

Rafael Alberti and the Grammar of Exile

*(Vida bilingüe de un refugiado español en Francia
Bilingual Life of a Spanish Refugee in France)*

To view Rafael Alberti as, above all else, a poet of exile is not to diminish in any way his work from before 1939. The subject of banishment (from the sea, from his childhood and family, from his social class, from paradise) is, in any case, already present in his poetry throughout the twenties and thirties. The epithet simply acknowledges the fact that a substantial portion of his life was spent outside Spain and that as a writer he consistently found creative inspiration in the range of feelings the experience of geographical displacement gave rise to, from mournful nostalgia to militant, politically motivated indignation. There has been a tendency to view this long period of physical absence from Spain—a total of almost 40 years—as being divided up into two distinct though complementary stages: the years spent in Argentina (1940-1963) and those spent in Italy (1963-1977). Similarly, there seems to be a tacit critical agreement that *Entre el clavel y la espada Between the Carnation and the Sword* (1941) signals the true starting point for his so-called “exile poetry”.

There is little that is radically wrong with this version of Alberti’s post-war career up to 1977, the date of his return to Spain. However, in my view it has one significant drawback in that it overlooks, or at least underestimates, the importance of his very first exposure to life as a refugee writer following his flight from his homeland at the end of the Civil War. I refer specifically to the period of time he spent in France between March 1939 and February 1940. Surprisingly little is known about those months even though for him, as for dozens of other Spanish refugee intellectuals, they must have constituted an unforgettable beginning to the long, emotional trauma of post-war exile. Curiously, Alberti himself glosses over this period in his autobiography in a few brief pages.¹ María Teresa León, in her own memoirs, *Memoria de la melancolía Memory of Melancholy*, adds little, beyond anecdotal detail, to his account of their stay in the French capital.² She, at least, complains

¹See *La arboleda perdida*, 2, pp. 127-32.

²*Memoria de la melancolía*, pp. 390-99. Subsequent references will be incorporated directly into the text with the page number indicated parenthetically.

about how little had been written concerning the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Republic: “¡Qué poco hemos escrito sobre ese mar de angustia!” “How little we have written on that sea of anguish” (*Memoria*, 393).³ From a critical point of view, the scant importance attached to those months has had the effect of pushing to the sidelines the collection of poems which express the first faltering steps Alberti took in exile: *Vida bilingüe de un refugiado español en Francia*.⁴ Long eclipsed by *Entre el clavel y la espada*, which dates from the same time period but establishes a more effective link with his life in Buenos Aires, *Vida bilingüe* is worth pulling back into focus as the expression of Alberti’s very first attempt to register the sensations of displacement and to devise, in order to do so, what I have chosen to call here a “grammar of exile”.⁵ The book offers a raw poetic testimony of that period of persecution and marginalisation during which Alberti, like his fellow refugees, had to come to terms with a double defeat: the defeat of the Republic at the hands of Franco’s troops, and the defeat by virtue of the harassment or indifference shown by the French authorities and the population at large.⁶

It is worth recalling, as a preamble to my comments on *Vida bilingüe*, that already in 1938 Alberti had coined the memorable phrase “esta

³Her complaint has been recently reiterated by other critics who have acknowledged the need to document and examine more closely the time spent in Paris after the Civil War by Alberti and, indeed, by many other writers. Pascual Gálvez Ramírez, for example, asks bluntly in a recent essay: “¿Qué sabemos de la etapa parisina de Alberti, siempre anulada por los 38 años de exilio en Argentina y Roma?”, “What do they know of Alberti’s Parisian period, always nullified by his 38 years of exile in Argentina and Rome?” “La poesía producida por los exiliados en Francia” “The Poetry produced by the Exiles in France,” p. 492. Gálvez Ramírez gives a long list of Spaniards who spent significant amounts of time in exile in France.

