Mourning for the Future: Poetic Inheritance in Juan Luis Martínez's "La poesía chilena"

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Mourning for the Future: Poetic Inheritance in Juan Luis Martínez’s *La poesía chilena*

In 1977, neo-avant-garde Chilean poet Juan Luis Martínez (1942-1993) financed the publication of his *La nueva novela*, in the face of a stifling reticence on the part of conventional and art presses in Chile, anticipating the negative response of official censors operating under Gen. Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship (1973-1990), who were also baffled by the strangeness of his art object. Martínez’s artist’s book (limited to a run of 500 hand-printed copies) would circulate in a clandestine manner in literary circles and cafés in Santiago, Valparaíso, and Viña del Mar in the late 1970s and early 80s, and would have little diffusion outside of Chile even after a facsimile edition of the text was published in 1985 (1,000 copies). Signed (*JUAN LUIS MARTINEZ*) (*JUAN DE DIOS MARTINEZ*), crossed through but still “readable,” *La nueva novela* exaggerates, renders illegible, and destabilizes the (doubled) proper name as guarantor of authorial
intent or presence, a move that calls to the forefront the already problematic continuity of Martínez’s poetic voice and reclusive historical subject.

The following year, Martínez self-published his next book, the final publication during his lifetime. *La poesía chilena* (1978) is a neo-avant-garde artist’s book containing copies of the death certificates of four great Chilean poets (juxtaposed with card catalogue entries listing their great poetic compositions about death) and of Martínez’s recently deceased father, multiple reproductions of the Chilean flag, as well as a bag of soil from Chile’s Central Valley (500 copies). A posthumous collection of his late poetry, titled *Poemas del otro*, would not be released until 2003 – having been rescued from destruction (against Juan Luis’ expressed wishes) by Eliana Rodríguez, the poet’s widow, following Martínez’s death in 1993 (which resulted from a lifelong struggle with diabetes and renal failure). A similar situation occurred with the recent exposition of Martínez’s art objects (also preserved by Rodríguez), titled “Señales de ruta” (March 19-April 30, 2010), as well as the publication of a book of visual poetry ostensibly based on the chance operations of the *I Ching*, titled *Aproximación del Principio de Incertidumbre a un proyecto poético* (150 copies). The underground nature of Martínez’s work cultivated the myth of this rebellious, car-stealing, motorcycle-racing, autodidact’s literary and artistic production, to the point that following the first in-depth critical study of Martínez’s work – by Chilean poets Enrique Lihn and Pedro Lastra (1987) – the critic Luis Vargas Saavedra speculated in the Santiago newspaper *El Mercurio* that Martínez was actually the invention of Lihn and Lastra.

The myth or cult of Juan Luis Martínez in Chilean poetry continues to be nurtured by, and is constitutive of, the contradiction between his lack of incorporation into the literary mainstream and the foundational nature of his work for a multitude of subsequent artists and writers. We might say, however, that Martínez’s own personal invisibility and objectively difficult texts contribute to his deliberately self-effacing artistic methodology, in which dizzying intertextualities and poetic collages eradicate and obscure his authorial persona. His work draws on numerous literary, philosophical, artistic, religious, and scientific sources, and profoundly blurs the line between these discourses by way of unrelenting visual and poetic interventions that challenge such preconceived notions as the subject-object binary that has oriented philosophical thought for centuries, the referential coherence of the poetic voice, and the illogical absurdity of “pataphysical reasoning,” to name just a few (see Weintraub, “Juan Luis Martínez”).

The curious non-engagement with a figure so vital to all Chilean poets writing during and after Pinochet’s dictatorship highlights the paradoxical need to introduce Martínez to North American audiences despite his cult status in the Latin American literary canon. In the recent *Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry*, the editors call Martínez “the best-kept secret of Chilean
poetry—according to almost all present-day critics" (452), but one might wonder exactly who is/was reading Martínez’s work, especially outside of Chile. That said, the empirical and textual ethic of obscurity and eccentricity that characterizes Juan Luis Martínez’s poetic explorations finds no better point of departure, perhaps, than the final publication during his lifetime—the artist’s book *La poesía chilena*. By closely reading Chilean poetry in *La poesía chilena* as a function of Juan Luis Martínez’s elegy for the Chilean poetic canon (as well as the political future of his country), I shall show that the literary and lived inheritance in Martínez’s project mourns for a future that is not empirically futural or simply “on the horizon.” As I briefly alluded to above, *La poesía chilena* consists of a black and white box measuring 14cmx20cm, and contains two objects: first, a small plastic bag filled with soil from Chile’s Central Valley, and second, a booklet that I shall describe in detail below. It is a difficult work to classify, as Felipe Cussen suggests in an article on Martínez’s art object:

A la hora de calificarla, aunque algunos [comentaristas] la consideran como “libro,” el abanico de alusiones es muy abierto: “obra” que prescinde “de los caracteres atribuidos a y esperables de un libro,” “obra en la cual no hay textos escritos por él,” “libro sin texto ni lenguaje verbal,” “libro gráfico,” “libro objeto,” “poema sin palabras,” “poema-objeto,” “objeto poético,” “texto verdaderamente objetual,” “objeto inclasificable,” “ente agénérico,” “artefacto,” “maleta,” “caja,” “libro-caja,” “caja negra,” “cajita negra como...un ataúd de cartón,” “caja, metáfora de un ataúd,” “ataúd”, “urna,” etc.

I shall, in fact, begin my analysis of *La poesía chilena* with the kind of “enumeration of curiosities” that Cussen performs here, and which Matías Ayala (167) has discussed in more detail with respect to *La nueva novela*. Beginning with the outer “layer” of the object itself, the box’s cover (fig. 1) reveals a number of slightly obscured inscriptions and photographs, whose origins and full text are “elaborated upon” inside of the booklet.

