

Featured Poet

RICARDO PAU-LLOSA



photo by Nicolás Antonio Jiménez

Ricardo Pau-Llosa, born in Havana in 1954, was six when his family fled communist Cuba and arrived in Chicago. He learned English by osmosis, yet Spanish language and Cuban culture were kept alive in his home, enabling him and his older sister to maintain a fluent bicultural identity. By 1962, Pau-Llosa and his family were living in Tampa, and in 1968 they moved to Miami, the burgeoning capital of Cuban American life, politics, and culture. Miami was emerging as the capital of Latin American art, and Pau-Llosa would soon become an internationally published critic and thinker. His poetry grew alongside his passion for the visual arts. Pau-Llosa published monographs and major essays on such Latin American masters as Olga de Amaral, Fernando de Szyszlo, Rafael Soriano, Arnaldo Roche Rabell, Nicolás Leiva, and Rogelio Polesello.

Pau-Llosa's debut collection of poetry, *Sorting Metaphors*, won the first national competition for the Anhinga Prize in 1983, judged that year by William Stafford. In 1992, Bilingual Press brought out *Bread of the Imagined*. The next year saw the publication of *Cuba*—the first English-language book of poems dealing exclusively with Cuba. It was chosen as the 100th title in the prestigious Poetry Series of Carnegie Mellon University Press, and Pau-Llosa's work has appeared solely on Carnegie Mellon ever since. *Vereda Tropical*, a book focused on Cuban music, performance, and exile-related themes, came out in 1999. *The Mastery Impulse* (2003) and *Parable Hunter* (2008) delve into how trope and fable guide the interaction of memory, history, and creativity. *Man* (2014) counterpoints the life of a contemporary secular man with archetypes enshrined in the Bible. *The Turning* (2018) explores Pau-Llosa's longstanding interest in ekphrasis, while his latest collection, *Fleeing Actium* (2023), complicates themes and content in previous books by means of the poet's unique take on the sonnet form.

Ricardo Pau-Llosa's poems and writings on art have appeared in journals across the globe. He splits his time between homes in Miami and Key Largo, along with his partner, Aleida Jacobo.

Enrico Mario Santí

Hermes Unbound: The Art of Ricardo Pau-Llosa

*He sang the story of the deathless gods and of the
dark earth, how at the first they came to be, and
how each one received his portion.*

—“Homeric Song of Hermes”

*These are the arguments of a life
earned by reflection.*

—“Trash”

Like many good things in my life, the art of Ricardo Pau-Llosa was a late discovery. Late, but not untimely. The poet and I had had contact twenty years before when Maestro Aurelio de la Vega—until his recent passing, one of the great classical composers—first introduced us. But it was only years later that I backpedaled into his work, and gathered a truncated first reading, by way of a side interest, when I began translating into Cuban Spanish, Cuba-themed poems written by Anglo poets. I started with Stevens and Crane, who famously penned such works, but almost as an afterthought began doing some of the excellent Cuban-American poets who write in English and concentrated on Pau-Llosa’s two early books, *Cuba* and *Vereda Tropical*. I was led at the time by haunting lines like the ones that evoke his childhood exile: “My *mameyes* were the snows of Chicago / and the sounds that were not, could not be / words coming out of every mouth.” Thus, I set out to retrieve “sounds that were not,” the Cuban Spanish words that had

not made it into verse. One crazy question framed that project: how would English Cuba-themed poems sound in Cuban Spanish? It was reframed by yet another, far wackier doubt that rendered the whole thing suspect: is there such a thing as Cuban Spanish? To this day, the answers escape me. But I do know that my later, broader acquaintance with Pau-Llosa's art enabled me to know a major living poet, regardless of language or theme.

Nine volumes and forty years of poetry made Pau-Llosa major. Not just out of volume and length of service. It's the power and strangeness of the language in those books, which owes little to his native Spanish, and over the years has evolved a unique vision and style. The strangeness comes from a chiseled verse that conjures a vocabulary wealth, a syntax often so tortured, and an allusive texture so rich that they defy coherence, delaying sense but in the end rendering luminous apothegms that border on the oracular. Making few concessions, his is a language of cosmopolitan urbanity, learned elegance, and aesthetic dignity, even when it deals with the everyday, as is often the case, or kids around with frivolous anecdotes, as the trickster in Pau-Llosa is wont to do. Such would be the essence of lyric he has mastered over the years, culminating in the forthcoming *Fleeing Actium*.

The cadence of Pau-Llosa's verse can wax Shakespearean; his extended metaphors, grounded in a very personal context, recall Rilke and Stevens; Walcott and Lezama Lima haunt the baroque echoes of his Caribbean visions—and all that, rising in a language harbored within an archive of world poetry stored since acquiring English as a child. The linguistic strangeness I invoke can only be compared, I believe, with prose masters like Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, or Alejo Carpentier, or with two mid-twentieth-century poets, Borges and Brodsky—all five “extraterritorial” natives of tongues foreign to the ones each ultimately chose as literary destiny. The more reason

to restate the obvious: Pau-Llosa is very much an American poet who writes superb English verse, *tout court*. And I say this while vigorously opposing any view to pigeonhole his work as “Cuban American” or “Latino,” which would acquiesce to that mild form of discrimination that too often limits the importance of emerging U.S. poets. In turn, the right to U.S. citizenship hardly strips the poet of a native identity. To quote from the interview that appears in this issue: “an artist’s ‘Cubanness’ or ‘Mexicanness’ is not determined by palm trees, maracas, pyramids, or sarapes but by how they use metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and other tropes in their visual thought.”

And then there’s Pau-Llosa’s sheer volume of work: not only those nine collections but a good amount of prose, to this day uncollected, devoted mostly to art criticism that would easily make up a goodly tome. Hence, added diversity of theme and obvious merit, one is left with the three requisites of Paul Valéry’s definition of a classic: quantity, variety, and excellence. Centuries before Valéry, Cervantes had called Lope de Vega, his contemporary polymath, a “*monstruo de la Naturaleza*” (monster of Nature) to describe the same phenomenon. Because there certainly is something *monstrous* about Pau-Llosa, well beyond the surface issue of linguistic mastery. I mean *monstrous* here in the original sense of “deviating from the stated order of nature” that Dr. Johnson, closer to Cervantes than to Wikipedia, once elucidated to reference the sheer excess of his production: exuberance as a brand of teratology. An exuberance that, one might add, goes well beyond his art. Step into the poet’s lair, which houses a world-class art collection—walls teeming with canvases, large and small; room corners camouflaged by sculptures, old and new; mantels overflowing with objects, strange and familiar—and take the personal tour—Bacardí in hand, Padrón in snout—to experience in body the sort of *monstrous* event to which I refer, the kind of awe one associates with the cornucopia

of a Picasso or the breadth of a Richard Taruskin.