⁴Few critics have dwelt on this book (hereafter referred to as *Vida bilingüe*) in any detail. Barbara Dale May, for example, devotes only three pages to it and all her remarks are superficial. Concha Argente del Castillo dispatches it with even greater economy, failing to go beyond descriptive summary. Catherine Bellver, a more alert and better informed reader of Alberti’s poetry, intercalates good observations on *Vida bilingüe* in her wide-ranging study of his post-1939 work. Gálvez Ramírez’s essay is about the only intelligently focused critical discussion of the book, though it should be read alongside Serge Salaün’s brilliant though polemical essay “La poesía española en el exilio o la continuidad (1938-1955)” “Spanish Poetry in Exile or Continuity (1938-1955)”.

⁵Both *Vida bilingüe* and *Entre el clavel y la espada* are officially dated “1939-1940”. The latter, however, was first published in 1941 and the former, a year later.

⁶Alberti uses the following conversational fragment to express the indifference of the French to Spanish affairs: “—Las cuestiones de España / no interesan, monsieur” “— Spanish question don’t interest anybody, monsieur” (poem 3, p. 41). All references to *Vida bilingüe* are to the second volume, entitled *Poesía 1939-1963*, of the 1988 edition of Alberti’s *Obras completas Complete Works*, prepared by Luis García Montero. Future references will be indicated parenthetically: poem number followed by page number. The same phrase, with minor variations, recurs like a bitterly ironic refrain in the pages María Teresa León devotes in *Memoria* to the months spent in Paris..

urgente gramática necesaria" "this urgent necessary grammar" to define the cobative rhetoric that characterised so much writing, especially poetry, during the war years. The particular poem in which this phrase appeared has a somewhat ambiguous status since although it was first published in October 1938 in the journal *Hora de España*, under the title "Para luego" "For afterwards", it was subsequently located under the new title "De ayer para hoy" "From Yesterday for Today", at the beginning of *Entre el clavel y la espada*. Consequently, it is usually read slightly out of context and conventionally considered to represent what Luis García Montero calls a "pórtico de una nueva etapa literaria" "gateway to a new literary stage":⁷ the point at which Alberti is able to recover the serene creative drive interrupted by the war. Whatever title it carries, and in whatever collection it is placed, it remains a powerful, haunting poem. In it, Alberti expresses very effectively the notion that given the circumstances of armed conflict, poetry has no option but to make hurried, improvised concessions to immediate pressures and to postpone to some later, unspecified time its genuine, transcendental mission, "el inédito asombro de crear":

Después de este desorden impuesto, de esta prisa,
de esta urgente gramática necesaria en que vivo,
vuelva a mí toda virgen la palabra precisa,
virgen el verbo exacto con el justo adjetivo.

After this imposed disorder, this haste,
this urgent necessary grammar in which I live,
the precise word comes back to me all virginal
all virginal the exact verb with the right adjective.

Que cuando califique de verde al monte, al prado,
repiteándole al cielo su azul como a la mar,
mi corazón se sienta recién inaugurado
y mi lengua el inédito asombro de crear.⁸

When it qualifies the mountain, the meadow as green
repeating its blue in the sky as well as the sea,
my heart feels recently inaugurated
and my language the new astonishment of creating.

The idea of postponement here implicitly picks up one of the bleakest features of the "urgent grammar" of Alberti's Civil War poetry, namely that in the final analysis, words are impotent in the face of

⁷In his introduction to his edition of Alberti's *Obras completas Complete Works*, p. cxv.

⁸I quote from the 1961 edition of Alberti's *Poesías completas Complete Poetry*, p. 445. The poem is explicitly presented as one of the book's two "prólogos".

weapons. Although the pen can be said to be mightier than the sword and although poems can be wielded figuratively as arms, lending their rhetorical strength to a political cause, the brutal fact was that they were powerless to alter the outcome of the Civil War or even to fix in any meaningful way the immense human suffering it caused. Alberti acknowledged this limitation in a sombre poem entitled "Nocturno" "Nocturne", also from 1938 and equally well known:

Cuando tanto se sufre sin sueño y por la sangre
se escucha que transita solamente la rabia,
que en los tuétanos tiembla despabilado el odio
y en las médulas arde continua la venganza,
las palabras entonces no sirven: son palabras.