![Fig. 1: Box cover: La poesía chilena](image)
The left-hand picture, of a star pattern shaved into the top of a man’s head (repeated and enlarged on the full cover of the booklet), has important nationalistic resonances with the solitary star present in the upper-left hand corner of the Chilean flag – a figure that also “explodes” exponentially through the small flags interspersed throughout the book. Roberto Merino historicizes this apparent nationalistic citation in the following manner:

Bernardo O’Higgins, el padre de la patria, creó la bandera chilena en 1817, tras el triunfo en Chacabuco y poco después de ser nombrado director supremo. Como se sabe, esta bandera vino a reemplazar una anterior, diseñada durante los días de Carrera, que conservaba aún una banta amarilla, color ignominioso entonces por estar vinculado al pabellón español. El amarillo fue desalojado por el blanco y se agregó la estrella solitaria que perdura hasta hoy. Si la bandera carrerista puede considerarse de manera simbólica como una titubeante despedida de la madre patria, la o’higginiana será el corte definitivo de la amarra umbilical y el inicio de una navegación bajo el auspicio de una estrella propia. Así por lo menos se quiso entender en esos años. (63)

I would add that Martinez’s use of the star imagery immediately inscribes the project within the context of the historical avant-gardes, since it visually cites Man Ray’s famous photo of Marcel Duchamp’s star-shaved tonsure (1919), also associated with the French artist’s female alter ego – “Rrose Sélavy” – which roughly puns the statement “Eros is life.” It also anticipates, in a significant way, a performance titled “Acción de la estrella” (1979) by renowned Chilean artist Carlos Leppe.

As Nelly Richard astutely describes,

In his Acción de la estrella, Leppe uses the quotation of Duchamp’s star-shaped tonsure to fill in the vacant position occupied by the star on the Chilean flag. Here he questions the transplantation of information from international art to a new historical and national circumstance such that it changes its meaning. The living body of the artist activates the transfer of the reference, it revitalizes it by making it flesh: the body is the transquotational vehicle for a sign that is grafted onto the skin as a living incarnation of the artistic message. (87)

The particular discursive and ideological positionality unique to both Leppe’s and Martínez’s citation of Duchamp is well-taken. With respect to this kind of literary-artistic transnational writing practice, Matías Ayala has analyzed the preservation of empirical place-ness in Martínez’s marginal(-ized) work, even in the face of the seemingly interminable citations (primarily of non-Latin American writers) of which La nueva novela is composed.
Como Rubén Darío y Borges, Martínez escribe con el rostro hacia Europa, hacia la llamada “tradición” literaria occidental, y como ellos escribió desde los márgenes (desde afuera y desde dentro) de occidente. A pesar de lo anterior, también en Martínez existe un trabajo con la nación y sus figuras. Lo que consideró Ángel Rama sobre Rubén Darío puede ser aplicado a Martínez: “Toda su concepción universalista de la cultura es, en un grado que ni él mismo ni su tiempo podían reconocer, la de un hispanoamericano, y la de un hispanoamericano en una determinada y muy precisa circunstancia histórica.”

(Ayala 161)

This notion of writing from the margins, with a particular discursive and ideological positionality unique to its historical situation, is useful in identifying the minor key in which nearly all of Martínez’s poetic project is composed. But the multifarious citational gestures in La poesía chilena are intensely political in a way that situates the politics of Martínez’s transnational agency in the bricolage aspect of his work as well as in more explicit political gestures that read both the contemporary moment and the constitutive futurity of the return to democracy in Chile.

Regarding the remaining elements represented on La poesía chilena’s outer box, the grainy photo of a sink, described as “fragmentación fotográfica del autor,” also adorns the back of the booklet. As far as the slightly obscured lettering on the front of the box is concerned, its full text, which appears towards the beginning of the booklet contained in the box, reads: “AB IMO PECTORE [translated as “Desde el fondo del pecho”] / Existe la prohibición de cruzar una línea que sólo es imaginaria. / (La última posibilidad de franquear ese limite se concretaría mediante la violencia): / Ya en ese limite, mi padre muerto me entrega estos papeles:”. The testimonial, and even lyric, nature of these labels is unusual for Martínez, whose poetic explorations following this book would expressly seek to “write the poetry of the Other,” as evidenced by the unfinished, posthumous Poemas del otro. Positioning this text as emanating “from the depths of the chest,” the almost Wordsworthian gesture employed here is curious, since Martínez is hardly interested in poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Wordsworth 8) given the multitude of self-effacing gestures that characterize this project, including the inscription of Martínez’s infamous signature – (JUAN LUIS MARTÍNEZ) and (JUAN DE DIOS MARTÍNEZ) – in both La nueva novela and La poesía chilena (fig. 2).

And, as in his masterful poetic collage La nueva novela, the Fox Terrier “Sogol,” or “Logos” spelled backwards, presides over the book – thus evoking the main character, Pére Sogol, of quasi-surrealist French author René Daumal’s mystical novel Mount Analogue: A Novel of Symbolically Authentic Non-Euclidean Adventures in Mountain Climbing, published upon the French writer’s death in 1952.
But the notion of line or limit, as it plays out in the brief "Ab imo pectore" text, is equally troubling. For Roberto Merino (66), the imaginary line is related to the poetic-national inheritance of the (Gabriela Mistral-Pablo Neruda-Pablo de Rokha-Vicente Huidobro[-Martinez's father]) anthologizing gesture of Chilean poetry present in the death certificates that are truly the featured element of La poesía chilena – thereby drawing together the delimitation of national(-istic) frontiers and also transcending geographical-spatial boundaries via the question of legacy. Andrés Ajens speculates as to which line(s) the reader might seek to cross: “¿cuál es esa línea ‘imaginaria’ cuyo cruce está vedado y cuyo franqueo solo sería posible mediante la violencia?: ¿la que separa ficción y realidad?, o: ¿vida y muerte? (esto: si calamos, justamente, en el personaje donador de papeles, el padre muerto)” (10). Andrés Morales, on the other hand, suggests that death is the only way to negotiate or get around the prohibition twice inscribed in La poesía chilena. He states:

ya puestos en esa circunstancia (aquella línea imaginaria que trazamos los hombres) y que solo se puede cruzar mediante la violencia (perdiendo la vida en esa violencia ejercida contra la existencia) para así posibilitar la lectura de los papeles (las fichas y certificados) que el padre del autor le entrega a este a través del texto (111).

