INTRODUCTION

From the Land of Nevermore: On the Poetry of Jorge Teillier

by Carolyne Wright

My instrument to counter the world is another vision of the world . . . It's worthless to write poetry if it isn't a means by which we begin to transform ourselves.

So writes Jorge Teillier in "Sobre el mundo donde verdaderamente habito" (About the World I Really Inhabit), his Prologue to *Muertes y maravillas* (Deaths and Wonders, Santiago: Editorial Universitaria, 1971), an anthology of his selected work published between 1953 and 1970, the period of his youth and greatest poetic output. Like many other poets in the Romantic vein, Teillier found his voice early and has remained "rooted," to use his term, in the source of his poetry, the world of his childhood and youth in the rainy South of Chile:

> My poetic world was the same one I now inhabit, which I must perhaps someday destroy to preserve: the world crossed by Locomotive #245, by November clouds which make it rain at the height of summer, which are the shades of the dead who visit us, as an old aunt used to say; the world populated by mirrors which reflect not our image but that of the stranger we were, who comes from another age to meet us; the [world] where the parish bells ring and stories are still told of the founding of the town.

Such an evocative power does that world have over the poet that, even as he attempts to describe it for us in prose, he falls into the tone and rhythms of his poetry.

Appropriately enough, the poems in the first section of *Muertes y maravillas* are addressed "To the Inhabitants of the Land of Nevermore," deliberately echoing the famous refrain, "Nevermore," in

Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Raven," and alluding to J. M. Barrie's enchanted "Never Never Land" in *Peter Pan*. But for Teillier, who believes that poetry "is a way of being and acting," to continue to dwell in the Land of Nevermore is to experience a sort of dissociation, an alienation from his ongoing adult existence in the city where he now lives and works. This alienation becomes more evident in the later poems (such as "Notes on the Author's Last Journey to the Town of His Birth"), but even his early poems are pervaded by a melancholy that seems to grow from a yearning for the lost domain of the past.

The suspended world of childhood, a time of precarious innocence, exists now only in memory, and its artifacts—the adult poet now realizes—were even then dust-covered and on the verge of evanescing. This remembered world, as evoked in Teillier's poetry, is a dreamy, small-town, rainy Chilean version of Antonio Machado's *aldea*—full of the whistles, steam plumes, and signal lanterns of the same north-south freight trains that bisect the towns and cut through the virgin forests of the Chilean *frontera* in the poetry of Pablo Neruda, Teillier's countryman and fellow *sureño*.

The *frontera* was, of course, a historical reality—Chile's own version of the North American "Far West," as Teillier calls it. As preserved in his poetry, the *frontera* is a fusion of this literal, rainy, heavily forested territory with the imagined landscapes inhabited by the autobiographical personae of Teillier's early poems: the private, oneiric Never Never Land of the pensive, bookish child of "Winter Poem" and "To a Child in a Tree," and the roaming ground of the dream-ridden, restless young man of "Afternoon in Automobile" and "Night Trains." In the cover note to *Cartas para reinas de otras primaveras*, Jorge Edwards, Chilean writer and literary critic, says that

> in Teillier's poetry there exists a mythic South, the same rainy, wooded Frontera of Pablo Neruda, but in this case rendered unreal, converted into a pretext for a verbal creation where trees, mountains, provincial village squares, are tinged with innumerable references to contemporary literature, as if literary space and that of nature were intertwined.

Having lost this mythic South—the "visionary gleam," as it were, of his childhood—the poet re-creates it in his art, giving this recreation a super-real quality. In "Aproximaciones a la poesía de Jorge Teillier" (Approaches to the Poetry of Jorge Teillier), his introductory essay to *Muertes y maravillas*, Chilean writer Alfonso Calde-

rón suggests an almost allegorical dimension to this process of artistic re-creation:

> The village is also an image of the universe. The overlaying of a visible landscape with the landscape of dream, and the confrontation between a paradisiacal childhood and a childhood with zones of darkness, are essential features of his lyric.