Balas. Balas.

When you suffer so much from no sleep and in the blood
you listen to the flowing of only rage,
to hate troubling alertly in the narrow
and in the inner core vengeance burning continually,
words then do not serve: they are words.

Bullets. Bullets.

Manifiestos, artículos, comentarios, discursos,
humaredas perdidas, neblinas estampadas,
¡qué dolor de papeles que ha de barrer el viento,
qué tristeza de tinta que ha de borrar el agua!

Balas. Balas.

Manifestos, articles, commentaries, speeches,
lost clouds of smoke, printed mists,
what a suffering of papers that the wind is to sweep away
what a sadness of ink that water is to wipe out!

Bullets. Bullets.

Ahora sufro lo pobre, lo mezquino, lo triste,
lo desgraciado y muerto que tiene una garganta
cuando desde el abismo de su idioma quisiera
guitar lo que no puede por imposible, y calla.

Balas. Balas.

Siento esta noche heridas de muerte las palabras.⁹

Now I suffer all a throat has that is
is poor, small-minded, sad, wretched

⁹*Poesías completas*, p. 420. The poem forms part of *Capital de la gloria*.

when from the abyss of its language it would like
to shout out what it can't because it's impossible, and is silent

Bullets. Bullets.

I feel tonight that words are mortally wounded.

Words are simply hollow, fleeting signs, disconnected from the stark realities they are supposed to represent. The poet can only gesture vaguely towards the destruction and violence of war, recognising that he has been dispossessed of the means to express them. The true victim of war, as the poem's last line suggests, is language itself. The poet can only retreat into silence.

These twin notions—that exceptional circumstances may bring into being a new poetic “grammar” and that language struggles, sometimes in vain, to register adequately the sense of those circumstances—form the backdrop against which *Vida bilingüe* can most fruitfully be read. In this collection language is pushed to new extremes in order to come to reflect in a compelling way the condition the poet has assumed, that of dazed and defeated political refugee in a hostile, alien environment.

The personal and historical context in which the poems of *Vida bilingüe* were written can be easily summarised. Having fled Spain and following a brief stay in Oran, Alberti and his wife made their way to Marseilles and subsequently to Paris. There they were given hospitality by Pablo Neruda and Delia del Carril who helped them obtain work as newsreaders for Radio-Paris Mondiale. They remained in the French capital until pressure from the Nationalist authorities—now the official representatives of Spain abroad—together with the conditions in war-torn France itself, obliged them to think of moving on and they gained passage on a boat bound for South America.¹⁰ Despite the long hours spent in the radio studio, in the basement of the Ministry of Telecommunications, the job of newsreader was not especially demanding and Alberti was not idle during the eleven months he lived in Paris. He had never allowed himself, even during the most desperate times of the Civil War, to be overwhelmed by his circumstances to the degree that he was reduced to silence, and while in Paris, by continuing to write, he

¹⁰According to María Teresa León, the person who actually cost them their jobs in Paris and was ultimately responsible for obliging them to leave France was none other than Marshall Philippe Pétain, French Ambassador in Madrid in 1939-40 and an ardent admirer of Franco, particularly of his military prowess. She reports a conversation with the Director of French National Radio: “Ayer el *maréchal* Pétain ha hecho una intervención en el Parlamento hablando de ... Bueno, ya saben ustedes que es el embajador de Francia en Madrid [...] Y citó el nombre de ustedes diciendo que enemigos del régimen franquista hablan por la radio de Francia” “Yesterday Marshall Pétain spoke in Parliament of...Well, you know that he's the French Ambassador in Madrid [...] And he quoted your names remarking that enemies of the Francoist regime were speaking on French radio”, pp. 397-98.

