

AN INTERVIEW WITH TINO VILLANUEVA

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Poet, painter, professor of Spanish literature at Boston University, among the forerunners of the 'Chicano Literary Renaissance' of the 1970s, Tino Villanueva (born in 1941 in San Marcos, Texas, to a family of migrant workers) has managed in his long-standing career to defy any easy classification thanks to a passionate insistence in innovating his craft and embracing increasingly universal (and archetypal) themes with a very distinctive voice. Each one of his poetry collections constitutes its own world and requires its own language: Spanish or English (sometimes both), the two linguistic codes between which Villanueva is able to switch with the same level of intensity and subtlety in the results.

And each collection contains its own distinguished exploration: his bilingual debut *Hay Otra voz: Poems* (1972) uses the two languages interchangeably to express the "other voice" originating from the Mexican migrant experience; *Shaking Off the Dark* (1984) enacts a struggle between the spoken word and the shadow of nothingness, silence and chaos; *Crónica de mis años peores* (1987) stages an autobiographical immersion in childhood and adolescence; *Scene from the Movie GIANT* (1993, winner of the American Book Award) deploys a cinematic ekphrasis to relive a traumatic moment; the chapbook *Primera Causa / First Cause* explores memory, writing and the struggle with the blank page; and *So Spoke Penelope* (2013) provides Odysseus' wife with a lyrical voice. Villanueva's work is transversed by an existentialist understanding of the self as the product of a relentless work, a characterization of the poetic voice—always poised between two idioms and two sensibilities—as the result of a patient conquest, and a conception of memory and writing as privileged tools in a struggle against silence and annihilation. His work has been partly translated into Italian by Paola Mildonian, who edited the anthology *Il canto del cronista: antologia poetica* (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2002) and *Così parlò Penelope* (Milano: Edizioni Ariete, 2017).

This interview was conducted via email while I was researching an essay focused on the use of ekphrasis in Villanueva's work. Having the privilege to converse with an author while researching her or his work is something never to take for granted, and Villanueva's generosity proved to be priceless. Villanueva has always been interested in the practice of ekphrasis itself ("the verbal and literary representation of a visual representation," according to the poet's reformulation of James A. W. Heffernan's famous definition) and he even devoted an essay to it (Villanueva 2010). As a matter of fact, the ekphrastic practice is particularly suitable to create an intersemiotic borderlands, a correlative objective of the in-betweenness often addressed by Villanueva's poetry. Besides ekphrasis, we also discussed his upcoming collection, which will be devoted to the theme of flânerie.

Do you consider Scene from the Movie GIANT as belonging to the ekphrastic tradition, and, if so, do you think that a cinematic ekphrasis differs from a classical ekphrasis?

Most certainly it's an ekphrastic work. Allow me to explain. *Scene*, to me, is representative of what the term *ekphrasis* means in modern times, not of how it was understood in antiquity. This contemporary definition of ekphrasis comes to mind: A verbal and literary representation of a visual representation. And *Scene* most certainly reflects that. On the other hand, ekphrasis in antiquity (beginning about the eighth century BCE, in classical Greek and Roman times) was considered a rhetorical device with which, making use of words, you could bring something "vividly before one's eyes." That's how it was understood in the beginning. If you were a Greek boy fortunate enough to get some sort of educational tutoring, at some point you had to take a class on ekphrasis. If you were going to become a lawyer, you most definitely had to attend seminars on ekphrasis, for one day you would have to appear in court, with your client, in front of a judge, and, depending on the particular circumstances, you would have to describe: a brawl or an accident in the street, let's say; a breaking and entering case; a murder, perhaps; thievery at the marketplace; a fire, etc. . . something your client had

been involved in. And you, as lawyer, had to bring all those facts “vividly” before the judge’s eyes.