Indeed, monstrosity, exuberant or not, happens to have been in Pau-Llosa's mind, in relation to himself or at least his *persona*, in at least one important poem from *Man* (2014), arguably his most original book. In each of the book's seventy poems, the trappings of Christian theology launch a kaleidoscope of self-caricatures—the title's "Man." Thus, "Monstrance Man," the seventeenth, exploits the homonym *monstrance-monstrous*:

As a boy he had trouble speaking,
past three before a real word preened
from his lips. And for the longest time,
malaprops haunted him. His older sister
did what she could to train the bitten seal
of his brain to twirl the red ball
on the nose of eloquence, and his grandmother
tired of insisting he utter the names
of toys or foods—for every desire
was coded—and gave him whatever
he grunted and pointed to.
O, the man then a boy
thought, when I tower among them
I should invent my own speech
and leave others empty and afraid
that they did not know it, could not ask
or plead their case in the one tongue
that mattered. I shall have them
look upon the simplest things,
the man then a boy thought,
and fill up with stolen awe,
and point with their faces,
their pupils wide as blackened coins,
and hope with all the revenue
shattered heart-glass can muster
that someone had grasped

their need as need and not
as the monstrous coupling
of sounds in a trance of whims.
Then, the grind of his teeth
vowed, then the plazas of my city
will fill with my name,
and their blood will matter
as little to them as to me.

Here we have one of many texts where Pau-Llosa reflects upon extraterritoriality, his and others', linguistic or not. First, bouncing memories of his sister's preening of actual words and the doting grandmother's short-circuit, a counterpoint to which the grown "Man," the book's recurring mask, attributes to the freakish origins of artistic fate. And then, as a result, the Zarathustra-like invention of a speech so unique that it bars response, save for those silent cues of "stolen awe" that forces presumed interlocutors to grasp "their need as need and not / as the monstrous coupling / of sounds in a trance of whims." The end result of this Man's identity, then, would be to pit *monstrance*—a sacred or transcendent offering, as in the Christian ostensory—against the *monstrous*, here defined as doggerel, metaphor for any negative aesthetics. If, on the one hand, transcendent *monstrance* breaks out of aesthetic media, including language, to move souls, then *monstrous*, on the other, is condemned to dissipate. In the end, having reached the immediacy of *monstrance*, Zarathustra cannot help embodying the *monstrous* himself, as he boasts indifference to human suffering. Dr. Johnson would agree with such redefinitions: true monstrosity would be the banality of evil; *monstrance*, well beyond "the stated order of nature," surpasses it, even when its producer, too, happens to be a monster. *Monstrance* makes the good visible; *monstrous* shows up the ugly and evil.

Man, Pau-Llosa's seventh book, is of course an exercise in self-mockery by a mature, self-confident poet, and we have here, rather than a definitive *ars poetica*, the contours, perhaps the moral limits, of a poetics, one of many that recur throughout all nine volumes. By contrast, *Cuba* (1993) and *Vereda Tropical* (1999), the two volumes I backpedaled into, had preceded *Man* by two decades. While those two books had plunged into a Cuban imaginary, *Man* went on to expand personal mythology by stripping it of native details. Thus, working through trappings of Cuban identity—from island geography to *boleros*, Little Havana to airline corridors, José Martí to Tropicana—allowed an abstract, generic *Man* to emerge. Not that the Cuban theme would be done with—it recurs in many poignant poems of the later books—but working through that native stage does seem to have cleared the way for the more random philosophical musings that make up *The Mastery Impulse*, *Parable Hunter*, and *The Turning*. That is, the “Cuban interlude” appears to have been a necessary probe of native culture before proceeding with the ongoing inquiry—broader, less localized—into philosophical themes, including art, which is Pau-Llosa's trademark.

You might note my preference for invoking *art*, rather than *poetry*, in relation to Pau-Llosa. It derives from convictions strewn among his ekphrastic poems, not to mention acquaintance with his parallel *métier* as curator and art critic. Again, from Hill's interview: “*Ekphrasis* is a term used to describe art that is inspired by other art forms, as, say, a musical composition inspired by a poem, or a painting inspired by music, or poetry that is triggered by painting. In my case, the latter.” Studying as I usually do those poems alongside Google Images, itself an education, has made me realize the centrality of art in Pau-Llosa's intellectual horizon. For just as the early poems about Cuba surpass folklore to render moral arguments about historical fate, the ekphrastic poems use descriptive rhetoric to reflect

upon the mysteries of art, mimesis, or else to elaborate far more intimate musings, such as the ways in which aesthetic experience compensates for a life of exile. Access to art and its practice thus become exercises in freedom, as shown in the plethora of subjects and themes, occasions all for “the arguments of a life / earned by reflection.” This, my second epigraph, I take from *The Mastery Impulse*, Pau-Llosa’s fifth book, at the end of the poem “Trash,” as if wishing to broadcast early his belief that anything is game for poetic reflection.

And so it is. I’ve already mentioned part of the repertoire in the Cuba poems and provided a glimpse of the huge ekphrastic gallery. Tour the rest of the canon and you will also encounter such sublime topics as bars, car washes, gardens, truck tires, cigar smoke, opera arias, and so forth. In each, the initial sensation or material support—trash, tires, arias—launches a reflection at the end of which we are struck by an aphorism, an apothegm, or, as Pau-Llosa prefers, a parable, thus making the reader marvel at the extraction of such wisdom. “Where shall wisdom be found?” The question that vexed Job, and later my Yale teacher Harold Bloom, seems also to be at the heart of Pau-Llosa’s random musings. Reading him for the delight of his parables, I have often thought how much his work reminds me of religious texts such as Pascal’s *Pensées* or Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*. Which makes me wonder: could the poet have absorbed the structure of such exercises from the Jesuit primary education he gathered in Havana, Tampa, and Miami?