The poet is aware of this tendency, Calderón says, and as evidence he refers to a 1963 article, "*The Great Meaulnes* Turns Fifty," which Teillier wrote for *El Mercurio* of Santiago. In this article, Calderón tells us, Teillier discusses Alain Fournier's novel (translated into English as *The Lost Domain*) in which a young man discovers a seemingly enchanted house in the middle of the forest, where he falls in love with a mysterious young woman. Teillier relates this tale to the perennial human yearning for a lost or golden age, a story which in its countless variations has attained the stature of myth or archetype, because "it is this lost paradise which man knows . . . he once inhabited, without being able to find it again . . . which existed once on the earth, and whose final instance would be childhood." In another article, the poet also reminds us that childhood is not solely "the domain of purity, but [the realm where] the angels of darkness extend their wings."

This theme has been elaborated in many forms, of course: in myth, folklore, fairy tale, children's literature, and in the popular culture of the twentieth century. Teillier has taken advantage of this "scattered tradition"—as Calderón calls it—and makes frequent allusions not only to Alain Fournier's book but also to *Alice in Wonderland, Peter Pan*, and the adventure stories of Robert Louis Stevenson, as well as to the fantasy world of early motion pictures and recordings. These books and films, along with the artifacts of the poet's own past—old photo albums, sports magazines, parlor pianos, movie posters, abandoned flour mills, and country houses—are all totems from the lost era of childhood. Like Rilke, Teillier believes in the capacity of beloved objects to retain a certain power and presence by virtue of human contact, and the value which people have invested in them: they become mediums of communion with this now lost, hermetic, almost magical order of life in the past. The poet affirms that his goal is not to "encounter, as Gide has in the literal landscape, words that suggest the mystery," but to "describe the other landscape, the mysterious landscape," the contours and features of the Land of Nevermore.

Beyond the realms of myth and popular culture, the poetic influ-

ences upon Teillier have been diverse. Grandson of French settlers in Chile, he names Verlaine, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Jules Laforgue, and Francis Jammes—whose works he has read in the original—among his poetic ancestors. He also credits the major figures of Modernism and Symbolism who wrote in his first language—Darío, Machado, and García Lorca. And he was also influenced by his fellow Chileans, both renowned and obscure: Pablo de Rokha, Rosamel del Valle, the "Baudelairean dandy" Teófilo Cid, Alberto Rojas Jiménez, Vicente Huidobro, Nicanor Parra, and the giant of them all, Pablo Neruda. Teillier refers to, and in some instances directly addresses, many of these fellow poets in his poems, as in the "Libro de homenajes" (Book of Homages) sequence. In *Animales literarios de Chile* (Literary Animals of Chile, Santiago: Ediciones Lafourcade, ca. 1981), a delightful volume of his articles reprinted from magazines, Chilean writer Enrique Lafourcade says that Teillier is widely recognized as a voracious reader, "immersing himself in Lautréamont and Jarry, in Reverdy and Apollinaire, in the Surrealists and in Jacques Prévert. All his life he has been an exceptional reader of hundreds of literary works. . . . He nourishes himself on prose writers and poets from all over the world, on histories and historians. He reads the songs of blind singers, sports magazines, oriental literatures." Lafourcade also gives us this amusing and revealing anecdote about Teillier and his Gallic heritage:

> I run into Teillier at the Book Fair not long ago. He's watching television, one of the matches of the recent World Cup of Football [soccer]. He says to me, "We're winning." I don't understand what he means, until I discover that it's France playing against some other team.