This manner of understanding ekphrasis stood until about the third century CE (late antiquity), when a Greek philosopher, Philostratus the Elder, wrote a book called *Eikones*, meaning “images.” In it he suggests that ekphrasis should be reserved exclusively to commenting and describing paintings, sculptures and statues—that’s it. By considering ekphrasis in this fashion, Philostratus took this term out of its rhetorical home and introduced it into the world of art criticism. Philostratus could not have imagined that centuries later ekphrasis would migrate again, and become a literary term as well.

To reiterate, and with my *Giant* in mind, the standard contemporary definition of ekphrasis is: a verbal and literary representation (the written text of *Scene from the Movie GIANT*) of a visual representation (the moving pictures of the film *Giant*).

Finally, present-day ekphrasis is not limited to describing paintings, sculptures, and statues only. One can write poems on etchings, watercolors, collages, comic books, calendar pictures, canned goods labels, postcards, billboards, ties, T-shirts, rings, earrings and belt buckles (should they have some kind of recognizable design on them), and any image from advertising.

Some of the poems in Shaking Off the Dark are in haiku form. I’ve read in an interview (Lee and Villanueva 2010) that what led you to compose them was reading Sergei Eisenstein’s essay “The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram.” I wonder if, when you wrote the poems in Scene, you also had that essay in mind, or perhaps other essays of film theory. It seems to me that some of the devices you employ in Scene (the frequent use of enjambments, the titles of some poems, several passages that seem to come directly from a script) reveal a certain awareness of film theory, especially as regards montage techniques.

Some background: In the summer of 1972—after having finished my first full academic year as a doctoral student—I was teaching Expository Writing at Boston University, and

the head instructor had us read and discuss with the students, as one of the assignments, the aforementioned Eisenstein essay. I confess I'd not read it before, so it was quite an eye-opener for me—a revelation, quite frankly. After having read and discussed “The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram,” and having subsequently bought a couple of anthologies of Japanese haikus and tankas, I felt inspired enough to write some myself, which appear, as you rightly point out, in my second book, *Shaking Off the Dark* (1984). But, no, it never did occur to me to go back and read said essay when I was writing the twenty-one poems of *Giant*. It never crossed my mind.

With the genre of ekphrasis you manage to incorporate the devices of one language (cinema) into another (the poem). It is difficult not to think about this blending of artistic media as connected to your ability to dominate different languages, and I see it as also linked to an existentialist take that defies essentialist binary oppositions. At the same time, do you think that employing ekphrasis somehow also underscores the specificity of each language, namely what the poetic word can do and the cinematic image cannot (and vice-versa)?

I believe your question has two parts, one dealing with the language spoken, and one dealing with the specialized language—that of cinema. Let me begin with the two languages that I express myself in: English and Spanish. One thing is to be bilingual, and able to get along competently in two languages by making oneself perfectly understood in different social circumstances. It's quite another to be bilingual and able to take these two linguistic systems to a literary level—to be resourceful enough to play with the language, to manipulate its syntax, and to act upon its morphology and phonetics in creative ways. What I'm suggesting is that writing literary texts in either language—English or Spanish—is quite the challenge, at least for me.

As for fusing poetic language with that of cinema, yes, I find it unique, but, in writing this book, it made sense to have done so; it couldn't have been any other way. At the moment I was writing the poems, I didn't realize I was fusing two languages. I was all too busy concentrating on each line, each stanza, from which, finally, emerged

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a poem to some degree of satisfaction. You may consider these poems as having been written not in the essentialist mode, but in the existentialist spirit, to use your terminology. As the book progressed, I often held the thought that I was in uncharted territory; that I was a pioneer of sorts; that I was doing something no other American author had done, which was: to write a whole volume of poetry on a movie, or on a scene from one. Such realization was exciting, and it drove me on to keep writing.

The same seems to occur between English and Spanish. For instance, in “Tú, por si no otro” you use the word “duende” (García Lorca’s “duende”?), which is very difficult to translate into another language.