reaffirmed his conviction that “life” and “poetry” were inextricably linked, the latter feeding constantly off the former.¹¹ However, in the comments he devotes to those months in his autobiography he refers only to the way he combined work on a translation of Racine’s *Britannicus*, undertaken somewhat whimsically, with poems that would ultimately form part of *Entre el clavel*: “Aquella traducción yo la alternaba con algunos poemas para un nuevo libro, que lo terminaría en Buenos Aires, tituléndolo al fin *Entre el clavel y la espada*” “I alternated that translation with some poems for a new book, which I was to finish in Buenos Aires, finally giving it the title *Between the Carnation and the Sword*” (*La arboleda perdida* *The Lost Grove*, 2, 129). He makes no mention either of *La arboleda perdida*, begun in Madrid and continued in Paris, or of *Vida bilingüe*, even though these latter poems were clearly composed at the same time.¹²

The fact that Alberti attached only a qualified importance to *Vida bilingüe* may reflect the poet’s own view that, like so much of the poetry he wrote during the war, it is a book that is emphatically rooted in the circumstantial immediacy of events and experiences in Paris and represents an attempt to reproduce that directly, with the minimum of mediation. In an interview with Benjamín Prado, following the award of the Cervantes prize in 1983, in answer to a question concerning how his contacts with the language of the new communities he encountered in exile enriched his own writing, Alberti commented on *Vida bilingüe* in the following terms:

En este libro yo quería un poco reproducir el estado de ánimo de aquellos primeros días franceses, la confusión de no saber, en realidad, muy bien dónde íbamos a ir, qué iba a ser de nosotros. Pero quería contar esos momentos tal como eran, sin demasiada literatura, digamos, reproduciendo las palabras, las pocas palabras de francés que repetían continuamente los atemorizados españoles, siempre a punto de ser enviados a un campo de concentración o, lo que era peor, devueltos a la España franquista. Bueno, pues ese lenguaje atemorizado de los emigrantes y nuestro desorden es lo que se recoge en *Vida bilingüe de un refugiado español en Francia*.¹³

¹¹María Teresa León herself draws attention to this when she remarks on their state of mind on arriving in France: “Habíamos conseguido reponernos, trabajar, escribir” (*Memoria*, 390). She also describes how in 1939, despite the circumstances, she managed to complete her novel *Contra viento y marea*, published the following year (390-91). In an interview with Benjamín Prado, Alberti described his entire poetic work as “episodios de mi vida”, “Rafael Alberti, entre el clavel y la espada”, p. 97.

¹²In their sub-titles, both *Vida bilingüe* and *Entre el clavel y la espada* are signalled as dating from the same years (1939-1940).

¹³In the interview referred to in note 11, p. 95.

In this book I wanted to try to reproduce my state of mind in those first days in France, the confusion that came in fact from not knowing very clearly where we were going to go, what was going to happen to us. But I wanted to recount those moments as they were, without being too literary, let's say, by reproducing the words of French continually repeated by the frightened Spaniards, always on the point of being sent to a concentration camp or, even worse, returned to Francoist Spain. Well then, that frightened language of the emigrants and our disorder, is what is gathered in *Bilingual Life of a Spanish Refugee in France*.

This is a fair but incomplete description of the book. It is true that several poems express the fear Alberti mentions here and all of them incorporate snippets of French as signals of the alien and threatening environment in which he and his fellow refugees were living at the time; but there is much more to the book than that. The writer gave a fuller account of the context in which the poems were written and the range of emotions they sought to accommodate in the introductory note, dated 1968, that the 1988 edition of his *Poesía 1939-1963* carries:

Despertar, de pronto, en París, después de más de dos años en Madrid, nuestra invencible, hasta ser traicionada, capital de la gloria. Había comenzado la España peregrina, la amargura sin fin del "español del éxodo y del llanto", que diría León Felipe. Rebosaban los campos de concentración franceses, muriendo a miles nuestros soldados —nuestro pueblo—, anhelando que algunas buenas manos amigas los liberasen de aquellos nuevos infiernos.