Morales is correct to point out that it is difficult to identify the content and meaning of these papers, but fails to note that the "papeles" to which Martinez refers here cannot "simply" be the contents of the booklet. In a way, La poesía chilena certainly memorializes and mourns for Martínez's father – who died of a myocardial infarction – through the inclusion of a copy of his death certificate at the end of the booklet, as well as the burial material of the included "Tierra del Valle Central de Chile." Thus the "desde el fondo del pecho" might at first be thought through in the context of his passing, since it is this elegiac gesture that appears at the "end" of the text of La poesía chilena. I would argue,
however, that the larger theoretical and empirical facticity of “inheritance,” on the other hand – “Ya en ese límite, mi padre muerto me entrega estos papeles” – requires some additional elaboration.

Perhaps the most poignant component of Martínez’s _La poesía chilena_ is the inclusion of copies of the death certificates of the four giants of Chilean poetry – Gabriela Mistral, Pablo Neruda, Pablo de Rokha, and Vicente Huidobro (thus excluding Nicanor Parra) – juxtaposed with card catalogue entries listing (what for Martínez are ostensibly) their most moving poems dealing with death. In this context, Morales (111) suggests that death is the great poetic creation of

![Fig. 3: Death certificate of Lucila Godoy Alcayaga (Gabriela Mistral); card catalogue entry for poem “Los sonetos de la muerte”](image)

Chilean poetry, inaugurated and closed off by the coffin-like enclosure of the box containing this heterogeneous mix of objects. Nevertheless, I believe that there is a different narrative inscribed by the death certificates, the _fichas de lectura_ and the flags that make up the vast majority of this book object, with interesting consequences for what I would call the non-teleological futurity of Chilean poetry in _La poesía chilena_, as well as for a reading of the historical avant-gardes. The poets’ death certificates included in _La poesía chilena_ and the poems inscribed in the subsequent card catalogue entries are, indeed, a touching visual and textual elegy for Chile’s four great poets – two of whom, Mistral and Neruda, were awarded Nobel Prizes, in 1945 and 1971, respectively. Nine Three – Mistral, Neruda, and de Rokha – received Chile’s National Literature Prize (1951, 1945 and 1965, respectively), with poor Huidobro being the only one of the four not to receive either of these honours. Ten Regarding the narrative that Martínez constructs here through the cryptological inscription of Mistral, Neruda, de Rokha and Huidobro’s lived and poetic textualities, we might
examine the details presented on the included death certificates and the card catalogue entries that list the poets' writings about death (fig. 3).

The following chart attempts to make a strict (if obsessive) accounting of this information, and includes the textual-biographical information provided about Juan Luis' own father (from his death certificate, the final text in *La poesía chilena*’s booklet):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poet</th>
<th>Poem</th>
<th>Book (year)</th>
<th>Date and place of death</th>
<th>Cause of death</th>
<th>Death certificate information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gabriela Mistral</td>
<td>&quot;Los sonetos de la muerte&quot;</td>
<td>Desolación (1922)</td>
<td>January 10, 1957; New York</td>
<td>Pancreatic cancer</td>
<td>Issued in Santiago; copy obtained October 5, 1978 in Santiago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Lucila Godoy)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pablo Neruda</td>
<td>&quot;Sólo la muerte&quot;</td>
<td>Residencia II (1935)</td>
<td>September 24, 1973; Santiago</td>
<td>Prostate cancer</td>
<td>Issued in Santiago; copy obtained October 5, 1978 in Santiago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Neftalí Reyes)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pablo de Rokha</td>
<td>&quot;Poesía funeraria&quot;</td>
<td>Gran temperatura (1937)</td>
<td>September 10, 1978; Santiago</td>
<td>Self-inflicted gunshot wound</td>
<td>Issued in Santiago; copy obtained October 4, 1978 in Santiago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Carlos Díaz Loyola)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicente Huidobro</td>
<td>&quot;Coronación de la muerte&quot;</td>
<td>Últimos poemas (1948)</td>
<td>January 2, 1948; Cartagena, Chile</td>
<td>Cerebral hemorrhage</td>
<td>Issued in Cartagena; copy obtained November 2, 1978 in Santiago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernández</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luis Guillermo</td>
<td>&quot;Tierra del Valle Central</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Heart attack</td>
<td>Issued in Villa Alemana; copy obtained November 10, 1978 in Villa Alemana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martínez Villablanca</td>
<td>de Chile&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you can see, the order in which the departed poets make an appearance in *La poesía chilena* is a function of the date of publication of their poems, rather than of the date of their death or the order in which Martinez obtained the death certificates. Therefore, we might say that Martinez is creating a literary narrative that supersedes what might be the expected, official order imposed by the legality of the death certificates – in such a way as to suggest that there is a literary trajectory or teleology that takes precedence over the empirical fact of
death. In fact, if we push this notion of literary teleology a bit further, the miniature Chilean flags and blank fichas de lectura that follow Huidobro’s “texts” support a reading of the futurity of Chilean poetry past La poesía chilena, since these blank cards might be filled in with the names and poems of poets yet to die or to be born. Insofar as this rather cheerful reading of “a bright future for Chilean poetry” also memorializes an avant-garde past “laid to rest,” we should take into account the final “text” included in the book: a copy of the death certificate of Martínez’s father, accompanied by a card catalogue entry for “Tierra del Valle Central de Chile,” referring to the bag of soil labeled as such and included in the box housing Martínez’s book object.