“Duende,” yes, proves difficult to pin down with a definition. It’s a pouring out of artistic inspiration, for sure. It’s when a melody, a song, or a poem “has soul,” I’ve heard it said. García Lorca said that it was “a mysterious force that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained.”

Carl Phillips reads “Field of Moving Colors Layered” (2016)—your ekphrastic poem on an abstract painting by Alberto Valdés—as a political metaphor of assimilation that resonates with the migrant experience. He maintains: “these lines are very much about the tension between being oneself and assimilation, and also about the challenge of assimilating without having to be compromised.” Do you find this interpretation in line with what your purpose? Does “Field” obliquely address the themes of exile and migration?

Some time ago, I did read Carl Phillips’ understanding of my ekphrastic poem as it appeared in *Poetry* (March 2016). As you know, any critic or commentator is at liberty to interpret a work of art as they see fit. What ekphrasis allows the poet is a freedom to react to a work of art anyway (s)he chooses. Bear in mind that a work of art is a product of an artist’s imagination. And to me it seemed as if these humanoid shapes in Alberto Valdés’ painting were moving right to left. As you mention, it’s an abstract rendering,

and so the field of blue on the left I arbitrarily called “the blue abyss.” What’s going to happen when they get there and fall into “the unknown?” Who knows. In short, I simply attempted to create a coherent narrative at the center of which are these figures in “wayward” motion. I have envoiced the painting, i. e., the writer of an ekphrastic poem gives the work of art a voice. Clearly, then, ekphrasis as a rhetorical device goes beyond personification and prosopopeia.

Finally, it must be obvious now I did not have in mind what Mr. Phillips observes in the painting and in my poem. As with any exercise of interpreting a work of art, be it a painting or a piece of literature, you get out of it what you bring into it.

This is just a curiosity of mine. I see some analogies between the way you crafted a cinematic ekphrasis, putting it in dialogue with time, history, and memory in Scene and some poems by Jorie Graham, especially “Fission,” from Region of Unlikeness (1989), which revolves around a screening of Kubrick’s Lolita, interrupted by the news of J.F. Kennedy’s assassination. Another poem (more a prose-poem, actually) where something slightly similar occurs is John Ashbery’s “The Lonedale Operator” (from A Wave). I just wonder if you admire these contemporary poets and feel somewhat close to their sensibility.

I wish I knew where I have my copies of *Region of Unlikeness* and *A Wave*. I have recently moved to a new apartment, and I still have many boxes to unpack . . . and sixty more in storage. It’s ridiculous I can’t find what I want when the need arises. But yes, I admire both of these poets. I once met Ashbery at the University of Texas - Austin (Fall of 1996), and I’m more familiar with his work. I don’t write in any way like him, but I much admire his extraordinary ekphrastic long poem, “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.” The poem wonderfully blossoms on the page with an abundance of detail as it explores a painting by Parmigianino from this angle and that angle. I published a poem in 2008 dedicated to Ashbery in which I try to imitate his style. It’s titled, “What We Mean by Barcelona.” At the moment, it doesn’t belong to any particular book.

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Your next collection will be focused on the theme of the flâneur, the urban wanderer, while in your previous effort, So Spoke Penelope, you chose as your alter ego Penelope, an apparently sedentary heroine, traditionally confined to a domestic role and to a reiterative routine. What is the link between these archetypal figures (if there is one)?

It's beyond my ken as to what these thematic and artistic choices might mean and how they are linked together, other than to say, in the case of Penelope, her character in *The Odyssey* was so compelling that it drew me to her. Oftentimes it's not the author who chooses the topic to write about; it's the topic itself that chooses the author. With regards to Penelope, she can be viewed as an underdeveloped character in Homer's work, thus my aim was to flesh her out a bit so as to more fully comprehend her as wife, mother, and artist (she's a weaver). If *Scene from the Movie GIANT* (1993) is an ekphrastic book of poems, *So Spoke Penelope* (2013) can be considered a midrashic work. Here's the best definition I've found on midrash. "[Midrash] . . . fills in the cracks . . . puts flesh on the bones . . . reinterprets stories and characters . . . gives voice to those in the story who have no voice."