Despite the diversity of influences on Teillier and his communication, via direct address, with his literary predecessors, his work is permeated with a sense of isolation and loss. Human contact is contemplated in terms of its evanescence, and the poetry is haunted by disappearances, suspended animation, and death—preoccupations that have persisted throughout Teillier's career. The painfully lingering presence of those who are in fact absent—the mother, the beloved, the cousins and grandparents, and the cast of townspeople—is acutely felt in poems such as "Narratives," "Postcard," and "In Memory of a Closed House." Equally acute is the poet's need to recall what life was like in the childhood microcosm by walking the village's now weed-choked streets, exploring its ruined sawmills and derelict wooden bridges, and calling up memories from the time

when the scene was fresh and vibrant with the speaker's sense of wonder. In poems such as "Letter of Rain" and "Afternoon Story," these journeys of memory are enhanced by the company—or imagined company—of a beloved young woman friend vanished long ago. On these return visits, Teillier's childhood village, like that of Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, appears virtually empty of all but its ghosts: the air vibrates with the sound of disembodied voices, snatches of tunes sung by long-dead singers, and footsteps of those returning who never quite arrive—just as the poet himself can never quite arrive in his attempted imaginative returns to the past.

Curiously, only old classmates and pals from the poet's boyhood seem to remain in this village otherwise depopulated of its former inhabitants. In poems such as "One Year, Another Year," "When Everyone Goes Away," and "Notes on the Author's Last Journey . . . ," the poet joins them in their old haunts. They are either ne'er-do-wells, frittering time away in the same old bars, or upwardly mobile petit bourgeois, with dreams of getting elected to local public office and purchasing imported cars. Having stayed in their home town, these old pals serve as ambivalent indices of how far the poet has come—or how far he has strayed—from his origin, that paradise overshadowed by darkness.

Mario Benedetti, the notable Uruguayan writer, believes that Teillier's view is not as gloomy as it may appear. Quoted by Enrique Lafourcade in *Animales literarios de Chile*, Benedetti explains that

> Teillier's view is tersely melancholy, but it is obvious that he does not long for any past age of the world, any lost childhood. His nostalgia is more serene, but also more plaintive than all that: it is limited to missing what man could have been in the face of the surprised, passive landscape. "The time has been too long," he says without fanfare, and we all, curiously, think about brevity, about any brevity . . .

Teillier's attitude toward the child's lost paradise may be more equivocal, in fact, than it appears. In "Golden Age," the final poem in the "Land of Nevermore" sequence, the speaker imagines a future time of unbroken happiness, in which he is reunited with his family in a resurrection of the past. The poem's dreamlike ambience is jarred, however, by an unexpected adjective in the final stanza, as everyone meets "under the solemn, *bored* gaze / of people who've never existed" (my italics). That they will meet in the logically impossible presence of people who have never existed—people who will find the family's illusions about its own supposed existence te-

dious—greatly compromises the validity of the speaker's and his family's metaphysical situation. The speaker then steps outside the frame of the poem to state ironically that they, and he, will only *believe*—erroneously—that they are still alive. Death is stasis, and any attempt to go back to the past creates a false life, a shadow world on the other side of time—false because it is static, because the real past was in constant flux. As is true for the figures on Keats's Grecian Urn, the irony of perpetual youth is the inability actually to live it. The price of freedom from one's "shadow and . . . name" is to have no living self with which to enjoy this return to the freedom of youth.

Death is implicit even on this side of time, immanent even in affirmations that strive, however ironically, to deny its existence—as in the repeated declaration, "Nobody's died yet in this house," that serves as a refrain in the poem of the same name. The poet, returning to the ghost town of his memory in poems such as "The Last Island" and "Signs," relives his youthful pastimes with a repetitiveness that approaches the hypnotic fixation of ritual. Like the last Buendía in the town of Macondo at the end of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the speaker in Teillier's poetry witnesses destruction that is inevitable, inexorable, and perhaps more real than what it destroys. The ritualization of activity here is another form of stasis within motion, a kind of death which manifests itself in the curious suspended life of these poems. In his essay "About the World I Really Inhabit," Teillier says,

> For me, poetry is the struggle against our enemy, time, and an attempt to integrate ourselves with death, of whom I was aware and to whose kingdom I have belonged since early childhood, when I sensed his footsteps climbing the steps that led to the tower of the house where I shut myself in to read. . . . Most of the people I know . . . believe that death doesn't exist or exists only for others. For this reason, childhood is present in my poems, because it is the time closest to death.