In 1954, Louis Martz published a whole book showing how “the poetry of meditation” of a John Donne followed strictly the Loyola-inspired structure of “a particular situation, through analysis of the situation, and finally some sort of resolution of the problems which the situation has presented.” Of course, Pau-Llosa is not Donne, his themes neither moral nor theological, although he does indulge

frequently in metaphysical and spiritual musings that make a reader like me think of that link. That we are dealing with a poetry of meditation with deliberate structure alerts us as well to a dialectical trait: Pau-Llosa is not a poet of sensation, in the sense of a single impression whose verbal equivalent is self-contained. Pau-Llosa and haiku don't mix. His are a philosophical mind and pen that cannot help pursuing initial impressions as logical, extended narratives whose derived endpoints may well be as puzzling for him as for his reader. Such poetics of inquiry, so to speak, explain, I think, Pau-Llosa's fascination for Edmund Husserl, and for phenomenology in general, even though Heidegger's teacher, unlike his more famous disciple, never did write about poetry and confined his inquiry to what he called *die Sache* (the things). It is that pursuit of analysis, or logical narrative, to the bitter end of things, material situations, regardless of resolution, that also explains Pau-Llosa's penchant for ekphrasis, a rhetorical grid that provides stable pictorial equivalents to the moral despairs of a Donne yet harbors enough evidence to destabilize any modern viewer's amateur interpretation.

Just survey the canon's books five through eight, and you will identify the wealth of themes and methods I am describing. Nowhere more evident, though, than in *Fleeing Actium*, the ninth and latest book, in press as of this writing. For one, it is Pau-Llosa's longest book—112 poems as opposed to the average 50 in earlier ones—and the most variegated, as if the mature poet had wanted to provide a *summa* of themes and objects (*Sache*, though here he calls them *Res*), all subjected to his customary exercises and with the virtuoso daring of a skilled sonneteer. Thus, ekphrases of both Western and Asian art (Edo, Hokusai, Hiroshige) and pastiches of apocryphal Buddhist sermons meet poignant elegies of both family members and an expired era (as in "Last Quarter of the 20th Century in Miami"). Structured in five sections ("Ekphrases," "Edo," "Belief,"

“Res,” and “Genius Loci”), the book proceeds, funnel-like, from aesthetic distance to local immediacy, with a recurring use of the sonnet form to provide a semblance of unity.

Where Pau-Llosa’s formidable monstrous imagination does show most daring perhaps is in the series of eleven dramatic monologues of figures, historical or not, in dialogue that he sets up in the first third. Thus, “Helen to Bathsheba” is followed by “Bathsheba to Helen,” “Homer to Moses” by “Moses to Homer,” and so on. A compendious assemblage of figures, historical events, art forms, texts, anecdotes, *Fleeing Actium* thus reaches for a totalizing encyclopedic form, radically different from the earlier books yet no different, in range if not in content, from modernist *Gesamtkunstwerk* like Pound’s *The Cantos*, Neruda’s *Canto General*, or de Campos’s *Galaxias*. The German comes, of course, from Wagner, who coined the term for totalizing art forms (like his own *Ring Cycle*) that synthesize diverse media, but the term that eventually came to describe encyclopedic texts ranging from Dante’s *Commedia*, Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, or Mallarmé’s *Coup de des*.

Unable to provide further illustration, I opt instead, as road to a conclusion, for reading the title poem as microcosm:

Fleeing Actium

—New Year’s, Port Largo
for Robert Nazarene

Summer on the backs of winter sirens the rich.
By late morning the canal regains its calm
after yachts and jet skis have shed
their docks for the Gulfstream. From shore
the festive clusters, wreathed in beer, ignore
our witness and the sunken life for pleasure’s bread.

Banners stroke the distant sand where helms
brace against the sky, a melding in which
three dozen craft engage into a form.
What golden day can truly presage storm,
this nest of noise in a cell's blind horizon?
Naxos before the courtship and slaughtered maze,
when no Before held sway over the known
and Now no Pharos yearned in ledger's trace.
By 5, with hungers shorn, a flybridge boat
heads east and pulls a raft in tow.
The rising tide reclaims by ancient rote.

True to form, three sections—situation, analysis, resolution—structure the witness's exercise one bright New Year's morning, an exceptional summery day in winter at the paradisa Florida Keys, as neighbors' yachts stream out to sea and rowdy crowds gather at the shore. Yet never content with surface appearance, Pau-Llosa's speaker wants to pierce through Paradise to forecast the inevitable coming storm—*et in Arcadia ego*—likely as a defense against certain disappointment. The circumstance—one “golden day” in a strait canal in pursuit of open waters—makes the learned speaker recall a historical analogy: Mark Anthony and Cleopatra's flight from Actium before Octavian's navy (September, 30 B.C.), an escape from North to South—Naxos to Pharos—that, unforeseen by the famous lovers, would end eventually in inevitable tragedy. Analogy thus posed, at day's end another sumptuous yacht comes into view, heading east out to sea, while pulling “a raft in tow.” Is this spectacle the true flight? Regardless, it derives a law (“ancient rote”) from the timely epilogue: the unavoidable “rising tide” will always reclaim its own.

Pau-Llosa subtly rewrites through History. Hardly content with Longfellow's scanty moral (“The day returns, but nevermore / returns the traveler to the shore”), he inquires into the enigma of cyclical change, cycles that

rule not just Nature, but History as well. That History is involved appears not only in the speaker's learned archive; the apparition of the tiny raft hauled by the sumptuous yacht, out to sea and away from land, reminds painfully, for refugees like Pau-Llosa or me, the fate of desperate island migrants, too often repatriated, repudiated, by either Law's or Nature's "rising tide."

And so goes the macrocosm—the ninth book, all nine books. For what can Nature's cycles, invariably captured in Art, East or West, or pseudo-Buddha's sermons, or dialogues among the famous, or the merest anecdotes, too often ignored for their parabolic value, their wisdom, teach us? By what method, what structured exercise, what "mastery impulse," can we learn what human experience is all about?

Future biographers of Pau-Llosa might note, finally, that publication of *Fleeing Actium* coincides in time with the poet's move from Miami to the Florida Keys, and therefore that the title metaphor could well be the cipher for the retreat from the city—the Horatian *beatus ille*: Happy are the few . . .—and therefore a retreat from both *Aktion*, the original Greek spelling, and *Actaeon*, the tragic mythical figure for strayed, or excessive, desire. And yet, will trading Miami for Keys open doors to greater knowledge? Is it here where Wisdom shall at last be found?