As for choosing to write a set of poems in the *flâneur* tradition, well, it's a subgenre of poetry that intrigued me when I first began reading Baudelaire years ago, the originator of this type of poetry. Much later I read, and am still reading Walter Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire. A *flâneur* poet is the walking around urban poet who observes his city, describes his city, he loves it, he critiques it, he engages it, he dialogues with it . . . and writes about it. I thoroughly enjoy *flâneuring* and observing the city I may be in, with hopes of something sparking my imagination. Once that happens, then begins the real task—the struggle with finding “the best words in the best order,” as Coleridge said, in order to create a poem.

With your next book you are again joining a very cosmopolitan and universal literary tradition, which goes from Baudelaire to Robert Walser's The Walk, from Poe to Hoffmann, and so on. What elicited your interest in the theme of flânerie?

As I mentioned above, it was having read some of Baudelaire's poetry and prose poems that got me started down this path. And also reading a poem by Pablo Neruda called "Walking Around." I read this poem in the early 1970s, but I didn't know exactly why he was using an English title; I didn't know there was a *flâneur* tradition, much less that Baudelaire was its precursor. By the way, you may have noticed that there's no question I've addressed different themes along the way, especially if you consider into the mix, *Shaking Off the Dark* (1984) and *Primera causa / First Cause* (1999). They all treat different subjects and varied themes. In previous interviews I've stated I simply do not want to be known for having written one type of poetry. And then I say that in a hundred years I don't want to be known as having been a "one-trick pony."

If there is one theme that runs through your whole oeuvre, it's memory. In your poetry, memory often plays the role of a muse, but a tough one, a muse that requires a patient and somewhat stoical wait, a constant return to the blank page (your chapbook Primera Causa / First Cause comes to mind, but also Penelope's work as metaphoric of your work as a poet). Will your next book also have memory as a central theme?

True enough that Mnemosyne as muse has been a protagonist in my poetry ever since my third book, *Crónica de mis años peores* (La Jolla: Lalo Press, 1987) / *Chronicle of My Worst Years* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994). But to be precise, the theme is not *memory* alone—it's *memory and writing*. At readings I feel inclined to explain that everyone in the audience possesses memory, but that writers take it a step further. . . they use it as a muse, as inspiration to write about those recollections.

As to your specific question, my sense is that memory will make an appearance in my *flâneur* poems, but minimally, I suspect, inasmuch as the *flâneur* or *flâneuse*, by definition, is absorbed by the drama and substance of the present moment, and, as such, busies himself/herself by registering those daily impressions which will give rise to the poems.

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Angelo Grossi received his PhD in American Literature from Ca' Foscari University of Venice in 2018, with a dissertation that explores David Foster Wallace's work through the interpretative prism of film theory. His research focuses on the cross-fertilization between cinema and contemporary American literature. He has recently published an article on the use of the cinematic ekphrasis in the work of the Chicano poet Tino

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Tino Villanueva is a contemporary American poet. Writing in both Spanish and English, at times sliding back and forth between the two languages, Villanueva writes poems exploring themes of memory, longing, and history. He is the author of several poetry collections, including *Hay Otra Voz: Poems* (1972); *Scene from the Movie GIANT* (1993), which won an American Book Award; and *So Spoke Penelope* (2013). He translated Luis J. Rodríguez's *La Llamam América* (1998), and his own poems have been translated into Italian, French, German, Portuguese, Greek, and Korean. The founder of Imagine Publishers, Inc., Villanueva has edited *Imagine: International Chicano Poetry Journal* and the anthology *Chicanos: Antología Histórica y Literaria* (1980). Villanueva received a Distinguished Alumnus Award from Texas State University-San Marcos. He has taught at Wellesley College, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Boston University.