Let us take a closer look at the timeline of assembly of La poesía chilena, since it shows how what I would call the “non-localizable (and non-teleological) futurity of Chilean poetry” in Martínez’s La poesía chilena problematizes the autobiographical nature of the inscription of Martínez’s father in this trajectory. According to the colophon at the end of the booklet, the art object La poesía chilena finished printing on November 16, 1978, a mere six days after the final death certificate (that of Martínez’s father) was obtained on November 10. At this point, Martínez had already collected copies of the death certificates of Mistral, Neruda, de Rokha and Huidobro in Santiago – which he did on October 4 (de Rokha) and 5 (Mistral and Neruda) and November 2 (Huidobro). What this reading of the specific chronology of the book’s construction reveals, first of all, is that Martínez’s father cannot literally be the direct benefactor of these papers, as Martínez appears to suggest in the earlier statement, “mi padre muerto me entrega estos papeles,” since he had passed away almost a year before. But this apparent contradiction begs the question, what, then, is transmitted or inherited in this transaction? More fundamentally, the time, and therefore the inheritance of La poesía chilena, radically “out of joint” here, composes a ghostly literary space in which the anachronic life and literary narratives testify to something that both lives on and is yet to come. The narrative inscribing the “big four” of Chilean poetry within the larger poetic project of “Chilean poetry” and La poesía chilena is not merely waiting patiently for teleological completion with a horizon of expectation. I would argue that the (Chilean) “poetry-to-come” in Martínez’s book, manifest in the proliferation of Chilean flags and the blank card catalogue entries, does not merely remark on a poetic or lived inheritance of the previous, avant-garde/modernist tradition. Rather, for a “poetry worthy of the name” to arrive, it must constitute something other and entirely unexpected, which is indicative of a structure described by Jacques Derrida in several different contexts, including messianism, justice, and democracy. These questions of temporality, inheritance and mourning in La poesía chilena, I think, yield a unique reading of both Chilean poetry and La poesía chilena, with surprising consequences for thinking through Juan Luis
Martínez’s take on the Chilean literary canon as well as the political horizon of his country in the late 70s.

Let us turn more explicitly to these questions of mourning and inheritance which, in the larger Derridean “framework,” are intimately connected to temporality and teleology – and therefore constitute an appropriate lens through which to examine Martínez’s “coffin-book.” As a whole, we might say that the work of mourning, as it plays out in Derrida’s writings, finds its “origins” in the Freudian conceptualization of memory and interiorization: “it entails a movement in which an interiorizing idealization takes in itself or upon itself the body and voice of the other, the other’s visage and person, ideally and quasi-literally devouring them” (Mémoires 34). This “carrying the other in the self” (“Rams” 160) constitutes the normal work of mourning, and “consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by identifying the bodily remains and by localizing the dead” (Specters 9). Nevertheless, for Derrida, there are a number of aporias at play in the “conceptualization” of mourning, firmly linked to questions of fidelity and responsibility, survival (as sur-vivance, or “living on”), friendship, inheritance, citationality, naming (and the proper name), and mourning as teleological process, among several others. He describes, for example, such complex formulations as mourning’s “unbearable paradox of fidelity” (Work of Mourning 159), “mourning as impossible mourning” (On Touching 219) and “the unreadability of mourning” (Mémoires 34) in essays that are theoretical works “on” mourning and also “perform” mourning, insofar as they are also (or at least began as) occasional pieces, of sorts, composed upon the death of a friend and fellow thinker.

We might begin to unpack these aporetic and apparently paradoxical articulations by examining a passage from Derrida’s piece titled “Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue: Between Two Infinities, the Poem,” ostensibly an elegy for philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (by way of a reflection on a poem by Paul Celan), in which Derrida claims that the failure of the “normal” work of mourning – a certain “leakage” of mourning into what perhaps might better be described, in Freudian terms, as melancholia – is in fact the more ethical response to the death of the other. He writes,

For each time, and each time singularly, each time irreplaceably, each time infinitely, death is nothing less than an end of the world. Not only one among others, the end of someone or of something in the world, the end of a life or of a living being. Death puts an end neither to someone in the world nor to one world among others. Death marks each time, each time in defiance of arithmetic, the absolute end of the one and only world, of that which each opens as a one and only world, the end of the unique world, the end of the totality of what is or can be presented as the origin of the world for any unique living being, be it human or not. (140)
This Blanchotian "world without world"-type argument requires that one embark on the impossible task of maintaining the alterity of the other within the self, of "living on" through life's economy of death,11 of mourning the other in a moment non-empirically "prior" to the other's death if it is to be an event "worthy of the name." J. Hillis Miller reads this gesture of "absolute mourning" in Derrida's work as "my inability to reach the other within myself" (323) — Miller's take on Derrida's often-cited statement that "tout autre est tout autre" — and explains the iterability of the singularity of the event as the "end of the world in its totality" that nevertheless "reappears again, with me remaining alive in it as a survivor of the death of my friend or beloved" (97). Without pushing the Derridean notions of "living on" or "half-life" too far, these aporetic formulations proper to the work of mourning can certainly be seen to constitute an ethics, insofar as being faithful to the dead requires a kind of interiorization that nevertheless rejects the other and maintains him or her outside of the self:

We can only live this experience in the form of an aporia: the aporia of mourning and of prosopopeia, where the possible remains impossible. Where success fails. And where faithful interiorization bears the other and constitutes him in me (in us), at once living and dead. It makes the other a part of us, between us — and then the other no longer quite seems to be the other, because we grieve for him and bear him in us, like an unborn child, like a future. And inversely, the failure succeeds: an aborted interiorization is at the same time a respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there, in his death, outside of us. (Derrida, Mémoires 35)

This at first appears to be a rather curious way to formulate an ethics of mourning, given that the necessary possibility of failed mourning (as introjection or incorporation) or of incomplete mourning is mourning's "best" possible outcome. This kind of "necessary possibility" argument appears often in Derrida's work — in discussions of perjury, citationality, writing, teleology, the postal service, friendship, death, democracy, etc. — and here is brought to bear on mourning in such a way as to effectively "inhabit" the aporia necessary for mourning to "work" — and, as we shall see, is part and parcel of the work of mourning carried out by, or in, Martínez's La poesía chilena.