The poet's fascination with the various ways in which death is present within life is related to his explorations of the supernatural in other poems, especially "In Order to Talk with the Dead," "The Exorcisms," "Dark Lantern," and "In the Month of Foxes." The ritual actions in these poems (throwing salt on the fire, sacrificing horses, burning fruit trees in blossom) may derive from the pre-Christian beliefs and folk traditions of Hispanic and Germanic settlers in the South of Chile, or from the still-vital beliefs and prac-

tices of the indigenous Mapuche people, whose reservations and ancestral lands surround the towns of Lautaro, Teillier's birthplace, and Victoria, where he grew up. The *machis*, shamanistic priestesses and healers of the Mapuches, have never been appeased after the usurpation of their domain by the European settlers, and their presence still broods, at times threateningly, over the towns of the poet's boyhood.

All of these traditions share a sense of the power of local spirits, the numinous energy of certain objects, trees, and geological formations. Teillier has called his poetry "laric," influenced by the power of the *lares*, the household gods and local deities. In these poems, the unseen realm is superimposed on the seen; the dead mingle—sometimes indistinguishably—with the living; and the "strangers" or "outsiders" who are perpetually anticipated (in "Winter Poem," "The Exorcisms," and "Dark Lantern") may be either living or dead. Teillier uses two different words which may be translated as "stranger" or "outsider": *desconocido*, which means simply an unknown person; and the more complex *forastero*. Literally, *forastero* means "outsider" or "foreigner," but Teillier's own meaning (as he explained in a letter to me) is that of "someone who returns for a time to the town of his birth without anyone's recognizing him." This unrecognized native in the guise of an outsider, who returns again and again to the town, inspiring dread and curiosity in the boy speaker and the other inhabitants, is a projection of the poet himself. He is the adult who is opposed (as Teillier writes) "to the voice of this civilization whose meaning I reject and whose symbol is the city in which I dwell in exile, solely to earn a living, without integrating myself into it." He is the one who will come back from the living death of his present days in that city "sick with smog," to revisit his past (the death-in-life of memory, stasis, suspended animation) and to confront himself as the boy—the speaker of the early poems, fascinated and disturbed by presentiments that the stranger is a foreshadowing of his future self. This future self, who will be the adult speaker of the later poems, is the *forastero* who can never fully return.

Just as the indigenous people and their spirits have been relegated to a poverty-stricken, marginal existence, this adult speaker—the poet himself—is an outsider, not so much by external socioeconomic conditions as by personal choice. Because his values and priorities differ from those of the modern world, he is an isolated, alienated figure, both in the contemporary city he hates but depends upon for material existence (as in "Portrait of My Father, Militant Communist" and "Notes on the Author's Last Journey . . .") and in

the village of the past, which gives him spiritual and creative sustenance but which no longer exists except in memory. The perpetual overlapping of time in the later poems gives them a peculiar, subtle energy. Most are written in the present tense, the author projecting himself back into the past as if he were still the youthful speaker, but a speaker with an uncanny sense that the scenes before him are long vanished. This multiple displacement—in space and time, life and death—allows the poet to invest his vision of a decaying railroad town with wonder, while acknowledging with frustration his own marginality in it.

