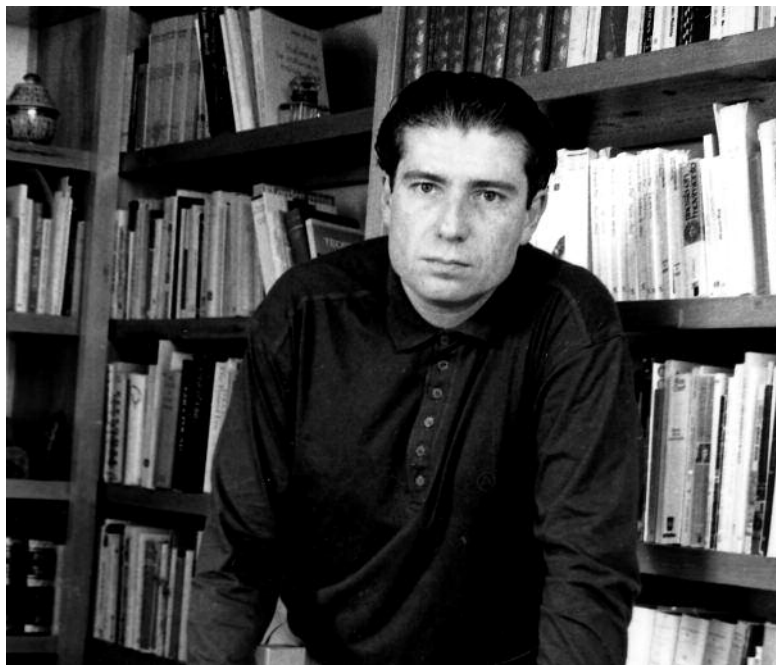


Manuel Ulacia

Something Very Luminous Lost

Adolfo Castañón*



Courtesy of Isabel Ulacia

A grandson of Manuel Altolaguirre, the Spanish poet who moved to Mexico, Manuel Ulacia was born in Mexico City May 16, 1953 and died in the ocean in Zihuatanejo, Guerrero, August 12, 2001. Like his grandfather, Manuel Ulacia was a poet and from his earliest years, lived in contact with the myths, the world and the voices of poetry. In *Origami para un día de lluvia* (Origami for a Rainy Day)¹ (1990), perhaps his longest and most ambitious poem, he remembers his meeting with Luis Cernuda, the poet of *La realidad y el deseo* (Reality and Desire).

Throughout the poem, Ulacia explores his own past through a monologue in which the rain serves

as a mirror that returns to him different images of his own life, his desirous days and nights, transformed, transmuted paper in the form of poetry like origami. The search for love, the desire for desire, the nostalgia for an impossible union with the faithful/unfaithful homosexual partner gives body and form to this poem that exudes desire and nostalgia but whose ultimate key is the quest, through the rain and the letters, for him who “listens to the rain” and “is already another” even though the rain is “the same as ever.” Like all real poets, Manuel Ulacia rooted his truth in the fervor with which he assumed his own personal and literary quest.

To this intensity should be added a natural elegance and kindness that give his other books —*La materia como ofrenda* (Matter as Offering) (1980), *El río y la piedra* (The River and the Rock) (1989) and

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El plato azul (The Blue Plate) (1999)— precision and weight, gravity and purity.

Even in the riskiest moments of the merging of poetic and amorous communion, Manuel Ulacia is capable of being both measured and extreme.

In his poetry, we can hear the ascending echo of Octavio Paz, a friend and admirer of Luis Cernuda, Manuel Altolaguirre and of Manuel Ulacia himself. Hearing echoes of Paz in a young Mexican poet, born in 1953, is by no means unusual. These echoes can also be heard in other authors of the same generation such as Alberto Blanco and Luis Cortés Bargalló, among others, with whom Ulacia created the independent poetry magazine *El Zaguán* (The Gate) that he would be editor of from 1975 to 1977 and to which Octavio Paz gave a poem for its first issue.

In addition to being a guide both poetically and even personally, Paz would nourish Manuel Ulacia's reflection and literary curiosity. One of his works, *El árbol milenario. Un recorrido por la obra de Octavio Paz* (The Thousand-Year-Old Tree. A Voyage Through the Work of Octavio Paz)² (1999), is an attempt to reconstruct Paz's poetic and literary itinerary. In it he aspires to unveil or reveal Paz's sources and reconstruct the different dialogues Paz established with the poetic traditions and the poets who nourished him, from Mallarmé to the Tantric Buddhist tradition, from Pessoa to Zen Buddhism. *The Thousand-Year-Old Tree* is vast and ambitious, but, written with simplicity and clarity, it is the book both of a professor (Ulacia studied and taught at Yale) and of a poet. *The Thousand-Year-Old Tree* is also a transparent tree, not only because of what it reveals or explains about Paz's poetic work, but also for what it reveals about Manuel Ulacia's literary curiosity, his rigorous appetite for aesthetic experience and poetic knowledge.

Without that fervent rigor, there would be no explanation for his translation of the great U.S. poet James Merrill's book *Reflected Houses*.³ We know from Manuel himself that Merrill (1926-1995) was able to read the translation of his anthology before his death, and, after approving it, gave a few pieces of advice. I like the fact that Manuel said that Merrill—a poet close to Dante— had

given him some advice. One of Manuel Ulacia's virtues was knowing how to listen: that is why he was a good disciple of Emir Rodríguez Monegal. That is why he could hear his own story told by the rain in *Origami for a Rainy Day*, or, in *The Blue Plate*,⁴ tell a love story that took place in Europe during the war as though it were a poem. (It seems to me, by the way, that James Merrill's poem "Bronze" and Manuel's *The Blue Plate* have some points in common.) This ability to hear the voices of the living and the dead, the voices from inside and from beyond is perhaps one of the lessons that can be learned from Manuel Ulacia's body of work, cut short by his death.

Ulacia died devoured by the sea on a Sunday afternoon on the beaches of Zihuatanejo in the state of Guerrero in August of this unhappy 2001. He was 48 years old, at the height of his power, and, in recent years, seemingly more and more understanding and kind since he spoke out more often and better. The last time I saw him was at his home at a meeting of the Mexican chapter of the P.E.N. Club, which he presided over with enthusiasm and disinterested industry. He was organizing a gigantic Pan American writers' congress and many were present, a sign of his ability to attract people, and—why not say so?— the esteem and affection that many of us had for him. When I heard of his death, I thought of "Adonais," Shelley's elegy for his friend Keats, that was later translated by Manuel Altolaguirre:

*He is a portion of the loveliness
Which once he made more lovely. (XLIII)*

NOTES

¹ Manuel Ulacia, *Origami para un día de lluvia* (Valencia: Pretextos-Poesía, 1991), pp. 14-15.

² Manuel Ulacia, *El árbol milenario. Un recorrido por la obra de Octavio Paz* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg-Círculo de Lectores, 1999), 410 pp.

³ Manuel Ulacia, ed. and trans., *James Merrill: Reflected Houses (Casas reflejadas)* (Mexico City: El Tucán de Virginia-Fideicomiso para la Cultura México-Estados Unidos, 1992), 295 pp.

⁴ Manuel Ulacia, *El plato azul* (Mexico City: Ditoria, 1999), 34 pp.