And wherefore Hermes?

We forget that he is not only the proverbial messenger of the Gods. Hermes is one of the two most prominent mythical poets. His rival is Orpheus, Eurydice's widower, but unlike his sad colleague, Hermes, the most human and least divine of the gods, happily carries on the affairs of the world yet cares for the netherworld. He first gained fame as a cattle thief and was pardoned once or twice by Apollo, his dotting father, when seduced by the charm of his lyre. "Slayer of oxen, trickster, busy one, comrade of the feast," went that address to his wayward son, only to add,

upon melting at his sounds—“this song of yours is certainly worth fifty cows.”

All too human, Pau-Llosa is no god. But the trickster in him keeps him busy with the world, his song acquits the cattle thief, his poems convey the message:

Therefore, heed my words:
Let him have those fifty cows.
And please leave him unbound.
The Gods will reward us.

The Five Senses

RICARDO PAU-LLOSA

Images courtesy of the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid
—The Five Senses *by Jan Brueghel the Elder*
and Peter Paul Rubens (1617–18)



Hearing

A garden of cochleas compose the scene which eye
dizzies into swirls that lock and free like galaxies.
The chime of clocks and hunting calls demure
asides to mobs of cellos and violins, harpsichord
and talky guests who dine on sound and hoard
the corner where the eye is thrown by the lure
of feast. Plucks and birds circle and seize
Cupid's venison trance as mother rides
the lute which painting cannot record. So deaf
the muted art that theater must fuss bereft
in copious mess to banquet what ear surgeons
clear. Thunder and all its clan and voice
are but ripples which a clutch of bones
and a fluid curl translate into a noise
of chemical and spark. Their journeys end
in luxury's vaulted den, the veiled mind,
whose maze reminds that silence was their origin.



Sight

The cyclopic chandelier ponders the world
of the *mise-en-scène*. It blurs gold with ash
on its brass orb. Pages of visuality surf
upon the paintings within paintings; a mall
of palaces mirrors a hive of art on the wall.
A dozen busts forum the shelves, cursed
with a stone gaze, as lions and men perish
in an orgied hunt. A goddess sits, schooled
in right vision by her son and mired
by wreaths, virgins, lechers. She is too tired
to learn or rage, will shut her eyes and dream
of rest. Conch infinities imploding abound,
for none can take whole this flood of scene,
and must piecemeal build a world in the round.
The eye itself, globe and prism, lets the brain
compose and rectify this detailed rain.
She wonders how each blink a miracle refrains.



Touch

Alone, the sense our bodies own entire.
It warns, detects, gives and pleasure takes.
The hand pulls the resting arm to want,
but all flesh feels the warmth of its brush.
Armor walls from blade, not rush;
it cannot spare us the shot of lure and taunt.
Flesh seals us when, eyes shut, it makes
for sleep. Fearless when we dream of fire.
Ablaze with the silk of oils when entwined,
alone we sank and rise alone to find
we are a crumpled page the dream as author
tossed aside. No such confusion derides
the falcon's prey or the knotted fists the forger
drops and the lasher meticulously plies.
What stroke, note, or pose, what meal or act
was ever free from the body's grip and tact?
This skin that halves the world cannot subtract.



Smell

The floral stampede conflates all scents
into one. No ear or eye, the nose cannot
tell from where or unravel the vines that shape
the clumped aroma. It is false that some detect
by hints the mosaic of waft, for none can reject
the sweep. Rose and jasmine with civet and ape
duel then mate. Behold the dog which forgot
his enemy before him. The goddess sensed
the world could meld and so invented love.
She made the nose her agent, not heart or dove,
not song or sugars bowed, as in Indian lore,
to shoot the guarding will and let trapped
passions roam. A life of thought can no more
quarrel with desire than a nose with odors mobbed.
Like the ear, the nose cannot resist
what enters it. No closing lid desists
nor tongue or hand refuse muddled air's fine grist.



Taste

To eat we kill. Dismiss the chubby shooter
who aims at lust, and fill the room with need's
slaughter. The boar alone manages a severed grin
below the martyred deer and over pheasants
round as bubbles in a drain. None of pleasant's
fineries, the table, field, and floor derange
with pantries or grazing beasts who soon will feed.
The goddess dresses almost right for dinner
as her satyr pours his heart out to allay
whatever haunt of measure might betray
that plenty is not the stuff of paradise.
What then was Eden for, what promise merits
devotion? This vale of no's, this crib that dies
each hour, seeks counterweight in tons not carats,
visions, or wings. The banquet's litany rebuffs
hungers timed to last. Spare us the rough
edge of doubt. We toast sweet pleasure's cuffs.

The Lost Sermons of the Buddha

RICARDO PAU-LLOSA

Devadatta

I too recall the life in which I was
his light and he my king. On the path
to the rising we danced inversely, and now I'm tasked
with needing the mastering pupil—no greater pain.
In this, our last life of night, I rein
my mind to scribe his sermons, and for me asked
nothing, at first. In secret, I brewed my wrath
and dutifully scrolled his words in the shade of his trust.
Even he forgot what I alone have stored
and therefore own. By service, I am authored.
His captured words, the bloom that will not rot
the stem. A wife abandoned owes herself
to a new master, so memory's hoard cares not
for origin but possession. The leader deserves
to be spared reasons. I set off to rule
who hope to flee the fate of rounding mule
and frantic moth. What flames life gifts to fools.

The Reef Sermon

Among mountains sowed with seashells
I came to rest from myself and entered the sea,
walked on its sand beneath a foam of stars,
and stood before its city of bones. Thunderous
with fish, inks, prisms, shaded by ravenous
fronds, pocked with crevices, like a mind far
alien yet mind. Grown from learned debris,
a hive of lives in forms that will not tell
themselves from where they lie, or if craft or chance
it was that let them seem the saving trance
of belonging. The city of bones ranges beyond
the eye's grip, rises to air past veils
of spores. Its thorn touch belies its horizon
scope which nearness cannot contain, like trails
we pace in lost now's. By nature built
to anchor flux, shelter the wheel, tilt
the sun. It owes to centuries, not man, its debt.

