In Canto III we are back on the road to the abyss, the poet having decided that since the nature of reality is haphazard and devoid of purpose then so too are the rules of language: "...puesto que debemos vivir
y no nos suicidamos / Mientras vivamos juguemos / El simple sport de los vocablos / De la pura palabra y nada más (lines 1023-1026). In a kind of inverted version of the counsel of despair offered by Unamuno’s atheist priest in San Manuel bueno, mártir, Huidobro/Altazor proposes the conversion of human existence and language into a game played for the simple amusement of its participants. Again like Neruda in his Tentativa del hombre infinito he paraphrases (whether consciously or unconsciously) the refrain from Eliot’s The Waste Land: “No hay tiempo que perder”, he urges us at the start of Canto IV before introducing a new variation on the same theme at line 1133 “Darse prisa darse prisa” – yet despite these exhortations the attempt to go beyond “el último horizonte” all will be in vain as the sea of death/oblivion is waiting for the moment when it will overwhelm everything (lines 1086-1087). The only effect then of these urgent appeals is to heighten the disintegration of time/reality – a kind of kaleidoscope effect that, depending on our interpretation, leads to a language of non-sense or “trans-sense” (Costa, The Careers of a Poet 155).

At line 1215 the text evolves from the destruction of syntax to the destruction of meaning at the word level itself, with the creation of so many neologisms – golofina/golontrina/golonicima and so on continuing in more or less the same vein. As in Temblor de cielo the poet-protagonist foresees his own imminent destruction: “Aquí yace Altazor azor fulminando por la altura / Aquí yace Vicente antipoeta y mago” (lines 1335-1336). We are now travelling into new, unexplored linguistic territory, as the opening line of Canto V informs us. Poetry, like politics, abhors a vacuum and so Canto V and the two that follow it consist essentially of a series of desperate attempts to “poblar” (line 1402) this space. Yet despite this brave attempt at line 1548 “Se abre la tumba y al fondo se ve el mar”. From line 1630 onwards the poet-protagonist sets in motion a windmill of language which generates verses upon verses of words which are in the final analysis “…full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (Macbeth V.v).

For a time it seems as though Huidobro’s creacionista enterprise might attain victory, keeping the universe in motion through the sheer power of language:

Así reímos y cantamos en esta hora
Porque el molino ha creado el imperio de su luz escogida
Y es necesario que lo sepa
Es necesario que alguien se lo diga (Altazor, lines 1850-1853)

The poet undergoes another bout of physical metamorphosis (lines 1894-1895) but in the process loses his sense of identity. “Dime”, he asks himself at lines 1886-1990, “¿eres hijo de Martín Pescador…? ¿eres hijo del ahorcado que tenía ojos de pirámide?” The word games continue, but all is in vain for at the end of Canto V we hear the laughter …de los muertos debajo de la tierra”. In the view of René de Costa, Canto V and the one preceding it act “to clear away the past and present of the avant-garde, levelling it to a senseless formalism” while “the sixth, along with the last, delineates a future that is equally vacuous: a blind alley in which all combinatory devices having been exhausted, poetry is reduced to sounds devoid of meaning” (The careers of a poet 158). However this view I think tends to overlook the obvious delight that the Huidobro the poet-protagonist (as opposed to Huidobro the literary polemicist) takes in the incoherency of the avant-garde project – its failure to consistently live up to any given set of aesthetic principles. At its heart the poetry of avant-garde writers such as Huidobro is the impulse to rebel, to refuse to be reconciled, a need to remain in a state of perpetual flux. Accordingly, just as Huidobro’s poetry rebelled against modernismo and the movements that came before it, so to it must inevitably rebel against itself. It is for this reason perhaps that Huidobro – like the Irish Modernist poet Yeats – could also be considered as one of the last Romantics, in the grand tradition of Espronceda and Shelley.

It is certainly true that the last two Cantos (VI and VII) represent a clear defeat for Altazor’s Promethean quest, as finally the rules of not only syntax and morphology but also narrative/textual coherency are broken. However it must be remembered that we are dealing here with a literary protagonist who is both poet and anti-poet, both affirmation and negation – by his own admission a “paradoja fatal”. We should also bear in mind that as an essentially Romantic hero Altazor must – like Shelley’s Prometheus, Milton’s Lucifer and Wagner’s Tristan – ultimately be defeated. Yet what matters most is not that he merely fails but that he does so “greatly daring”.