The notion of successful mourning as incomplete mourning, or as a mourning that might "hold itself back" in a non-teleological or interrupted manner, is a structure that Geoffrey Bennington has described through a reading of Derrida's use of the term "half-mourning" (demi-deuil) that Freud originally postulated in "Mourning and Melancholia." For Bennington, Derrida's demi-deuil is
not really opposed to mourning, nor is it even an etiolated form of mourning, but, affirmatively and even militantly, the only possible mourning, even as it marks mourning with a kind of impossibility. (For the possible in general to be really possible, radically possible, and not just the unfolding of a pro-gramme, it must always in a certain sense be impossible). (xii)

The interrupted teleology of demi-deuil, argues Bennington, perhaps looks more like melancholia than mourning in its refusal of, or protest against, completion of the process. But the failed or inhibited mourning is in fact more ethical than what might be construed as “regular” mourning; Bennington cites Derrida on the way in which mourning “cannot and should not be accomplished. Mourning as impossible mourning” (Bennington 71), glossing the “cannot and should not” in this quote in the following manner: “or must not: ne peut pas et ne doit pas, my emphasis on this crucial point of what I call interrupted teleology” (71). By “leaving the other his alterity, respecting thus his infinite remove” (Mémoires 6), the militant mourner, for Derrida, does not simply elegize the departed friend in the more pedestrian sense of the genre; a mourning “worthy of the name” actively responds to an inheritance and an injunction, thus countersigning the aporetic legacy of the deceased other in the double bind of fidelity and infidelity.

We might inquire as to the nature of inheritance in these curious formulations, given that the composition of Juan Luis Martinez’s La poesía chilena is explicitly framed in terms of a poetic and patriarchal (nationalistic) inheritance. The most direct engagement with the question of inheritance can be found on the box’s cover and is doubled within the depths of the included booklet: “AB IMOPECTORE / Existe la prohibición de cruzar una línea que sólo es imaginaria. / (La última posibilidad de franquear ese límite se concretaría mediante la violencia): / Ya en ese límite, mi padre muerto me entrega estos papeles.”. The corpus of papers described here, we might say, metonymically and metaphorically replaces the body whose existence is inscribed in a legal-political order via the death certificate of Luis Guillermo Martinez Villablanca – who passed away December 26, 1977 (copy of the death certificate issued in Villa Alemana and obtained November 10, 1978). The lived inheritance of Chilean poetry, living on under the aegis of La poesía chilena – pseudo-anthology of the “deaths” of Chilean poetry – “stands up to, and stands in for, the body: a corpse replaced by a corpus, a corpse yielding its place to the bookish thing” (Derrida, Work of Mourning 176), and constructs a literary narrative that interrupts and complicates the patriarchal legacy passed from father to son. Derrida and Roudinesco’s (8) conceptualization of inheritance requires the kind of risk and decision-making that eschews rule-following, and thus is linked to his formulation of the event and non-teleological thinking in general. In several places Derrida describes the horizon-less nature of that which comes, of an
event whose horizon of expectation cannot be anticipated – and of an other for whom we must maintain “hospitality without reserve ... [without] messianic opening to what is coming” (Specters 65). For Derrida, the spectral nature of this *arrivant* – the singular other from whom legacy itself comes, coming from the future (Specters 196) – is linked to the kind of temporal disjunction that characterizes the messianic (as messianism without messianicity), in which the non-prophesied other opens up an interruption in history with “no horizon of expectation (regulative or messianic) ... having perhaps an *avenir*, precisely *justement*, a ‘to-come’ [*à-venir*] that one will have to [*qu’il faudra*] rigorously distinguish from the future” (“Force of Law” 257). The non-futurity of this future, I would argue, is the time of Chilean poetry as it plays out in the personal and poetic inheritance of Juan Luis Martínez’s *La poesía chilena*. It speaks to the untimeliness of a text that simultaneously canonizes and disrupts *avant-garde* poetic traditions, in which Martínez memorializes and mourns for the “passing” of the *avant-gardes* and also presents an archival space in which the future of Chilean poetry is horizon-less and not temporally localizable.12

With respect to the elegy for poetry and patrimony found in Juan Luis Martínez’s *La poesía chilena*, Matías Ayala writes that this work signs off on the death of Chilean poetry, asking in which sense(s) this legal “acta de defunción” (198) closes down traditions (poetry written by Chilean citizens, in Chile or about Chile) or national culture. In terms of nation and tradition(s), what the four memorialized poets have in common is the following:

Se puede conjeturar sobre el estilo de los poetas difuntos: todos partieron del modernismo; todos murieron entre los años 48 y 73; tres de ellos se adscribieron a la vanguardia por un tiempo; dos portaron el carné del Partido Comunista; solamente uno es de extracción social alta; una es mujer; entre ellos se apoyaron y pelearon mutuamente, etc. ¿Qué tradición literaria forman todos ellos? Ninguna, debiera decirse, fuera de su nacionalidad. (Ayala 198)

Ayala (198) goes on to speculate that a neo-avant-gardist erasure of the literary past (declaring it dead) might also be at issue in *La poesía chilena*’s thanatological enclosure and burial of poetic traditions; Andrés Morales, on the other hand, leaves more room for reading the art object as an “obra abierta” that might be “finished” by the reader:

puede completarse o quizás, “debe” completarse por su lector (fuera de las fichas y certificados ya señalados y junto a cada una de las pequeñas banderitas chilenas contenidas en el empaste, el trabajo se completa – y complementa – con otras fichas bibliográficas en blanco, como si llamases al receptor a rellenarlas) proponiendo, quizás, una suerte de “juego cómplice.” (109)
For Morales, the openness of the reading-encounter finds its origins in the trajectory of the first four names included in this “do-it-yourself” anthology – Mistral, Neruda, de Rokha, Huidobro – and in the subsequent (blank) sections of the book,

el lector puede o podrá ir configurando su propia antología (de poetas y de poemas sobre el tema de la muerte), arrancando una banderita chilena, si así lo desea, y rellenando la ficha correspondiente (amén de adjuntar el debido certificado de defunción... lo que señala que solo pueden ser incluidos poetas ya fallecidos). (111)