The Ash Sermon

The art fire bequeaths, numbing dust,
marries black and white to shut the book
of rainbow. Swept in air, washed, speaks
with earth. Deaf to touch, flees nose
and tongue, the fated sum of flesh, rose,
and hearth in uniform grey. End is meek.
No banner or stone, the winds its erasing brook.
Patient sign of urgent flame it trusts
to free. Formless, it clumps with fat that drips
from altar to make soap. In palm it slips
or lifts to cloud the memory of what it had been.
Shakes off from surfaces it will not taint, yet feeds
the field and once forest ground. Alien
ghost of seed's lurk and end, it pleads
our nothingness. Escapes into life
and from it as words from sighs and back—rife
with change yet timeless, must take what it must give.

The Cloud Sermon

Shapes infirm, hulks sight cannot touch,
They wither hover quick from similitude.
Even dark they harem our view, pliant
clumps in chaliced doze. Passing, they shroud
as do bulks that root or stalk the ground.
When the sky fills, they meld with kind, ignorant
of ownership. Exiled from altitude
to blank our paths, they succor earth and drench
our breath. In peaks alone, at times, they bow
to us to teach us clarities since shadow
is petal common. They herald spirit to the wise—
tireless vapor's toil, infinite in shape,
matrons of every season, indifferent to us
wanderers burdened with name. Like their shade,
we brief respite and grateful know our fullness
come to light. To rise we teach the harness
gold is mist, our trail blind to duress.

The Monsoon Sermon

Abundance, our enemy. Drowns way and traveler.
Torrent dreams of drought, as drought of torrent.
Need, the great baffler, confuses with bluntness.
The rain comes when and as it must,
the world's eyelid shut, thick as lust.
Conditions are sovereign in all but the free whose lightness
natures courage. Flesh, flesh is the mendicant.
The world's rush seeks the navigator
who is the melody of his meager raft,
born at last to need the freedom of his craft,
alone. Simpleton sky who dreams in pairs,
turns earth to sea with a vertical flood to palm
the mirror known and make it world's repair.
But world's three tongues alone can rightly calm
clarity to us. The craft, pilot, and river;
the three faces of time; sower, harvester,
and cook. Thought, word, and the silent knower.

The Edge Sermon

The soul of the moment, these plummet promises.
The path pretends it holds us until it ends
on one edge. The eagle has but one—
the ground. Seasons author their perfect limits.
The wheel is one edge whose tireless pivots
the axle will disown. What is a cliff but a torn
sky? We rampart from others, but what defends
us from pride? Forces are as forces
grip. The blizzard within, the private storm
break past human congress. No harm
is alien, no love natural. A line's fate
is to blur. Gate and door are marked by hinge
and man by the reach of his step, a tongue the gait
that utters him as first warmth spring.
Dire resonance, dear to the binding know,
your reins the last to give, penitent furrow.
Axle, the ninth spoke none foresaw.

The Memory Sermon

Can the story break from its calendar,
that nest of sighs and breath of fiery solace?
Trim sails bump with wind, needling
the tilting mast which, bound, cannot course.
Remembrance—cradle, anchor—stripped of dross,
is new gold in an old sea, reeling
then calm with unveiled stars and brevity's peace.
Memory scours dream's clay and mortar—
the fragrance of toys, the brush of sandy foam,
voices musick'd by loss, love's tome
scrolled away. No one can sow what's been
sown, regress fruit into stalk, abjure
the lessoned scar which roots now in then.
Easier to harvest distance when I ruled inured
to pity and a prophet came to melt my ear,
mazes prior—than weeks ago, that fear,
this sigh. No horizon is ours or near.

The Tool Sermon

Diligent as the plow, the moon returns, its cold
light the shadow of the sun. Hammer, pen,
ladle, blade—our creatures of use, extensions
of sense and flesh. Our moons, were we
their sun, but they are no mere
mirror, rather growth we lack, completions
which in turn unfrail our thin born
knots. From fire we feed and learn to mold
our poured metals. We furrow and hunt, ponder
how labors muscle, song voices, number
marks, symbol recalls. So each tool
and its greater issue define each person
by the task he becomes. But what of the pensive fool
who is his path, toil and tool but burden?
In chant he slowly flees from the daily flame,
defying defiance itself. Words cannot tame.
In mirrors he vanishes, eclipsed by the frame.

The Gifts Sermon

Who deserves the sun or has earned
the day, the perfect rain, or the curative night?
We are the fruit of givens which we dare
to own. A melody on crafted strings
is no bird in their cage. It also sings
on branch and eave. Talents and virtues we snare
with our names, into legacy take flight.
We but embers where once their glow did burn.
Valor, insight, mercy, language—all
by fated chance bequeathed, though they befall
the harkened servant. Who listens to the light
speaks and lives it. Who claims, betrays.
At last, we shall all escape, like sun's bright
music unraveling the fountain's muddled maze.
No names will find us safely then.
The origin of deeds and words will be their end.
No shadow will mark the haunts of men.

Selected Poems

RICARDO PAU-LLOSA

Paris Inundated

for Ron De Maris

The city is a reef
where crabs decorate
cornices, angel fish
pass through windows
like smoke, jellyfish
stab onto TV antennae
like kites,
turtles huddle on the curb
with a windblown homburg,
plankton travel the paths
of indifferent spores,
and minnows shift in cosmetics
departments, watched by an octopus
draped over the head
of a mannequin.

On the bakery shelves
anemones and sponges.
An eel coils
around a billowy dress
worn by a warm upcurrent.
In office corridors
barracudas knife
sealed envelopes, dwell
above leather-bound rubble.
Triumphant arcs halo
schools of sardine, and an obelisk
points to whales catching
their breath, their cumulus
shadows darken the unstroled gardens.