...
Neruda’s Residencia en la tierra (1931-1935)

The poems that make up the first and second cycles of Residencia en la tierra (first published in 1931 and 1935 respectively) were written during a time when Neruda found himself in a state of both emotional and geographical isolation. Jaime Concha has described very well the events of this period in Neruda’s life – his rural isolation on the island of Chiloé in Southern Chile from 1925-1927, his departure for Europe and the Far East in 1928 and his occupation of various diplomatic posts in Sri Lanka, Burma and Indonesia (Concha 49-50). However even after his return to Chile in 1932 the poet still found himself languishing in the depths of a deep despondency, indicating that his sense of alienation was as much political and metaphysical as it was motivated by personal circumstances.

As has been previously outlined, the key turning point in Neruda’s literary (and political) trajectory was 1935, the same year in which the second cycle of Residencia was published and Neruda was active as editor of the short-lived avant-garde magazine Caballo verde para la poesia in Madrid. The following year saw the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and a move towards a more realist, didactic style as evidenced by the majority of the poems written during post-1936 period that were later published in Tercera Residencia (1947). Yet if we are to look at Neruda’s writings from 1935 there are remarkably few hints of his proximate poetic “conversion”. Even allowing for the first seven poems of Tercera Residencia which were written during this period of Spain’s “belle époque” (although not published until 1947) such as “Naciendo en los bosques” and “Las furias y las penas”, there is still little evidence of the radical shift in attitude – from introversion and ambiguity to facile credos of revolutionary faith such as “Reunión bajo las nuevas banderas” and “Explico algunas cosas” – which read as René de Costa has said “like pamphlets written with an almost missionary zeal” (Costa, Poetry of Pablo Neruda 90).

Greg Dawes has argued that “Naciendo en los bosques” marks an attitudinal shift towards a more hopeful perspective in which the poet’s physical environment is no longer filled with death and despair (Dawes 149, 158). However as has already been pointed out in the discussion of Tentativa del hombre infinito, the (fundamentally Romantic) transcendent impulse to be one with Nature is already present in Neruda’s earlier work. Even in Residencia we can still see traces of this impulse, for instance in the first of the “Tres cantos materiales” from Residencia II where the poet expresses his desire to dissolve himself into the roots of trees and flowers. To be sure, death is present here – but so too is life, as the poem concludes:

...a vuestra vida, a vuestra muerte asídme,
y a vuestros materiales sometidos,
a vuestras muertas palomas neutrales,
y hagamos fuego, y silencio, y sonido,
y ardamos, y callemos, y campanas. (“Entrada a la madera” 325)9

The idea then is one of an eternal cycle of death and regeneration, a perpetual state of flux and mutability. As Loyola points out, the “sujeto residenciano” is certainly conflicted and tending towards dissolution, but the impulse to overcome and resist the advance of “time’s winged chariot” (to borrow Andrew Marvell’s memorable phrase) is still present as well (Loyola, 26). However, while in Tentativa this impulse took the form of an epic quest into the celestial world of the night, in Residencia the poet turns his gaze away from the heavens and “….impedido de ascender, de idealizar…bucea en lo terrestre” (Yurkievich, Fundadores 281).

Neruda allows himself to be subsumed into the life of plants and inanimate objects – as Yurkievich says not so much of a “suprarrealidad” as an “intrarrealidad” (ibid). This is the origin of Neruda’s famous credo of “una poesía sin pureza”, expounded in his 1935 article of the same title that was published in Caballo verde. In place of the journey heavenward Neruda now expresses a preference for “una atmósfera humana inundando las cosas desde lo interno y lo externo” and a poetry that is full of contradictory “….negaciones, dudas, afirmaciones, impuestos” (“Sobre una poesía sin pureza” 266). Clearly we are still dealing with a fundamental paradox or duality, albeit of a slightly different kind to that previously seen.10

Where before the binary opposition was between transcendence and dissolution, now the main contradiction appears to be between the poet’s sense of isolation and his desire to achieve consubstantiation with the rest of the physical world (whether human, animal or vegetable). In this respect the “Cantos materiales” of Residencia are reminiscent of one of Huidobro’s later poems, “La poesía es un atentado celeste”11 which although in a strict chronological sense falling outside the scope of this investigation is worth quoting here briefly:

Yo estoy ausente pero en el fondo de esta ausencia
Hay la espera de mi retorno

Y esta espera es otro modo de presencia

La espera de mi retorno
Yo estoy en otros objetos
Ando en viaje dando un poco de mi vida
A ciertos árboles y a ciertas piedras
Que me han esperado muchos años

Se cansaron de esperarme y se sentaron... (Obra poética 1243)

This poem, so radically at odds with Huidobro’s earlier voluntarist, creaciónista aesthetic, seems in many ways closer in spirit to Neruda’s exclamation in “Estatuto del vino” (the third of the “Cantos materiales”): “Hablo de cosas que existen, Dios me libre / de inventar cosas cuando estoy cantando!” (329 - sic). Even so, just as the Promethean quest which we saw in Tentativa ultimately proved unsuccessful, so to the outcome of the quest for consubstantiation in the first two cycles of Residencia is at best ambiguous. As Neruda writes in one of the poems from Residencia I, “Ars poética”, the world for him must ultimately be reduced to “…un golpe de objetos que llaman sin ser respondidos...un movimiento sin tregua, y un hombre confuso”(274). This underlying tension or sense of ambiguity is present throughout the first two Residencias, right from the very first poem in the collection, “Galope muerto”:

Como cenizas, como mares poblándose,  
en la sumergida lenticitud, en lo informe,  
o como se oyen desde lo alto de los caminos  
cruzar las campanadas en cruz,  
teniendo ese sonido ya aparte del metal,  
curso, pesando, haciéndose polvo  
en el mismo molino de las formas demasiado lejos... (257)

The first line of the poem echoes Canto V of Huidobro’s Altazor (“Hay un espacio despoblado / Que es preciso poblar”), except that here it is not the poet-creator who populates the world through the mechanism of voluntarist willpower/language but rather the world that recreates/regenerates itself. The process is somewhat disconcerting and disquieting because it is beyond human control: “…todo tan rapido, tan vivente, / inmóvil sin embargo, como la polea loca en si misma” (257) – a kind of dramatic re-enactment of Karl Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism perhaps – yet at the same time it appears as though it might contain the antidote (always promised but never quite delivered) to the poet’s feelings of alienation and desperation:

Adentro del anillo del verano  
una vez los grandes zapallos escuchan,  
estirando sus plantas conmovedoras,  
de eso, de lo que solicitándose mucho,  
de lo lleno, obscuros de pesadas gotas. (258)

This same sense of simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from his physical environment can be seen in the poems “Caballo de sueños” and “Unidad” which are also found in the first section of Residencia I. The poet dreams of being absorbed into the earth, among the rocks and the plants where “…un extremo imperio de confusas unidades / se reúne rodeándome” (262). In “Colección nocturna” the poet longs for the onset of the sleep (“mi pardo corcel de sombre”) in order to escape from his sense of existential orphanhood, but his sense of disconsolation remains as is evidenced by “Diurno doliente”, in which “Un esfuerzo que salta...apaga mi poder y propagar mi dedo” (272-273). Only in a stoic sense of determination and resistance can the poet find the motivation to continue, as Neruda imagines himself in “Sonata y destrucciones” to be “…aquel que vela a la orilla de los campamentos, / el viajero armado de estériles resistencias” (276).

Sections III and IV of Residencia I mark a return to the realm of separation/alienation: the night-time couplings of “…gordas y flacas y alegres y tristes parejas” lend a bathetic tone to “Cabellero solo” (285), while in the next poem “Ritual de mis piernas” the poet muses on the separate parts his body which despite sharing the same outward clothing are really “mundos diferentes” (287). “El fantasma del buque de carga” (288-290) then sees the poet meditating upon his return sea voyage from exile to Chile in 1932 as a kind of death (Loyola 27), and indeed in the other poems that make up this final section we can certainly sense the presence of time weighing heavily upon the poet. “No oyes la constante victoria,” he asks rhetorically in “Trabajo frío” (294), “...en la carrera de los seres, / del tiempo, lento como el fuego, / seguro y espeso y hervículo...” The final poem in Residencia I, “Significa sombras” then procedes to strike at the heart of what Malraux once famously labelled “la condition humaine”, as we find the poet musing on whether “Tal vez la debilidad natural de los seres recelosos y ansiosos / busca de súbito permanencia en el tiempo y límites en la tierra...” (295)