Whereas Ayala’s reading of Martínez’s literary artifact marks the closure – however uncertain – of a series of poetic, political and cultural traditions, Morales allows for a more “open” reading of a past that is not quite comfortably “laid to rest” and of a future – albeit limited to a future (book) populated by dead Chilean poets (solemnly interred alongside their compositions about death) – for which the reader always already mourns. This literary trajectory, finding its origins and its ends in the avant-gardes, is neither past nor empirically futural insofar as it constantly effaces or buries its origins in, or through, the included soil and coffin-box, meanwhile its blank card catalogue fichas put forth or articulate a temporal structure that turns the past into the future – while it at the same “time” buries its origins and its future. For a (Chilean) poetry “worthy of the name” to arrive, a poetry “to-come” that would (re-)constitute a poesía chilena in La poesía chilena, the literary space of possibility – delimited and re-marked as a national(istic) zone through the obsessive repetition of the Chilean flag – must not foreclose on the arrival of something other in the legacy or inheritance that it actively affirms. I therefore believe that to write the future of Chilean poetry in La poesía chilena, to “mourn for the future” here, one must – as Martínez himself did – carve out a space for the openness of the future, a future re-marked by the projection of the untimeliness of “past” mourning, of a passing that is not empirically past and is necessarily incomplete. Poetry, in this radicalized form, must be “the institution which allows one to say everything, in every way. The space of literature is not only that of an instituted fiction but also a fictive institution which in principle allows one to say everything ... It is an institution which tends to overflow the institution” (Derrida, Acts of Literature 36).

I would like to conclude by outlining a return of the political in Juan Luis Martínez’s La poesía chilena, thinking through the spectre of politics in a way that is certainly related to (or perhaps a consequence of) the questions of mourning, inheritance and teleology with which this essay has been concerned. In the context of artistic production following the violent overthrow of Salvador Allende’s (democratically-elected, socialist) Popular Unity party on September 11, 1973, María Eugenia Brito (8) suggests that the event of the coup – certainly...
in the post-structuralist conception of the term – gave rise to a paradigm shift in Chilean literature whose opaque language reconfigured the national literary imaginary in three ways: as an exploration of historical Latin American (Chilean) culture, as a medium working at the level of the signifier in order to contest the Oppressor’s imposed codes, and as a mourning for the motherland as the violated source of language – inscribed in/on the wounded and domesticated body. The kind of reading done here by Brito – which certainly is valid in the logic of artistic praxis under dictatorship – emphasizes the relationship between the aesthetic of fragmentation practiced by a number of Chilean writers and visual artists, a cathexis of (allegorical) mourning, genre-(and gender-)bending creative activity, as well as a subversion of official (hegemonic) discourses in the reformulation and reorganization of signification in the face of political crisis. Brito’s deconstruction of monolithic identities is clearly informed by the theoretical apparatus of French structuralist and post-structuralist thought (especially Barthes, Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, and Kristeva, among others) as well as more local paradigms (Ronald Kay, Patricio Marchant, and Nelly Richard, for example), which reflects, and at the same time performs, the rigorous theoretical coordinates of what she – following Richard (following Freud and Derrida) – classifies as the larger Chilean “scene of writing” in the mid- to late-1970s. Juan Luis Martínez’s place in this trajectory is marginal on several levels, given his reclusive nature (as a function of his poor health as well as his ethic of self-erasure) in addition to his physical remove from Santiago, the nation’s intellectual and artistic centre. Despite his multiple eccentricities, the larger allegorical resonances of Martínez’s political gestures in La poesía chilena made readers uncomfortable,13 as Roberto Merino has suggested, given that it was published in “un momento de fuertes restricciones en la lectura política de todas las cosas” (65). For Merino, “El campo de la lectura estaba, por decirlo así, minado, o bien sembrado de alarmas, como la patria misma. La presencia de la serie de banderas chilenas entre las páginas de este libro produjeron, si me acuerdo bien, algunas inquietudes en relación a la ambigua oscuridad del gesto” (65). How, then, might we more precisely situate the political in the midst of these obscurities, and what, if any, is the link between the future of Chilean poetry and Chilean politics in La poesía chilena?

We might return, if a bit obsessively, to the beginning of the book as an initial point of (re-)entry: as the reader of La poesía chilena moves through the art object’s included booklet, the author’s name first appears with respect to the book’s copyright information: “©JUAN LUIS MARTINEZ HOLGER, 1978 / INSCRIPCION N° 48406 / DERECHOS RESERVADOS.” On the following page – the detailed title page – we find the doubling and erasure of the author’s proper name, as (JUAN LUIS MARTINEZ) and (JUAN DE DIOS MARTINEZ). Merino highlights the subtle political disarticulation at play in Martínez’s use of the pseudonym, insofar as the Martínez “twins” (JUAN and JUAN DE DIOS)
thus divorce themselves or deviate from the political inscription of the proper name – much in the way that three of the four poets immortalized within the book’s confines chose to renounce their given names:

Esa negación del apellido paterno – que en el caso de Neruda tuvo valor legal – equivale a una evidente y deliberada desafiliación de lo propio. No puede tener otro carácter, en cuanto el nombre adoptado no tiene, en las bóvedas del arte, más resonancia que el nombre heredado. En tal sentido, no podríamos hablar sin mayores problemas de las obras de Carlos Díaz Loyola, Lucila Godoy, Neftalí Reyes y Vicente García Huidobro. El libro-caja de Juan Luis Martínez, siendo una restitución a la patria realizada en oscuros momentos, es también una restitución al propio padre. (66)

For Merino La poesía chilena is a metaphorical and literal repatriation – insofar as it highlights the belonging of people to a nation (transcending physical space) and also marks the restitution of the (fatherly and literary) corpus to Chilean soil by way of the inclusion of a packet of “Tierra del Valle Central.” Martínez thus inscribes his (deceased) father into a literary-legal order via a cryptonomy of proper names, a “crypt as a foreign body included through incorporation in the Self, and the ghost effect, more radically heterogeneous insofar as it implies the topography of an other, of a ‘corpse buried in the other’” (Derrida, “Fors”xxx). Chilean poetry in La poesía chilena, then, is a cryptic space in which to keep the dead alive as living dead (Derrida, “Fors”xxi) and also to mourn for the future as impossible or incomplete mourning, bearing witness to a death that can never be (and should never be, viz Bennington reading Derrida) fully sublated or mastered.