Con esta mezcla de dolor y angustia, con el terror y la persecución policial, con el espanto de la segunda gran guerra ya empezada, con la agonía de no saber nuestro destino ante las tropas nazi en avance hacia París, con la burla mordiente al comprobar la indiferencia y el miedo de tantos, escribí estos poemas biográficos, salpicados de aquellas palabras francesas —verdaderas espinas algunas— tan repetidas entonces entre los refugiados españoles. (35)

To wake up, suddenly, in Paris, after more than two years in Madrid, our invincible, till it was betrayed, capital of glory. Pilgrim Spain had begun, the endless bitterness felt by the "Spaniard of exodus and weeping" as León Felipe put it. French concentration camps were overflowing causing the death of thousands of our soldiers — our people— yearning for some friendly helping hands to free us from those new hells.

With this mixture of pain and anguish, with police terror and persecution with the fright of the Second Great War already underway, with the agony of not knowing our fate in the face of Nazi troops advancing on Paris, with the mordant joke of confirming the indifference and fear of so many people, I wrote these biographical poems, spattered with these French words —some of them real thorns— which were repeated so often then among the Spanish refugees.

Everything that Alberti says here is entirely accurate and understandable. I would even say that from a thematic and biographical point of view, it is unavoidable and predictable, and therefore requires little commentary. What is new and intriguing about these poems, on the other hand, are the strategies of expression that the writer uses in order to convey the sense of that particular moment of his own personal history and the history of Pilgrim Spain.

The first point worth making is that there is a clearly discernible overlap with the combative rhetoric of the war. Conditions in France were clearly as harrowing in their own way as those in Spain had been; the "desorden" he refers to in 1983 when talking about Paris in the spring of 1939 echoes the allusion to the "desorden impuesto" "imposed disorder" of the war years, evoked in the 1938 poem "Para luego", already quoted. And since the events were still acutely present in the poet's experience, it is understandable that he falls back on occasions to the "urgente gramática necesaria" of earlier writing. *Vida bilíngüe* contains expressions of the pride the speaker feels at his association with the popular struggle and his active participation in it:

Yo tenía un fusil, yo tenía por gloria un batallón de infantería, por casa una trinchera. (1, 37)	I had a rifle, I had for glory an infantry battalion for a house a trench.
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It also offers descriptions of the horrors of war and the human sacrifice it exacted:

Tenía sol, tenía
libros, libros y libros
que daban a la luz cuando se abrían.
Flores,
en medio de explosiones.
Geranios y rosales que estallaban
lo mismo que la sangre de los niños,
niños descabezados que volaban
hasta quedar asidos de los árboles
y las rotas canales
de los últimos pisos. (2, 39)

I had sun, I had
books, books and books
that looked out on to the lights when they were opened.
Flowers,
in the midst of explosions.
Geraniums and rose trees that exploded
just like the blood of the children,
beheaded children who flew

till they were taken hold of in the trees
and the broken pipes
of the top apartments.

There are evocations of the heroic resistance of Madrid's population as it overcomes the deprivations of the war to reassert to the entire world the exemplary nature of its defence of freedom:

Madrid vencía y resistía
con un poco de pan
amasado por los soldados,
y bajo un cielo continuo de granadas
dormía y trabajaba
asombrando hasta a las raíces de la tierra,
conquistando hora a hora y dolor a dolor
el ser la capital del honor
y las libertades del mundo.
(Madrid soñaba esto
y diariamente lo escribía,
mientras que turbias manos
lo mataban y lo vendían.) (3, 41)

Madrid was overcoming and resisting
with a little bread
kneaded by the soldiers
and beneath a continual sky of grenades
it slept and worked
astonishing even the roots of the earth,
winning hour after hour and suffering after suffering
the title of capital of honour
and the liberties of the world.
(Madrid was dreaming this
and daily writing it,
whilst muddy hands
were killing it and selling it.)