The poet’s sense of dismemberment and fragmentation is continued in Residencia II which opens with “Un día sobresale”, a disjointed mass of objects and images “… Zapatos bruscós, bestias, utensilios / olas de gallos duros derramándose” (300) that recalling the “golpe de objetos” of “Ars poética”. Death is ever-present (“Sólo la muerte” 301-302) and the poet meanwhile appears to be experiencing feels of profound rejection towards his native country of Chile, when in “El Sur del Oceano” he identifies himself with the Great Southern Ocean which “…sólo quiero morder” the coast of “la triste república” (306). Despite this and somewhat paradoxically, he wishes to be delivered from his lonely maritime existence as the preceding poem “Baracola” (303-305) indicates, with its notably wistful, subjunctive mood.
The status of the poet as a kind of “internal exile” within Chile is heightened in the next section with poems such as “Walking Around” (308-309), which reduces all of existence to a series of happenings or “sucesos” of indistinguishable moral equivalence. The poet is essentially tired of humanity, and his sense of alienation is expressed in a desire to shock or scandalise respectable bourgeois society (“...sería delicioso / asustar a un notario con un lirio cortado / o dar muerte a una monja con un golpe de oreja”). Emotions such as rage, forgetfulness, tranquillity are all subsumed in the overwhelming sense of boredom or ennui.

Only love, it seems, can rescue the poet from his loneliness. In “Oda con un lamento” at the start of Section III the poet is pursued by his despairsing alter-ego, who calls out to him sobbing “…con una triste voz podrida por el tiempo” (320). Nevertheless, he hopes that the girl to whom the poem is addressed will come into his heart “…porque allí hay una sala oscura y un candelabro roto, / unas sillas torcidas que esperán el invierno, / y una paloma muerta, con un número”. This longing for physical union is continued in “Material nupcial” and “Agua sexual”, with the latter poem allegorising the love of the poet for a woman as being like the union between sea and land (323).

Passing over section IV (the “Cantos materiales” already discussed above), we come to the final section of Residencia II which – unsurprisingly given what has gone before – fails to reconcile these various contradictory elements and impulses. Excepting the first three poems which are homages to various poets – both dead and living and the last poem which is dedicated to Neruda’s former Burmese lover “Josie Bliss” – the prevailing tone is again of liminality, being between different times (“El reloj caído en el mar”, “Vuelve el otoño”) and spaces/states of being (“No hay olvido”). However, the poet appears content to live with these various unresolved contradictions or questions, as he concludes in “No Hay Olvido (Sonata)’:

...Pero no penetremos más allá de esos dientes,
no mordamos las cáscaras que el silencio acumula,
porque no sé qué contestar:
hay tantos muertos,
y tantos malecones que el sol rojo partía,
y tantas cabezas que golpean los buques,
y tantas manos que han encerrado besos,
y tantas cosas que quiero olvidar.(343-344)
Conclusion

In the foregoing paragraphs it has been argued that the vanguardista poetry of Pablo Neruda and Vicente Huidobro was filled with tensions and internal contradictions. We began with the opposition between transcendental projection and psychological dissolution (or between centrifugal and centripetal force) that surfaces in Huidobro’s “literary Cubist” poetry as well as Neruda’s Residencia en la tierra. We then saw this same tension resurface in slightly different form in the epic poems Tentativa, Temblor de cielo and Altazor. There, the struggle took form of a confrontation between the Promethean desire to refashion the external world in the poet’s own image and the certainty of failure/death. However, as will hopefully have become clear by now to the reader, the fundamental dichotomy is still the same.

In order to try to explain the existence of this basic set of contradictions, it has been suggested that they were the product not of personal rivalries or differences of psychological temperament but rather flowed from the fragmented and contradictory nature of the artist’s own existence. In a world in which the powers of scientific knowledge and instrumental reason instead of liberating humanity have been harnessed to a new capitalist order based on the alienation of the artist from their audience and of the worker from the products and services that they create, the only rational response (paraphrasing Adorno again) is to retreat into the irrational.

This process of alienation and fragmentation was not born in the 20th century, but began in fact with the Industrial Revolution - which may perhaps be why we have been able to detect so many similarities between the poetry of vanguardistas such as Neruda and Huidobro and the earlier generation of the Romantics (Yeats, Shelley, Espronceda). Since the artist or poet can no longer validate their production except through the commercial operation of the market, their response as a kind of protest is to create art that is as deliberately difficult – even impossible – to interpret for the average reader. Thus, returning to the question originally posed in the title of this essay, we see that the artistic tension and disunity in evidence in the work of poets like Vicente Huidobro and Neruda (before his literary conversion in the mid-late 1930s) is not really a fatal paradox at all. Rather, it is the only logical response to a system predicated on a perpetual state of “unfreedom”. Permanent and active negation – a negative dialectic – is the only course of action that seems appropriate in this situation.

