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ANTONIO DE HOYOS Y VINENT

## ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE INSURMOUNTABLE WALL

*TRANSLATION BY ÁLVARO PIÑERO GONZÁLEZ AND  
INTRODUCTION BY MARIANO MARTÍN RODRÍGUEZ*

Antonio de Hoyos y Vinent (1885-1940) was a notorious decadent writer whose aristocratic person haunted the vibrant nightlife of Madrid in the decades preceding the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939, when Spanish urban moral views were, in fact, quite liberal. Although he was openly homosexual, he was not prosecuted as Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) had been, but rather celebrated and popular thanks to his many realistic narratives, where Hoyos y Vinent hardly hid his own sexual orientation when he sympathetically described the lust and perversion of the members of his social class, in the wake of Jean Lorrain (1856-1906), another notorious homosexual and master of decadent prose, as well as author of fantastic fiction. Hoyos y Vinent actively followed Lorrain's footsteps, but he showed that he knew to be a different, more original kind of writer in his own fantastic stories, which are today highly appreciated, as

well as in his rewriting of international legends such as the French one about the city of Ys in "El encanto de la ciudad sumergida" (The Charm of the Sunken City), from his masterful collection *Los cascabeles de Madama Locura* (Mrs. Madness' Bells, 1916), or myths such as the Hebrew story of the destruction of Sodom in "El filósofo de Sodoma" (The Philosopher of Sodom), a highly original tale collected in his book of stories *Las ciudades malditas* (The Cursed Cities, 1921). Another piece from this same book also showed Hoyos y Vinent's deep knowledge of Symbolist aesthetic and worldview, as well as his mastery of poetic prose in the framework of a narrative written as a sort of fabulous history of an imaginary ancient nation in a setting reminiscent of contemporary high fantasy stories by Lord Dunsany (1878-1957) and others.

"Al otro lado de la muralla infranqueable," translated into English below as "On the

Other Side of the Insurmountable Wall”,<sup>1</sup> was first published in the magazine *La Esfera* (The Sphere) in June 1919. Despite its brevity, it presents a full fantasy universe. In the first lines we read about an isolated place where nature provides everything necessary for the simple life of its inhabitants, who live in complete autarchy. Such a place is to them the whole earth. It is a “small world” (*pequeño mundo*) that unequivocally shows that Hoyos y Vinent considered it, in fact, a world that today we would call secondary, even high fantastic. After having described it as a fertile valley around a lake surrounded by high peaks that delimit it and completely separate it from the rest of its planet, which may or may not be ours, the story goes back to a prince or hero who, fleeing from unknown monsters, natural catastrophes or even from the “frightful cosmic abysses” (*espantables abismos cósmicos*) allegorically named “Pain, Love, Ambition and Death” (*Dolor, Amor, Ambición y Muerte*), had arrived in the valley. He was accompanied by a rich retinue carrying treasures “robbed from the palaces in which the gods dwelled up in the clouds” (*robados en los palacios que los dioses habitan en las nubes*). Once there, his newly acquired spiritual wisdom made him get rid of all treasures that were not the secret of earth, water and fire, which he bequeathed to his people, now a tribe living as in the Neolithic and whose way of life had nothing to do with that of the founding hero, but whose memory of ancient splendor they preserved in the form of a legend about their ethnogenesis, a legend pregnant with mythical content. The resulting culture is happy and stable in its inviolate refuge. However, the fact that there are also stories about the adventures of heroes who had gone out of the valley, faced monsters

and encountered fabulous beings indicates that they were nonetheless curious about the outside world. At last, they resolved to traverse the steep mountains surrounding the valley, in spite of the fear inspired to them by the belief that they would find only an endless sea or an abyss beyond. The reality that they encounter is even more extraordinary. After reaching the top of the gigantic peaks, they behold on the other side of them wide fields that seem to them to be studded with precious stones and, at the bottom of the horizon, cities looking as works of magic due to the richness of their materials (marble, onyx, jade, etc.). Whether they were indeed supernatural cities, or rather the result of a deception induced by the novelty for them of the possibly *civilized* landscape they were looking at, the attitude they adopt before the spectacle of the lands now open to their exploration is a prime example of symbolist enigma. However, while two boys run down to meet their future, “the others, kneeling and prostrate, called on the god they had just created for their cowardice” (*los demás, genuflexos, prosternados, invocaban al dios que acababan de crear para su cobardía*).