What all these examples have in common, beyond the echoes they contain of the poetry of war, with its praise of courage and its denunciation of the savagery of fascism, is the use of the imperfect tense: entirely apposite for the description of realities and experiences that lie in the past. There is, after all, a grammar of nostalgia as there is a rhetoric of battle. But given the proximity of that past and the way it still haunts and hounds the poet's sensibility, this grammatical coherence is sometimes upset. The immediate past spills over into the present, blurring these temporal distinctions. This is reflected in the combinations of past and present tenses in lines like the following:

Allí vive Madrid, allí vivía ... (2, 40) There lives Madrid, there it lived
 Arde Madrid. Ardía Madrid burns. It was burning
 por sus cuatro costados ... (4, 42) on all four sides...

This fusion of “then” and “now” —the simultaneous experience on an emotional level of both past and present— is also conveyed in the typographical layout of the poems. Verses of unequal length are set alternately on different sides of the page, suggesting this oscillation between different times and places. Consider the way poem 5 is presented:

La Closserie des Lilas.	La Closserie des Lilas.
Madrid, Madrid morado y violeta pálido. ¡De la Casa de Campo! Por la Casa de Campo.	Madrid, purple and pale, violet Madrid of the Casa de Campo. Around the casa de Campo.
No, no son explosiones ni son tampoco balas. Lilas de cuerpo lila era lo que estallaba.	No, they are not explosions nor are they bullets either. Lilacs of lilac body were what was exploding.
¡Ay, cúrame esta herida con agua! Mejor con hojas, mejor con agua sola. No. Con hojas y con agua, mejor.	Oh, cure me this wound with water! Better with leaves, better with water alone. No. With leaves and with water, better.
Que por el Luxemburgo no pasa nada, nada.	Along the Luxemburg nothing, nothing is happening.
No pasa nadie, ¡ay!	No one is passing, alas!
... mejor con agua y hojas, Manzanares.	...better with water and leaves, Manzanares.

The speaker’s consciousness shifts from one location to another, drifting from Paris to Madrid and back again, confronting one reality with another, experiencing them in one confused and muddled “now”. It is interesting to see how an observation in one context —“Que por el Luxemburgo / no pasa nada, nada” “Along the Luxemburg / nothing, nothing is happening.”— leads him, by association, to another where the same word, in this case the verb “pasar” “to pass by”, is charged with a different meaning.

What these texts point to is the poet's reluctance to relinquish a past in order to embrace the present. Whereas he felt defined and fulfilled by the past, he is unnerved by his equivocal status in the present. In the opening poem of the book, the plaintive lines "Yo fui, yo fui, yo era / al principio del Quinto Regimiento" "I was, I was, I was at the beginning one of the Fifth Regiment" (1, 37) register both an emphatic attachment to an ennobling past and an uncertainty as to the current status of that past, hesitatingly relegated to an unrecoverable time. What is difficult for the speaker, as this poem goes on to suggest, is to make sense of the relationship between "then" and "now", to see clearly exactly where he finds himself in the "now" and to accept it:

Pensaba en ti, Lolita, mirando los tejados de Madrid. Pero ahora ...	I was thinking of you, Lolita, looking at the roofs of Madrid. But now...
Este viento, esta arena en los ojos, esta arena ...	This wind, this dust in my eyes this dust...
	(Argelés! Saint-Cyprien!) (1, 37)

The enigmatic allusion to the unidentified "Lolita" is positively charged but it immediately collides with the painful associations of the present that blind the speaker, forcing him to acknowledge, albeit in liminal brackets, the desolate realities of the concentration camps on the beaches of southern France.

The fragment above, with its unfinished sentences, parenthetical asides and bare exclamations is a reminder that, just as in the trauma of war, so in the initial immersion in exile, language itself falters, becomes fatigued, uncertain, fractured. This breakdown of language provides, paradoxically, the most effective means of conveying the speaker's own sense of disorientation and confusion. This is to say that these sensations are enacted textually, in the very substance of the poems. This effect is partly achieved, as the book's title suggests, by the simultaneous use of two languages, and occasionally three, since the odd word of English is slipped in too.¹⁴ The mixture of languages serves to represent what the book's opening poem laconically refers to as "la vida de la emigración" "the life of emigration" (1, 38). The flow of the speaker's native Spanish – the language of his feelings and memories – is constantly interrupted by the intrusion of the alien language of his hosts. The two languages, inhabiting the same space and time, sometimes awkwardly coexist as when a question in one —"Quelle heure est-il monsieur?"— is answered in the other: "Hora de reunirse en Comité /