But it is the shark
who alone possesses the ornate galleries,
the emblemed vaults. His fins
scrape the headless wings of tumbled victories.
He is the new dove bursting through
the rose window of Notre Dame.

from *Sorting Metaphors* (Anhinga Press, 1983)
first appeared in *Kayak*

Swirling Lines

A brain, a tree heart,
the cellular meltings
of a galaxy, a fly's wing,
a torpedo's bubbly void,
a moiré dress shifting,
leaf, ear, onion, fist,
blood's canopy, rolled newspaper,
a knot of hair, a dozing
cat-o'-nine-tails, a ring
of cigar ash, grasses
on the river, a face diluted
on a concave, marble's calcium strings,
a snake nest, an astrolabe,
smoke writing or clenching,
a pineapple's crown, estuary
sand settling like pastry shells,
run-on opalescences, hamburger,
the acrobatics of streaks on glass,
geology's veils, a rippling pond,
a disemboweled wire, a bowl of pasta,
a peacock feather, cloud fronds,
the citadel of a car engine,
a star-of-Bethlehem, a bouquet
of cathodes and filaments,
squid embracing, genes,
an agate word, combed sand,
the lace of oil on water,
plywood, a terraced slope,
the penmanship of dance,
watermarks, a vortex of moss,
the ways of meaning, wet fur,
fire's filigree, a plowman's world,
an artichoke halved, a nautilus echo,

a deck of handkerchiefs arching
like papyrus heads, the mother-of-pearl
undulations of a porch screen,
brushstrokes, climate mapped
from a satellite, a labyrinth,
this thumb against the pane—
the face of touch—
on the first morning of spring.

from *Bread of the Imagined* (Bilingual Review Press, 1992)
first appeared in *The Missouri Review*

Frutas

Growing up in Miami any tropical fruit I ate
could only be a bad copy of the Real Fruit of Cuba.
Exile meant having to consume false food,
and knowing it in advance. With joy
my parents and grandmother would encounter
Florida-grown *mameyes* and *caimitos* at the market.
At home they would take them out of the American bag
and describe the taste that I and my older sister
would, in a few seconds, be privileged to experience
for the first time. We all sat around the table
to welcome into our lives this football-shaped,
brown fruit with the salmon-colored flesh
encircling an ebony seed. “*Mamey*,”
my grandmother would say with a confirming nod,
as if repatriating a lost and ruined name.
Then she bent over the plate,
slipped a large slice of *mamey* into her mouth,
then straightened in her chair and, eyes shut,
lost herself in comparison and memory.
I waited for her face to return with a judgement.
“No, not even the shadow of the ones back home.”
She kept eating, more calmly,
and I began tasting the sweet and creamy pulp,
trying to raise the volume of its flavor
so that it might become a Cuban *mamey*. “The good
Cuban *mameyes* didn’t have *primaveras*,” she said
after the second large gulp, knocking her spoon
against a lump in the fruit and winking.
So at once I erased the lumps in my mental *mamey*.
I asked her how the word for “spring”
came to signify “lump” in a *mamey*. She shrugged.
“Next you’ll want to know how we lost a country.”

from *Cuba* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1993)
first appeared in *Kenyon Review*

Rockinchá

All around the cone of light
the man playing two yellow maracas
is hoping to lose his balance
exquisitely, for a split second.
The maracas above his head will pin him
in air like a monk's angel of the margin.
The yellow orbs cross into the light
to stab and ponder it, as if two words
were invading a language
but still weren't sure
where they stood
or what they might come to mean
in alien weathers of sense.
As the maracas hold the man
between two clockworks split by a smile,
my eye wanders through a syrup
of dust in the cone of light
and professes: these are the seeds,
the citizens of that sound
rattling as they enter a heaven of amber.
Language is less about distance
than about sutures.
The man strikes into the light
with a ceaseless clatter
that becomes a circulation,
and he is saying, This is
what blood cells sound like
constantly working the body's furrows,
diligent as oxen. Only to air
is blood a quiet thing.
I am bringing news from inside you.
The body is an ear
listening to itself, holding itself

in place by a red anthem.
Tilt, Rockinchá, beyond the candor
of physics. No one crashes
in a torrent of amber.

from *Vereda Tropical* (Carnegie Mellon UP, 1999) first
appeared in *American Poetry Review*

Comfort

At night, even then, I go to my backyard
to throw Lacho, my dog, the frisbee. Even

when darkness hums a few bars of fear
into every twig or leaf that cracks or falls.

The randomness of night is equal to its uniformity.
At night, the Spanish proverb says, all cats

are brown. At certain intervals
differences do not matter. And only

because we are eye heavy. Why is there no night
for the nose, for the ear? Lacho, bat apprentice,

can tell twig from assailant, can smell
perfunctory bird from a drawn knife,

so he soars freely into the festive air to catch
the frisbee in his jaws. Night is his species weather.

Night is the function of his dark coat.
I stay inside the halogen parapet,

which Lacho must think of as the prey's
limelight, as if I had chosen to wear the bony

chalk of the target without its planets of numbers
or the black heart of trophy lusts.

He aims his body through my maze of shadow trees
to snatch the frisbee again and again,

relentless despite his poor dog eyes and my rich
fears. This is Miami, after all,

and not Tulum where the Maya castle points
two unlike slits of light to the pointless sea.

Their sailors knew to turn toward shore
and avoid the reefs exactly when they could see

the two lights at the same time. That is why
the Maya invented daylight: to measure rock and sea

against the cursive land, to tame necessity and prepare
for when the lights go and the cats conquer the earth.

Their sailors came and went among the perils
counting on a numbered sense of things,

on the sun of two windows in human rock,
on turning into method what a body knows by leaps.

from *The Mastery Impulse* (Carnegie Mellon UP, 2003)
first appeared in *Luna*

For the Cuban Dead

Once they were men fully because they belonged,
and everywhere they looked and chatted and sipped
a bit of coffee, whisked away a fly with a wrist
or jolted a newspaper readably straight,
or flirted, or worried about the world and where
the damn country was going as a trolley rolled
and curtains dipped and bulged breast-like
and hid again in the proper window. They were
home and citizens of it and dared and loved
and were decent and stole and killed and loved again.
They were home. How like the root in the earth,
the crease in the linen, the wind rending the cloud,
the growl in the hunger, the pavement sprayed
with waves crashing against the sea wall.
How like all right things in the mind of place,
they jostled and failed, learned and betrayed.
Like coins in pockets made for them
they cried stridently or simply tinkled in murmurs,
and it didn't matter if talk or life had substance.
Right of place was substance.

There is no *enough* in exile. Not enough anger,
and the blanket of safety always leaves the feet bare.
And it is here, no matter how clean and golden,
that one learns how different the wrist and the fly
and the shot of wave, how *once* never stops
calling although the law of distance deafens.
Memory is the heart's gravity.
The accent of their children
becomes unbearably alien, a dampness
from the sidewalk creeping past the thin sole
and into the ignored sock. Now nothing
escapes notice and the balance is always against.