This last sentence, whose lapidary style calls to mind the writing of Jorge Luis Borges in his best symbolic tales, places us before an insoluble mystery. Who are these new gods? How had they been created at that very moment? What is their relationship with the cowardice of men who have so suddenly become their creators and worshippers alike? These questions can only have the answer that the imagination of the readers would give them. Perhaps mountains are metaphors for the “insurmountable wall” that we build ourselves with our beliefs, preventing us from accepting on its own terms the existence of an outside

<sup>1</sup> The translation is based on the Spanish text of the following edition: Antonio Hoyos y Vinent, “Al otro lado de la muralla infranqueable”, *Las ciudades malditas*, Madrid, Hispania, 1921, pp. 107-113.

world independent of us, while this newly discovered (mental) world forces us to question the comfort of our prejudices. Or perhaps they meant something else to the author. At any rate, Hoyos y Vinent does not offer a clear key to its meaning, thus excluding his tale from being an allegory. It simply leaves us suspended between the old safe secondary world of the valley and a new, external one that could be

a further secondary world of even a more fantastic nature, as it can be deduced from the apparently impossible mineral composition of its cities. We are, therefore, offered not just one high fantasy setting, but two, and the second one is to be explored through our own fantasy, according to the suggestive symbolist quest for creative mystery and its tacit demand for our partaking in it as active readers.

# ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE INSURMOUNTABLE WALL

That corner was to them the whole world. By agency of some miracle of Nature, there was to be found what those rough, austere and temperate beings needed to live. It was a small world, green and rich, where the blue of the sky looked at itself cheerfully on the blue of the lake, a ballad lake so crystal clear that you could see the little white pebbles carpeting the bottom.

Behind them, towering, there were high peaks, dark bare cliffs. Before them there lay the serene and calm lake, which stretched into the horizon surrounded by huge mountains crowned by everlasting snow. Its wet, tender, emerald plains, by the fruit trees' filigrees bejewelled, served them both for leisure and work in the summertime, while in winter they slept covered in snow and the men went out hunting in the mountains nearby.

It was a tribe that had made camp there centuries ago. They did not know where they

came from and what their origin was. A vague and confusing legend, further deformed with each new generation, told of a hero or prince who, fleeing who knows what horrible monsters, telluric movements and frightful cosmic abysses, adorned with rare names of Pain, Love, Ambition and Death, had arrived to the prairie many, many years ago, clad with gold and gemstones, followed by a numerous entourage carrying manuscripts, supplies, jewels, perfumes, precious fabrics, weapons and furniture, all of it robbed from the palaces in which the gods dwelled up in the clouds. A very deep suffering must have embittered the days of the mysterious character, for legend had him as someone afflicted by a rare illness of the soul. Yet, little by little, he found certainty in mysterious spiritual ways and with it he also regained the peace of mind he had lost. The impossible to define riches and the vague and indetermined treasures disappeared. The

entourage went away. The surprising animals that followed the man's voice perished. Only he remained, accompanied by his wife. He remained there to bequeath his heirs three secrets: the secret of the earth, the secret of the water and the secret of the fire.

The tribe lived in huts and wore furs. Sometimes they sailed the lake with a canoe, reaching to the brink of the frothing waterfall which falls onto the unexplored pit of horror where the world ends. Because, to them, the world did end there. The world was that tiny piece of land where they lived merrily. And the high peaks, the bare cliffs, the mountains covered with snow and the frothing waterfall, they all marked the boundaries of their world. And it is well known that, for humans, a thing's limit is the limit of their own endeavour.