Perhaps the most subtle politics present in this hermetic text may be found in a transposition, a slight-of-hand of sorts, which displaces the death certificates and substitutes them for the Chilean flag – returning to, and culminating in, Martínez’s father’s death certificate and its accompanying bag of soil. If, as Morales asserts, “es como si el autor delimitara el tema de la muerte a la gran creación poética chilena” (81), then there is a poignant series of metamorphoses forming the backbone of the moribund literary creation stitched together in La poesía chilena. As I previously described, the visual narrative begins with legal documents ordering and classifying death and card catalogue entries registering poems about death (both metonymies appealing to different registers of the signifier “death”). It then transforms into the proliferation of Chilean flags (metonyms for the nation) and blank library fichas (a kind of poetry-to-come, a non-empirically futural “half life” of poetry), finally culminating in the idea of patria by linking the flags with Luis Guillermo Martínez Villablanca’s death certificate and the “Tierra del Valle Central” (metonymy and metaphor; patronym and cryptonym). These tropological shifts enact a clandestine textual politics, insofar as they deftly propose a politics
and a literary-visual poetics of death through their operations of substitution and contiguity. By conflating legal and literary discourses “about” death, which also performatively enact and entomb the death of poets, poetry, and the father(land), the reader is certainly left, as Merino suggests, with “algunas inquietudes en relación a la ambigua oscuridad del gesto” (65).

Rather than espousing a particular course of political action – i.e. criticizing the violence and censorship of the Pinochet regime – La poesía chilena’s preservation of the futural poetic event certainly gestures towards and favors an openness in the political. I am hesitant, however, to extend my exploration of poetic futurity (vis-à-vis La poesía chilena) towards something like Derrida’s “democracy to come” or other conceptualizations of futural politics, messianism or justice, as I have done in the context of Raúl Zurita’s Anteparaíso (1982). In the case of La poesía chilena, I would suggest that we might think of literature’s ambiguous critico-political function (not to mention language’s problematic referential status) as its greatest (ir)responsibility. As Derrida convincingly argues in an interview titled “This Strange Institution Called Literature”

[literature] gives in principle the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them, and thereby to institute, to invent and even to suspect the traditional difference between nature and institution, nature and conventional law, nature and history. Here we should ask juridical and political questions. The institution of literature in the West, in its relatively modern form, is linked to an authorization to say everything, and doubtless too to the coming about of the modern idea of democracy. Not that it depends on a democracy in place, but it seems inseparable to me from what calls forth a democracy, in the most open (and doubtless itself to come) sense of democracy. (37)

He goes on to relate the openness of literary space to the (non-empirically) futural event that, structurally, is “democracy to come”: “That’s the whole question of the future or the event promised by or to such an experience, what I was just calling the democracy to come. Not the democracy of tomorrow, not a future democracy which will be present tomorrow but one whose concept is linked to the to-come [à-venir, cf. avenir, future], to the experience of a promise engaged, that is always an endless promise” (“This Strange Institution” 38). Whereas some of the claims that Derrida puts forward in Rogues (and elsewhere) regarding this notion of the “democracy to come” are beyond the scope of the present study, I see some similarities with the ways in which Juan Luis Martínez’s poetic and micro-political strategies in La poesía chilena make a normative claim about preserving the openness of the (poetic) future, while at the same time properly (impossibly) mourning for and memorializing (burying) the past.¹⁵ This is, in a sense, “mourning for the future” of Chilean poetry in La poesía chilena: bearing witness to the spectral archival space of the
coffin-book while also silently sealing off the future crypt(s) of the living dead. *La poesía chilena*, then, mourns for the future (*a future?*) without horizon of expectation, insofar as its work of (poetic) mourning — necessarily incomplete and interrupted if it is to do its “work” — shows how the corpse/corpus of the Other buried in the Self is never quite laid to rest, and returns, obsessively, in literature and politics, in literature *as* politics.¹⁶

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**NOTES**

1 On situating Martínez’s work within the Chilean neo-avant-garde, see Carrasco, Morales (“La poesía”) and Rioseco.

2 Lastra, an editor at Valparaíso’s Editorial Universitaria in the early 70s, provided early support for Martínez’s work when in 1971 he (unsuccessfully) encouraged Universitaria to publish the manuscript that would become *La nueva novela* (interview with María Ester Robledo, *Poemas del otro 65*).

3 English-language publications on Martínez’s work are — amazingly — limited to articles by Scott Jackson and Oscar Sarmiento as well as a book chapter by Thorpe Running. Translation of his work into English, to my knowledge, includes brief selections by Steven F. White, Jack Schmitt, Mónica de la Torre as well as a short bio and selection in the recently-published *Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*. A number of dissertations from North American universities have included discussions of Martínez’s work, including those by Matías Ayala, David Miralles, Marcelo Rioseco, and Jesús Sepúlveda. There have been five (Spanish-language) articles on Martínez published in US-based academic journals — by Santiago Daydi-Tolson, Laura García-Moreno, Gwen Kirkpatrick, Elizabeth Monasterios and Marcelo Rioseco. Having compiled a comprehensive bibliography of critical work done on Juan Luis Martínez, I am puzzled by Maureen Lennon Zaninovic’s comment in *El Mercurio* — upon the publication of *Poemas del otro* — that “más se ha escrito sobre [Martínez] fuera de Chile.”