And it hits them, these never again composed,
that the time to see and hear was then,
when rightness held even the stormy evils
of the quotidian in the same palm
with the trash of years of seconds
and the kissed joys.

Then, as we have come to know, was
the proper place to gaze at the dust
of butterfly panoplies, ponder
the calligraphic crud on china,
relinquish decorous ears to taut goatskins,
wash in the lace of Sunday clouds,
and otherwise pay attention
with one's whole life to shadows
knitting five centuries of incomparable capital,
field's antique jewel, and the cradling shore.
God it was who let them die
filled with late understanding,
so who dares say we the innocent lurk
unpunished in the works and days?

from *Parable Hunter* (Carnegie Mellon UP, 2008) first
appeared in *Crab Orchard Review*

God-Is-Love Man

The corner bakery opens at 7, fills
with breakfast hawks, overdressed
office types who never figure time
for making coffee and warming
buns, cleaning up, and being
a loving sun of a family person
in the morning, the most delicate time
of the day, when tempers were most likely
to slash and swipe. Why would that be,
the man wondered, that morning tended
to boil people just so? The yank from sleep,
the broken chapter of a dream,
the realization of just how cheap memory
and imagining can be bought—a kiss,
a shower, a swift hump before a day
of duties descends—all these are bribes,
and it is then, the man realized,
that we gather the stones with which
to pelt ourselves, wretches, adulterers
of our kiss to ourselves. Morning
was indeed the proper time to sacrifice
the crumpled lamb when the sun
might just as well be setting,
and the toll of withering is felt
simultaneously as dawn and twilight.
And who might rise from the desert
of the clean table, and what face might
shape the steam above the styrofoam,
and what bug will think the crumbs
on the floor of the bakery a delivery
from God? Will the man, then,
his number finally called, the last
almond pastry within his reach,

settle for the timed quiet of a corner
broken only by the flocking
of flakes on his lapel, or will
he accept the bread and shoes
of forgiveness?

from *Man* (Carnegie Mellon UP, 2014)
first appeared in *Birmingham Poetry Review*

Artemisa Japanese Car Care, Miami

I step out of the shop where my old car
gets younger, and see as if for the first time
the triangular communications tower
looming to the south. My father, the draftsman,
would have glanced at the structure, tapering,
branched on each side by lined arrays of equipment,
and calculated strengths and forgeries,
named and numbered steels
that for my aesthetic eye are burnished metals
in a skeletal bauhaus with minimalist flashes.

The gulfs never quarreled between us.
To each man, assigned domains bestow
province and legion, a shield of bridge
across the darkness blows.
A wisdom hails from what is not,
to the other, strange. I imagine my father
torpor-free on such a tower's ways.
The sky celluloid it takes for ladders,
the host-cream drums with which a million
chatters moon and back—he'd raise
such gallows up from plans he drew
in ballet surgeries, the way a sterile God
first dreamed snow, and in a leap
planted it in our denials.

His muse did not recoil
between the draftsman's cage
and the welder's theater, which let him
bin with pride over my poems and scrape
to buy paintings he understood
without understanding. And how he must
have hoped and dared to prophesy

this moment, at this car mechanic's,
when I at centuries last see him
in all the labors of Velázquez's Forge.
The swagger of grime Praxiteles
receiving delicate news from a robed gardenia,
arc the prism of identity, thinkers to tamers.
But in my father alone have I witnessed
a brotherhood in one self, a forum
made for them within one man.
Nineteen years after your death,
your slow son,
who natured only to beauty and ideas,
has come home.

from *The Turning* (Carnegie Mellon UP, 2018) first
appeared in *Chariton Review*

Michael Anthony Hill

The Worldly Outsider: A Conversation with Ricardo Pau-Llosa

Ricardo Pau-Llosa lives the idea of the Renaissance man completely. He is comfortable in the cultures of Western Europe and North and Latin America, and he is fluent in his two native tongues: Spanish by birth (b. Havana, 1954) and English, which he learned by osmosis when he was six, in Chicago in 1960, when he and his family came to the United States as exiles at the beginning of the ongoing Cuban totalitarian period. His literary output includes nine volumes of poetry, a number of essays and articles on the visual arts, especially modernist Latin American painting and sculpture, and a respectable number of other essays and short stories. Arguably the most original and profound Cuban American poet and art critic of his generation, Pau-Llosa writes in English. In 2017, he and Enrico Mario Santí—the premier living scholar of Latin American literature—published *Intruder between Rivers / Intruso entre ríos* (Del Centro Editores, Madrid), a clothbound, hand-stitched limited edition of 100 signed and numbered books. *Intruder* contains 25 poems by Pau-Llosa with facing-page translations into Spanish by Santí. The book began the overdue process of bringing Pau-Llosa's poetry into the modern Spanish-language canon. A more comprehensive collection of Santí's translations of Pau-Llosa is in preparation.

Pau-Llosa's poems have also appeared in major literary magazines across the globe and in various major anthologies. However, perhaps given his rejection of Marxism, which he decries as “the quasi-religious orthodoxy of our time for those lacking spirit and minds of their own,” and his

indefatigable denunciation of leftist tyrannies in his native Cuba, Venezuela (in which he spent a great deal of time between 1988 and 2004), as well as in China and other socialist nations, Pau-Llosa continues to be a satisfied loner in the literary world, speaking and writing his mind without allegiance to trends or to what he derides as “the packs of hush buddies” that elevate and depose the dubious idols of the moment. Nonetheless, Pau-Llosa is difficult to ignore, in part because of the obvious merits of his work, but also because of how he has integrated into his poetry the wide scope of his erudition in the visual arts and philosophy. His poems reference with equal depth of certainty Bruegel and Amazonian tribal art; Afro-Cuban religions, Japanese Edo prints, and Greco-Roman myths; T’ang Dynasty poetry and the modernists of his beloved Latin America—Jesús Soto, Olga de Amaral, Enrique Castro-Cid, Rafael Soriano, Rufino Tamayo, Arnaldo Roche-Rabell, Amelia Peláez, Wilson Bigaud, among others.