Likewise, it is the marginal figures among his fellow poets with whom Teillier identifies, especially those poets who died young, their promise unfulfilled, often because they refused to make any practical compromise between the high and timeless ideals of their art and the exigencies of survival in the mundane modern world. Like Rosamel del Valle—to whom "The Return of Orpheus" is dedicated—the poet in contemporary society, especially one who works within the Romantic tradition, can be considered an archaic entity, a survivor from some lost age, whose art is a neglected stepchild among literary genres. For Teillier, "the poet is a marginal being, but this marginality and displacement can give birth to his greatest strength: that of transforming poetry into living experience, and of assenting to another world, beyond the sordid one in which he lives." The poet's inner conflict parallels the conflict between himself and the world, as he struggles to overcome the "mediocrity of the everyday" within himself, and to attain his true and highest self, which is one with his poetry.

These are lofty ideals, not easily realized even by the highest-minded and most disciplined of poets. Except for a few of his *homenajes* (homages), most notably "The Lost Domain," Teillier's poems are peopled with all-too-human failures. Some are casualties of the struggle between the ideal and the real; others are obscure individuals whose inner light may never have been glimpsed at all, characters whose existence was tenuous even in the quiet, small-town world of the poet's boyhood. The young speaker of Teillier's early poems observes, with curiosity and sympathy, the madwomen strolling with parasols or dancing in a lonely frenzy before their mirrors, the tramps asleep under linden trees or lighting fires in derelict sheds to warm themselves, and the drunken peasants stumbling home from the taverns. In later poems, the adult speaker identifies more closely with these characters—the tipsy postman lost on his own delivery route, his fellow patients in an alcoholic detoxification clinic outside Santiago, his fellow poets who have fled into political

exile to escape the "Ogres" of military rule (as in "Now That Once Again"), while he himself has remained at home. In the fallen world of adulthood, this poet is a marginal figure, by virtue not only of his literary calling, but also of his own ordinary human struggles, especially with alcohol.

Para un pueblo fantasma, the first book of Teillier's since 1971 to contain a substantial number of recent poems, was published in 1978, during the repressive early years of the Pinochet regime. There are signs, especially in poems such as "Notes on the Author's Last Journey to the Town of His Birth," of Teillier's increasing disillusionment with his society—most notably with the deterioration of the rural and small-town life of his childhood under the onslaught of trivialized values, values which took precedence as foreign capital and consumer goods flooded back into Chile after the coup. With the arrival of television, children no longer play in the streets; local sports clubs have been superseded by distant professional teams; and the old industries and movie houses have closed for lack of business. The town is no longer a self-supporting community, but a consumer satellite of Santiago, the capital city "sick with smog." The fields filled with sunflowers, the oxcarts, the weathered wooden houses, and the unpaved roads remain; but the poet can no longer connect spiritually with them. They no longer vibrate with inner life; they are no longer the outward emblems of the boy's sense of wonder.

In *Cartas para reinas de otras primaveras*, which was published in 1985, it becomes clear that the poet has lost touch with "the glory and the dream" of his youthful creative vision, the "other vision" by which he meant to rise above the "mediocrity of the everyday." Now, preoccupied like any other petit bourgeois with his unpaid bills, seeking escape in taverns and police novels, he can hardly believe any longer in "the magic of verse." He is also tired, he says in "A Day in Madrid" (in *Para un pueblo fantasma*), of "telling stories of the provinces"—the principal subject matter of his poetry—yet in his travels he encounters only variations of the same wearisome urban and consumer-oriented themes. His days in the cities he visits are pointless rounds of small observations and details. The lines of poetry which he reads in "A Day in Madrid," and even those which his provincial Chilean poet friends send him in "Now That Once Again," seem precious and self-indulgent: he quotes them only to expose their shallowness. He yearns nevertheless for the *frontera*, but when he returns in "Notes on the Author's Last Journey . . ." as "the poet whose name appears regularly in the papers," he discovers that he is indeed a *forastero*, a native son come home a stranger

("lonely where I have never been lonely"), as he always knew and dreaded he would become. The "other vision" of his youth, which he meant to evoke in poetry, has faded; even poetry itself has become an empty form, the writing of it an empty exercise. The longing for home is futile, since he cannot go home again to a town that no longer exists as he knew it. The movement from early to later poems is a perfectly closed circle, and the speaker of these later poems confronts his own spiritual bankruptcy in landscapes which, whether new or familiar ("You have to travel so as not to travel"), all reflect stasis and suspended animation.