4 In critical articles and reviews of *La poesía chilena* (and also in library catalogues listing the work) there are, strangely enough, some discrepancies regarding the empirical composition of the art object. Andrés Ajens, for example, counts 30 Chilean flags included in the work, Matías Ayala mentions 40 “fichas de lectura” and 29 paper flags and Jaime Quezada asserts that Martínez used a total of 16,500 flags in the project’s composition — therefore utilizing 33 in each of the 500 copies. My copy of *La poesía chilena* — number 354 — contains 30 flags and 40 blank card catalogue “fichas.” Whereas the death certificates are not attached to the booklet (and might be rather easily lost), the flags and cards are in fact attached — I am thus unable to account for this curious discrepancy.
Whereas the reader of *La nueva novela* is repeatedly confronted with names like Rimbaud, Valéry, Mallarmé, Breton, Blanchot, Duchamp, Magritte, Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Beckett, Deleuze, Sade, Hobbes, Hegel, Marx, Gauss, and Lobachevski, to name a few among literally dozens, the only names of Latin American writers that appear in the book are those of poets Alejandra Pizarnik, José Lezama Lima, Miguel Serrano, and Pablo Neruda, as well as philosopher Felix Schwartzmann.

The sink, for Andrés Morales, symbolizes a site of ablution, in which, “a la salida de la lectura del texto, es menester lavarse las manos ... [así] según la tradición, se desliga de la responsabilidad de sus dichos o hechos” (110). In a similar quasi-religious vein, Jaime Quezada (45) reads the sink as emblematic of the erasure of the Promised Land of Chilean poetry incarnate in *La poesía chilena*.

Elizabeth Monasterios describes the play on “logos” in the following manner: “Dependiendo del énfasis que se le otorgue, LOGOS puede ser interpretado en el sentido heraclitano (principio abstracto universal que genera un orden cuyo conocimiento conduciría a la sabiduría); en el sentido judaico (LOGOS es aquí una realidad concreta: dios mismo, el camino, la verdad y la vida) o finalmente, en el sentido lógico (razón encaminada hacia una pretensión de verdad)” (864).

We might also consider this elegiac textuality as akin to the kind of epitaphic writing that Karen Mills Courts has described in her book *Poetry as Epitaph: Representation and Poetic Language*. Here, Mills Courts treats the poetic voice in terms of its epitaphic gestures, alternately performing a Heideggerian (presentational or incarnative) view of language or a Derridean (representational) one.

Some critical reviews of *La poesía chilena* take the elegiac nature of the work to be quite touching – Jaime Quezada (46) and Andrés Morales (110), for example, compare it to the superb 15th-century elegy “Coplas por la muerte de su padre” written by Jorge Manrique. On the other hand, Cándido (Enrique Laforcade) dismisses the work as “Caldo sin una pizca de substancia” and “Un total vacío, pretencioso” (E8) in a way similar to Ignacio Valente’s back-handed compliments regarding Martínez’s *La nueva novela*. Valente, the influential literary critic for *El Mercurio*, referred to the visual and formal-logical elements in *La nueva novela* as conjurations or slight-of-hand (“malabarismos”) “que no siempre [le] convencen como poesía” (“La poesía” 3), and later highlighted “la carencia de substancia humana en el interior de sus formalismos lógico-mágicos, por brillantes que éstos sean” (“Juan Luis Martínez” 7). Even more harsh were judgments by the poet Braulio Arenas (founder of the Surrealist Mandrágora group in Chile in the late 1930s), who called *La nueva novela* the most boring thing (“lo más fome”) he had ever read, suggesting that “de ahí que resulte tan penoso recorrer el libro de Martínez (sin contar con la provocativa cita de Picabia a continuación de la bandera nacional, o el obsceno texto de la página 129) porque nos suena a cosa vieja sin ese frescor del pasado” (6).

In his “Discurso de sobremesa” titled “Also Sprach Altazor,” marking the centennial of Huidobro’s birth, Chilean poet Nicanor Parra calls Huidobro “Vincent” and...
writes (in French in the original), “Par lui même / poète français / Né au Chili” (232) – lamenting that even back in his home country he was left behind when it came to awards: “Qué vergüenza + grande! / Ni Nacional / Ni Nobel / Ni siquiera Municipal!” (284-86).

11 Geoffrey Bennington describes this “life-death” or “half-life” structure (with reference to Derrida’s quasi-teleological reading of the Kantian regulative Idea and his formulation of différence in Speech and Phenomena and the Grammatology) as an “inhibited tendency towards an autos or ipse that would, however, if achieved, be the end of life” (61). On “living on,” see, particularly, “Living On: Borderlines” and Demeure (with Maurice Blanchot).

12 The point of reference for the theorization of untimeliness is Idelber Avelar’s The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning, which is an excellent treatment of the links between mourning and allegory in recent Latin American literature.

13 I would argue, however, that the trope of allegory is insufficient to account for the kinds of radical textual gestures carried out by the more experimental literary projects of this time period. In my articles “Messianism” and “Beyond Allegory?” I make a case for non-allegorical readings of the early work of Raúl Zurita and Diemela Eltit, focusing in particular on the ways in which referential aberrations and non-teleological structures problematize allegorical approaches to their difficult texts.

14 We might perhaps read Martínez’s own crossed-out name vis-à-vis this cryptological reading of La poesía chilena’s poetics of mourning for the historical avant-gardes, and for the futural crypt in which poetry is uncomfortably and not completely laid to rest. That is, JUAN LUIS MARTÍNEZ as cryptonym – simultaneously absent and present – is also indicative of the logic of cryptic spaces in which the living dead walk (write) among us.

15 Matthias Fritsch’s article makes an excellent case for the normativity of Derrida’s argument in the face of the deconstructive philosopher’s ethic of aporias and contradictions.

16 I would like to thank Eliana Rodríguez for permission to include images from La poesía chilena in this article.

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