Sometimes, however, a bolder one felt deep inside the urge to explore the unknown, the desire to leave and peer into forbidden darkness. An almost mystical terror had shaken the tribe: they had seen him leave without the hope of ever seeing him return, he who had gone to fight ghastly hydras. Then, in the endless winter nights, they recalled together, before the ancestral fire, the image that they were turning heroic, like that of a demigod triumphing over wyrms and basilisks. Back then, the elements that appeared to them clearly in the crude way of their living, and the passions, like formless and monstrous larvae worms of which only the glaucous glow of the pupils were to be seen, were barely comprehensible to them. They took the form of rampant vermin spewing fire out of their open mouths. And they could see the Nimrods, mountain climbers, wielding the giant club over the horn-rimmed head of the dragons or rolling over grappling with white bears falling into abysses, or strangling with their white, muscular and hairy arms wolves of blue and phosphorescent pupils, or descending

on makeshift vessels the waterfalls leading to another sea, huge and roaring, where old ladies with fish tails sang with age-hoarsened voices old-fashioned sonatas, while trying to reproduce their beauty of old with strange ointments and odd oils and to hide the bald patches of their green manes with algae and corals.

But one day...

How did they get to know there was something *beyond the borders of their known world*? Maybe it was one who did come back, maybe an intrepid hunter that peeked out from the summits. The thing is once *they knew, they coveted*. Knowing of a thing's existence is beginning to desire it and, in desiring it, there's the secret wish to possess it.

Yet many, many days passed, before desire turned into resolution, and many more before resolution turned into action. At last, the whole tribe departed to climb the mountains that lay between them and unknown wonders.

They marched day and night, climbed the snow-clad peaks, they bordered chasms, laboured under ice avalanches and coarse hurricanes. Each new mountain surging taller than the former seemed to them to be the last and they thought that upon climbing it they would finally see. And yet, upon stepping onto the high plateau, a new range of cliffs was there to close the way.

Sometimes discouragement seized them and they began talking of coming back, of abandoning their undertaking, sibling of that of the Titans, who climbed to the skies, or that of the Argonauts, who conquered the Golden Fleece. In such moments the guides told them of that prodigious country where the climate was benign, and the air was perfumed.

They barely heard him. A mystical terror had seized their souls and, like lost children in a haunted forest, they imagined the strangest

myths happening on the other side of the insurmountable wall. Some believed there was an endless surface of oily, black, thick water, where the land floated. Some believed there was black abyss inhabited by horrifying monsters. And some believed there was a bottomless pit in whose inscrutable darkness the sun burned like an immense bonfire, the moon was a flint wheel and the stars were sparks falling in an incessant rain.

They went up and up, slowly, laboriously. Clouds shrouded them like grey wadding, wet and cold, and everything was invisible to their eyes, tired of peering into the shadows. It dawned at last, and the day came, and with it the sun, with its boast of light, tearing the clouds and producing a marvellous picture before the dilated pupils of the awed pilgrims. Behind the snow, there were even more sharp and desolate peaks, and further ahead black, grey, red and blue mountains, and after them there could be seen forests made of immense trees, and

emerald plains with rubies, opals, hyacinths, peridots and amethysts. Even further there were fruit trees laden with topaz and maroon apples, ruby-like cherries, and bloody pomegranates. Then came a sea like a huge liquid sapphire, and, at last, on the horizon, the magic of portentous cities, with palaces made of marble, jade, coral, malachite and onyx, crowned by high cupolas made of gold, silver, mother of pearl, seashells and ivory.

Before this never-dreamt spectacle, the splendour of such a picture and the intensity of the life that could be *felt* throbbing below, some came down to their knees, some closed their eyes, and some started whimpering. Yet none dared walk towards life. They thought of stepping back or die, but not of moving forward. And as two children went down the mountain leaping unaware, the others, kneeling and prostrate, called on the god they had just created for their cowardice.