In a country as politicized as Chile, the question of a writer's views inevitably arises, even for a generally nonpolitical poet such as Teillier. During the three-year presidency of Salvador Allende, when Teillier published his collection of new and selected poems, *Muertes y maravillas*, humanitarian and socialist values were the norm in literature. Among Popular Unity supporters and sympathizers, these values were sine qua non, and anyone involved in public life had to come to grips with his or her own political orientation. This process of self-examination also occurred among those in the arts, especially among writers, who worked in the shadow of 1971 Nobel Prize winner and idealistic Communist Party member, Pablo Neruda.

"Neruda was the poetic hero of my generation," Teillier writes in "About the World I Really Inhabit." This was especially true in 1953, when, like other boys from the provinces (including the young Neruda himself some thirty years earlier), Teillier made the "soot-baptized journey" by train to Santiago to attend the University of Chile. By then, Neruda had served his country as a diplomat and a senator, had fled Chile in disguise across the Andes to escape the arrest order of the formerly leftist president González Videla, and had written his masterwork, *Canto general*. According to Teillier, Neruda was at that time lamenting the fact that young people were still reading his difficult, surrealistic early collection, *Residencia en la tierra*. Neruda called to younger poets to speak "with simple words to the simple man, and in the name of socialist realism . . . to build socialism." But, Teillier admits,

> I was unable to write . . . political or "socialist realist" poetry. Son of a Communist, descendant of artisans and small farmers, I knew in a sentimental way that poetry should be an instrument of struggle and liberation, and my earliest poet friends were those who were at that time following the example of Neruda. But [my

> inability to do the same] created in me a sense of guilt that even now habitually pursues me. I could easily be regarded as a decadent poet, but it seems to me that poetry cannot be subordinated to any ideology. . . . No poetry has alleviated hunger or remedied social injustice, but its beauty can help us to survive hardship. I have written what was dictated by my truest self, the one I try to reach in this struggle between myself and my poetry. Because what matters is not . . . writing good or bad verse, but transforming oneself into a poet, overcoming the mediocrity of the everyday . . . in order to go on listening to Keats's nightingale, which gives joy forever.

This was Teillier's statement on his relationship to political poetry in "About the World I Really Inhabit," which was written in late 1968, during the Christian Democratic presidency of Eduardo Frei. At that time, momentum was building in Chile for a speedier process of social change, for more effective land reform policies, and for independence from the influence of foreign-owned businesses on domestic policy. This momentum culminated in the election of Salvador Allende and his Popular Unity coalition in September 1970. Teillier's *Muertes y maravillas*, which included as its prologue the essay cited above, was published in August 1971, during that brief period when the arts and literature of all political viewpoints flourished in Chile—a renaissance of sorts which was abruptly curtailed by the military coup of September 1973.

Besides the prose passage quoted, *Muertes y maravillas* contained only one poem that overtly referred to politics: "Portrait of My Father, Militant Communist." This poem—dated 1961, well before the Allende years—is a fond and admiring recollection of Teillier's father Fernando, whose union-organizing efforts among the rural poor in the South of Chile put his life at risk in the 1930's, and whose Communist Party membership sent him into exile after the 1973 coup. Whatever his father's political convictions, Teillier was not forced to flee Chile on the basis of this poem or the few socialist references in the long narrative sequences "Crónica del forastero" and "Treinta años después" (not translated here) with which *Muertes y maravillas* ends—possibly because these poems alluded to bygone events and did not call readers to take any political action in the present. After the coup, Teillier kept his political views out of the public record, and except for trips to Spain and to Peru to visit his daughter and her family, he remained in Chile. It is noteworthy, however, that *Para un pueblo fantasma*, published in 1978, re-

printed only eight of the ten poems included in the "Book of Homages" section of the earlier volume. One of the two poems omitted from the newer, expanded section of the same name was "Portrait of My Father, Militant Communist."