¹⁴In poem 8 the leavetaking is done trilingually: "Au revoir! / Good bye! / ¡Salud!" (8, 49).

para seguir salvando a la cultura / de esta ola de basura ..." "Time for a Committee meeting / to go on saving culture from this wave of garbage..." (2, 40). The two can be artificially fused to produce hybrid phrases like "la Francia de la liberté" (1, 37) or "la Francia des Actualités" (1, 38) or to combine the private thought with the words that others use in public: "De 'quelque part' muy pronto saldrá un barco" "From 'quelque part' very soon a boat will come". (8, 47)

But the French that the speaker overhears or incorporates into his own reflections is often splintered and meaningless: contradictory, as in the repeated lines "Mais oui, monsieur. – Mais non ...", or absurdly ironic, as in the empty rhetoric of the official French revolutionary tradition: "Vive la Garde Républicaine! / Aux armes, citoyen!" (3, 42). What lodge themselves in his mind are fragments of French poems – "Il pleut / – pardon – / sur mon coeur" (4, 43) – that are manifestly incongruous given his current circumstances, or else arbitrary items glimpsed on a French menu: "Des pommes de terre. / Entrecôte" (3, 41) or mechanically repeated from an advertisement: "DUBO DUBON DUBONNET" (3, 41). The overwhelmed, disorientated consciousness of the speaker can only register vague, uncertain sensations, articulating in one-word sentences, telegraphic affirmations of time and space, half in French and half in Spanish:

Minuit.
Porte de Charenton o Porte de la Chapelle.
Un hotel.
Paris. (1, 38)

Midnight.
Porte de Charenton or porte de la Chapelle.
An hotel.
Paris.

But there is more to the disruption and breakdown of language than this. Elsewhere, outside the "bilingual" context in which the speaker finds himself, the syntax becomes severely truncated, reduced to an absolute minimum necessary for communication. As in the fragment cited above, a single word is often all that he can manage: "Andar" "Walk" (3, 41), "Terror" (4, 43) or "Motores" "Motors" (4, 43). Each carries such a heavy and complex emotional charge that elaboration is either impossible or pointless. The same could be said of the names that appear in the poems; they are simply enunciated and nothing more. Either language no longer has the resources to handle the sensations that crowd in on the speaker, or the speaker himself cannot rise to the challenge of offering even a semblance of narrative or description to gloss them: "El mar, ya. / Un abismo" "The sea, already / An abyss" (8, 48); "Azoteas. Terrados" "Flat roofs, terraces (9, 49).

In such a situation, words tend to become merely arbitrary sounds and sentences are strung together in hollow, confused patterns devoid of meaning. Consider poem 7 which begins with the following curious statement:

Pis. Sigo estando en París. (7, 46)	Pis. I go on being in Paris.
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Here there is at least confirmation, albeit from an unlikely source, of the speaker's location; but the statement leads on whimsically as the association is mechanically and senselessly developed, as if in some pointless language exercise where the plural is required to follow the singular and the individual must be made to lead on to the universal:

El perro se hace pis, los perros se hacen pis, todos los perros se hacen pis. (7, 46)	The dog pisses, the dogs piss, all dogs piss.
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Words and phrases follow on from each other in meaningless incantations. Then the speaker's mind is led, almost by chance it seems, to a diatribe against the French, their hypocrisy, the farce of the whole organization of a corrupt and reactionary Europe:

Pis a la puerta del Printemps, pis al pie de la estatua de Danton, pis sobre la Revolución y los Derechos del Hombre. Pis reaccionario, pis burgués, pis de pacto de Munich, maniqués. (7, 46)	Piss at the door of the Printemps piss at the foot of the statue of Danton piss on the Revolution and the Rights of Man. Reactionary piss, bourgeois piss Pact of Munich piss, mannequins.
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In such a state communication can only be disjointed and illogical, though it can still be unexpectedly and dramatically focused by the realization that the destinies of all the inhabitants of Paris are bound together:

El Sena – ¡por Dios! –, pis, y pis la Tour Eiffel.	The Seine -for God's sake-, piss and piss the Eiffel Tower.
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Señora:	Madame:
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¿ha dado usted a luz un perro? Pis. ¿Se salvará París? (7, 46)	have you given birth to a dog? Piss. Will Paris be saved?
--	---

This failure and destabilization of language are transmitted in other ways too. Sentences repeatedly trail off into silence, unfinished or perhaps unfinishable. Scenes are punctuated with bracketed, marginalised comments, disconnected from the rest of the text. These can sometimes be immediate, distracted perceptions, poignant in their stark, lyrical intensity: "(Las gaviotas)" "The Seagulls" (8, 49); at other times, they are fragments of overheard, parallel conversations unrelated to what is going through the speaker's mind: "(¡Jí, jí! / ¡Jí, jí! / C'est gai.)" "Hee, hee! / Hee, hee! / C'est gai." (4, 43). Words are repeated, chanted emptily or despairingly, as if the simple act of repetition could endow them with the full meaning the speaker wishes to assign to them:

El Prado.	The Prado.
El Prado.	The Prado.
El Prado. (4, 42)	The Prado.
Cabrón,	Bastard,
cabrón,	bastard,
cabrón. (2, 39)	bastard.

Questions are framed in the same way: "¿Qué, qué, qué?" (1, 38) but left unanswered, perhaps because any attempt to answer would be futile. The questions themselves can be so absurd, engendered by fear, that they do not even require an answer:

¿Neptuno es alemán, es hitleriano y ataca en submarino? (9, 51)	Is Neptune German, Hitlarian and does he attack in a submarine?
--	--

* * *

Towards the end of the first poem, the speaker asks a pointed question:

¿Es que llegamos al final del fin o algo nuevo comienza? (1, 38)	Here we reached the end of the ending or is something new beginning?
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Although no answer is given in the text, an appropriate response to both parts of the question would be a resounding "yes". The question is significant because it aptly frames the hybrid nature of *Vida bilingüe*. Situated at that point where one set of experiences merges into another, it describes how the confusion and uncertainty of the present (alien, hostile, contemptible) mingles with the vestiges of a past that is still fresh in the speaker's mind and played out vividly within it. The poems depict a decentred speaker struggling to make sense of his oscillating emotions in his current surroundings. Forced to recognise that he is now "elsewhere" and "unhoused", his self-assurance and self-definition falters. He flounders in a shifting, untrustworthy present that only engages him intermittently, and then only produces fear or contempt.

The final poem ends with a resolution, a firm imperative stemming from the realization that in order to restore harmony and to eliminate these stuttering ambiguities, he has to move forward and away: "Miremos a otro lado que no resuene a sangre" "Let's look the other so it doesn't echo with blood" (9, 53). This is accompanied by an equally firm conviction that such a move will disencumber the present and open up a less confused future, albeit on a different continent: "Bajo la Cruz del Sur / cambiará nuestra suerte" "Under the Southern Cross / our luck will change" (9, 53). The book ends, almost defiantly, on a note of hope and expectation, anticipating renewal:

América.

Por caminos de plata hacia ti voy
a darte lo que hoy
un poeta español puede ofrecerte. (9, 53)

America.

Along silver ways I am going towards you
to give you what today
a Spanish poet can offer you.

It is on the other side of the Atlantic that Alberti will recover a more stable language of lyrical self-expression and regain access to words that are still intact and whose sense has been restored. Meanwhile, *Vida bilingüe*, with its chaotic uncertainties and unsettled grammar, records the harrowing moment of transition from the Old World to the New, the passage from the past to a future as yet only imagined.

University of St Andrews

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