As is obvious (particularly from reading the literary manifestos of Huidobro) this objective outcome of permanent negation is often at variance with the subjective intentions of the poet, who wishes to give unity and meaning to the world around him. It can scarcely be accidental though that all attempts to convert this subjective intention into concrete literary praxis ultimately fail. Whether it is through the Surrealist strategy of lucid dreaming and consubstantiation, the Cubist device of abstraction and displacement or the creacionista model that combines aspects of both, the pursuit of the infinite or absolute ultimately proves impossible. Yet what we have tried to show is most important in the final analysis is not so much this failure but rather the fact that the artist’s own internal tension and disunity objectively correlates with their position in an atomised, fragmented society.

In this sense, the avant-garde poetry of Neruda and Huidobro is a far more accurate representation of “reality” (such as it is!) than anything the most faithful disciple of Lukács could hope to offer.

Notes

1 Enrico Mario Santi goes as far as to argue that Huidobro’s poetry was essentially “dehumanised”, devoid of all sentiment and feeling (picking up on the argument advanced by Ortega y Gasset in his famous work dealing with the phenomenon of the avant-garde La deshumanización del arte (Mario Santi 90-91).

2 Even Leon Trotsky, who collaborated with André Breton and the Surrealists and defended (against the line of the Stalinist Comintern) the right of revolutionary artists to be free from political censorship and control, still insisted in his seminal work Literature and Revolution that the new art born from the Russian revolution “…is incompatible with pessimism, with scepticism, and with all other forms of spiritual collapse. It is realistic, active, vitally collective, and filled with a limitless creative faith in the Future” (Trotsky 15).

3 In the German original: Die Gleichsetzung der Negation der Negation mit Posi- tivität ist die Quintessenz des Identifizierens, das formale Prin- zip auf seine reinste Form gebracht. Mit ihm gewinnt im Inner- sten von Dialektik das antidialektische Prinzip die Oberhand, jene traditionelle Logik, welche mehr arithmetico minus mal minus als plus verbucht. (Negative Dialektik. Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966. p. 160)

4 The view I advance here is that initially put forward by Amado Alonso, who was the first to identify 1935 as the decisive year marking “la conversión poética de Pablo Neruda” (Alonso 339-341) and generally adopted by most scholars. However alternative schemas have been proposed by other Neruda scholars that variously identify 1956 and 1958 as the key turning points (see for instance Loyola 27-29, Oviedo 344-345).

5 All further page references given in parentheses in this chapter refer to the 2003 edition of Huidobro’s Obra poética edited by Cedomil Goic, unless otherwise explicitly stated.
“Túércele el cuello del cisne”, the famous attack on Hispanic modernismo by the Mexican Enrique González Martínez urged poets to do away with the graceful swan and praise instead the owl, which “… no tiene la gracia del cisne, mas su inquieta / pupila, que se clava en al sombra, interpreta / el misterioso libro del silencio nocturno”.


6 For a more in-depth discussion of this theme see Keith Ellis “Vicente Huidobro y la Primera Guerra Mundial”. Hispanic Review 67 3 (Summer 1999) 333-346.

5 All further page references given in parentheses in this chapter are to Volume I of Pablo Neruda’s Obras completas, published by Galaxia Gutenberg (1999), unless otherwise indicated.

12 Rocío Oviedo sees in this division of the poet’s psyche and blurring of boundaries between subject and object the influence of the surrealist school: “Por supuesto, al multiplicarse el mundo, se multiplica el yo en visiones oníricas” (Oviedo 336).

11 Another poem by a member of the Latin American vanguardia worthy of study in this respect is poem number 16 from Oliverio Girondo’s 1932 collection Espantapájaros which begins with the deceptively casual lines “A unos les gusta el alpinismo. A otros les entretiene el dominó. A mí me encanta la transmigración…”

10 Rocío Oviedo sees in this division of the poet’s psyche and blurring of boundaries between subject and object the influence of the surrealist school: “Por supuesto, al multiplicarse el mundo, se multiplica el yo en visiones oníricas” (Oviedo 336).

Works Cited