Despite Teillier's perceived nonpolitical stance, as declared in his 1968 essay, many of his later poems contain images and passing comments that refer to social and economic conditions in Chile during the Pinochet regime. The inclusion of such oblique and ironic protests is not the same as writing in a deliberately revolutionary or "socialist realist" mode, but these poems cannot be called entirely nonpolitical either. Their realism is based on the poet's individual observations and responses, rather than on any preconceived ideological framework. No longer buffered by the uplifting vision evident in his earlier work, Teillier was personally affected—as was everyone in Chile—by the official lies and ongoing threat of violence in the regime. His health problems rendered him more vulnerable, and he treats these with fierce irony in "Clinical Landscape," referring to himself as "the poet in residence," and sketching verbally the various private dramas in which his fellow patients in the alcoholism treatment clinic are trapped. The clinic is portrayed as a microcosm of the society outside: the paranoia which prevails within its walls reflects the paranoia rampant in the police state. A flock of thrushes, alighting momentarily in trees next to the barbed-wire fence, is suspected of transmitting clandestine messages. The only patient allowed outside to purchase the pro-government newspaper is both "a hopeless madman" and a "descendant of Germans"—in a country to which hundreds of ex-Nazis and Nazi sympathizers fled to resettle after World War II. In the madness of right-wing repression, who else could make the correct selection of reading material with the proper attitude? Wasted, self-destructive lives go on here, watched over by the blue plaster Virgin, protected by "saints" who bear the names of tranquilizing drugs. It is a bitter picture, but the harshness of tone is appropriate in a world where beautiful poems with beautiful subject matter seem less and less credible.

This harsh voice finds further expression in poems included in *Cartas para reinas de otras primaveras*, as Teillier implicates himself in his oblique accusations against his country. In "Everything's Gone White," his own double dresses in black and becomes a demonic figure who could be vampire or executioner, pulling on gloves

> which the Prince of Lies hands to his disciples
> so they can strangle themselves
> without the aid of the foreigners who betrayed them. . . .

Could these lines allude to the covert participation of outside interests in the 1973 coup, and to many Chileans' complicity in the continuation of the military regime? This book was published in 1985, in a period when Pinochet was restoring some freedom of expression in an attempt to improve his image at home and abroad. The poet appears to take advantage of this freedom, in a number of increasingly overt political allusions.

In "Now That Once Again," Teillier evokes the atmosphere of lingering dread that predominated in the years following the coup. With his descriptions of the prowling radio-patrol cars and the Lieutenant of the Guard with "his little moustache of an apprentice / Nazi," Teillier insinuates a parallel between this state and Hitler's Germany. The poet is consigned to a wintry urban wasteland full of "godforsaken lovers," homeless "drifters and drunks" who sneak into churches to sleep, and gangs of boys "hostile to the outsider." Again the *frontera* is far away, and the poet, alone with his books and memories, empathizes with all who seem as marginal in their own way as he feels. He muses about his "brothers" in exile, and his decision to light the fire at the poem's end is both a literal response to the winter cold and a symbolic act demonstrating his determination for some sort of social action.

The most powerful poem representing this phase of Teillier's work is "No Sign of Life." The title could be an allusion to the colloquial Chilean term for a political reactionary, a *momio*—akin to *momia*, "mummy"—someone whose human sympathies are dead. Or it could simply highlight the paralysis of will and initiative which overwhelmed many in the Pinochet police state after September 1973. Careful attention to self-censorship and constant vigilance over one's words and actions—these are survival mechanisms such as George Orwell, Czeslaw Miloscz, and other writers on totalitarian regimes have described. Under such conditions, Teillier says, "one must speak in an undertone," and even to slurp the soup at an official dinner is to betray publicly, dangerously, our true hopes. Those who wish to stay out of trouble must "learn to behave" themselves because in the Pinochet regime, as in many dictatorships, citizens were encouraged to inform on friends, neighbors, and family members. Such denunciations became a way to settle old scores or to seek one's own political advantage at the expense of others, as well as a means for those in power to keep everyone divided. No one, in such a state, could trust anyone else. Allusions to the reign of terror that followed the coup are not disguised in this poem—even in the ironically negative assurance that "never again will blood run in the streets," or in the poet's mention of the instructions

to jettison banned "leftist" books and recordings, which many Chileans destroyed or concealed in fear of the soldiers' house-to-house searches for any incriminating pro-Allende material. Teillier's sarcasm is blatant in his ostensible praise of the "time of austerity" after the failure of some of Pinochet's economic measures of the late 1970's:

> Wives sing happily
> while they mend the only suit
> of their laid-off husbands.

Teillier also seems to insinuate that government officials and other beneficiaries of Pinochet's regime are rodents consuming the scanty supplies of cheese in the name of a future plenty they are doing nothing to foster. In such a situation, there is not much hope of speedy recovery from any of the national ills.

All of these references emerge as part of the poet's "desperate song" of love that is not so much lost as rendered pointless, in which even remembering the beloved becomes an "act of despair or elegance," and the only "sacrament" remaining in the debased contemporary world is not any rite of passage through life, but suicide. In the society depicted in the poem, genuine love is impossible; only violent, dangerous acts, such as derailing trains or violating curfew, have any impact. The closest that lovers can come to communicating is to make "sun signals . . . with the hand mirror"—like the "clandestine messages" of thrushes in "Clinical Landscape"—but such limited communication is far from fulfilling for human beings. The poet retreats into alcohol and Salvation Army literature, and announces, as if the news were good, that syphilis "will once again be incurable"—perhaps as an ironic reflection of sentiments held by those who believe that syphilis is a just punishment for sins of the flesh. Similarly, he declares, almost triumphantly, that children can dream of taking up careers which have now become truly lucrative and admired—as "economists or dictators." The cynicism of these lines is a far cry from the tenuous idealism expressed by many artists, writers, and political figures during the Allende years; the irony and even sarcasm evident here are certainly far removed from the fragile "world of innocence" of the poet's youth.

Sadly fallen though the world of these later poems may be, they are enriched by Teillier's embrace of more of the miscellany of culture and the events of recent history than is found in his earlier work, and by the sometime clashing interaction of different dictions and degrees of irony, along with flashes of his earlier lyri-

cism. This mixed style is akin to what Ernesto Cardenal has called *exteriorismo*:

> . . . poetry created with images from the world around us [*el mundo exterior*], . . . an objective poetry: narrative and anecdotal, made with elements from real life, with concrete things, proper names and precise details, exact dates and figures and facts and statements.

Whether or not Teillier's style continues to evolve in this "exteriorist" mode remains to be seen. Certainly his poetry has developed in a more narrative, anecdotal direction, and it took on a political dimension at precisely the time when most Chilean writers who worked in this vein prior to September 1973 were in exile. Teillier stayed in Chile: he was able to witness the full trajectory of the Pinochet regime. His own tendency to dwell on people and events from the vanished past parallels the obsessive recollection of fellow Chileans who lost family members to the summary executions, the disappearances, and the years in exile. Many of these "vanished friends" who survived have gradually returned to Chile, following the return to democracy marked by the December 1989 election and the March 1990 swearing-in of Christian Democrat Patricio Aylwin to the presidency. It will be interesting to see what effect the new national atmosphere will have upon Teillier and his personal forms of poetic witness and recollection.

Note. The quotation from Ernesto Cardenal is from the Introduction to *With Walker in Nicaragua* (Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1984). The translation is by Jonathan Cohen. All other quotations of writings by Jorge Teillier and others are translated by Carolyne Wright.

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