The home of the poet in Miami is a trove of the art Pau-Llosa has collected for over four decades, and is, as he says, “a memory theater containing the art that continues to shape my mind and my life.” Covered with art from floor to ceiling, the residence is beauty’s Ark, with no Ararat yet in sight. Over many years, he has also donated numerous artworks to museums, among them the Denver Museum of Art, the Snite Museum at the University of Notre Dame, the Blanton Museum at the University of Texas at Austin, the Zimmerli Museum at Rutgers University, and the Museo de Arte de Ponce in Puerto Rico. Pau-Llosa has hosted many receptions in his home over the decades for artists and writers visiting Miami, including the acclaimed Cuban opposition leader Dr. Óscar Elías Biscet, journalists, academics, editors, diplomats, and political figures. Pau-Llosa’s collection and the manner in which he coalesces his intellectual and creative passions became the subject of a major exhibition at the Snite Museum at Notre Dame

in 2010. The book-length catalog to *Parallel Currents: Highlights of the Ricardo Pau-Llosa Collection of Latin American Art*, includes an essay by the poet on how he came to understand the power of tropes in the study of art, especially that of Latin America. The entire publication can be accessed online as a PDF by searching “Pau-Llosa Snite Museum.” Likewise, televised interviews, such as those on *France 24* and the *PBS Newshour*, can be viewed online.

In 2018, I took one of Pau-Llosa’s last creative writing classes at Miami Dade College, from which he retired the following year after a 35-year tenure. He had the uncanny ability to make the wonders of art, film, poetry, myth, and philosophical concepts accessible to students not previously exposed to these realms. “The past,” as Pau-Llosa said in an interview many years ago, “is like shelter; everybody needs one.” Without a sense of the presentness of legacy, there really cannot be poetry or art that, as he states, “grows from its roots, not against them, so as to make heritage persistently both relevant and new.” Renaissance is a duty always at hand, not a condition, as I have learned from my former professor.

What poets, writers, or thinkers whom you came across early on continue to influence your work and ideas?

I have always been taken by poets who combine tropological intensity and vividness of language with complex philosophical ideas. Not an easy combo to master. But I was equally influenced by philosophers and visual artists, if not more so than poets I admired and studied. The father of modern phenomenology, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), has continued to influence my writing and my approach to art. I have tried to apply his ideas on consciousness, which were instrumental in the formulation of European existentialism and the break with dualism (from Plato to Descartes), to understanding how the images of art are

constituted in the mind. Unlike Martin Heidegger and Otto Rank, two other thinkers I admire, Husserl never dealt with art or poetry, but his insights are profound for the understanding of creativity. Patterns of thought, seen under the lens of the Husserlian “suspension” and “reconstitution,” reveal more about a group (culture, generation, movement) than themes and overt concerns. For example, regional themes are typically used to identify which artists reflect their cultural legacies best, but I reject that approach. An artist’s “Cubanness” or “Mexicanness” is not determined by palm trees, maracas, pyramids, or sarapes, but by how they use metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and other tropes in their visual thought. In other words, the Latin American modernists expanded the power of representation, while North American and European modernists (with the exception of the early Surrealists) sought to reduce or eliminate representation altogether. To expand the power of representation, the Latin American artists used tropes, and how they used them is what interests me in understanding how they think visually.

Painters, who are not as a rule philosophically engaged and are more intuitive as artists than, say, composers or writers (yes, with exceptions), nonetheless reveal a world of ideas in their art that influenced the way I put poems together. More precisely, art has influenced what I expect from a poem as an experiential unity of thought and ideas. Joaquín Torres-García, Clyfford Still, Rufino Tamayo, Clarence Holbrook Carter, Joseph Cornell, Olga de Amaral, Giorgio de Chirico, and many others, less known but equally impactful on my writing and thinking, have influenced me and continue to do so. As for the poets I have always found inspiring: Wallace Stevens, Rainer Maria Rilke, Ovid, Richard Wilbur, César Vallejo, and Derek Walcott would rank among the top.

What factors in your family life when you were young, or in your educational environment, triggered in you the desire to become a poet and writer?

While I have always been grateful to come from a working-class family that, despite the hardships of living in a country not their own, was very supportive of my creative aspirations, I would have pursued these under any and all conditions. I was also fortunate to attend Jesuit schools that valued intellectual and creative excellence. But artists *are*; art is not something one does, nor is it merely a profession. I do owe my family the self-confidence to be an artist. Indeed, when I was already in college and also became interested in the visual arts—to write about painting and sculpture and also collect—my parents, older sister, and even my grandmother joined in enthusiastically, went to galleries and artists' studios, and also started making art purchases. Mind you, my family was lower middle class. I figure they kind of ruined my rebel phase with all that support and comradery. But I, of course, am glad they did. As for what “triggers” one's awareness of this path in life, I suppose I was always on that path. As a kid, I drew and read a lot, and there was no doubt where I was headed. It all became quite set in my mind in ninth grade, Jesuit High School of Tampa. I was 13. I would add that it wasn't easy being Cuban in a totally white American environment in the '60s. Ethnic diversity in schools, especially private ones, was practically unheard of then. I was the odd man out, the very rare Hispanic, indeed the only minority in practically all my classes, and I took the derisive isolation and rejection as a given at the time. They trained me, unwittingly, to assume the latter a personal cost of being an artist. And this isolation also impelled me to get to know my culture of origin, the real Cuba and not the cliché one we get in movies and American pop culture. This process also trained me to disregard peer pressure

and the approval of others, a priceless skill to bypass the drug craze that began in the late '60s and the knee-jerk political ignorance that endures to this day. The whole idea of “generation gap,” for instance, was alien to me. I lived in an extended family which was fully adapted to American life without surrendering our legacy, native language, and other values. I was an alien in an America that thought of me as an alien, an extraterrestrial, and I can't thank them enough.

How has your Cuban identity affected your career as a poet and art critic in the United States?

It might surprise you to know how much of a *burden* it has been, in a professional sense, although what a great advantage it has been in the formation of my worldview. In this age of grievance and minority privilege, which we've been wallowing in for three decades or longer, some “oppressed” groups are more equal than others. “Latino,” as all such other group-think designations, is not merely a cultural or racial filing label—it comes with mandatory political positions. These labels are a return to tribalism with sinister mass-control agendas in play. As a Cuban American painfully aware of the total destruction of a society that Marxism, when in power, inevitably inflicts, I have not navigated the minority advantage well. When asked what I think about Cuba and its 61-year-old tyranny, I have spoken plainly and factually, much to the dismay of fellow writers, artists, and academics who are tribalist leftists, or think they are. Nonetheless, I have managed to publish widely, although I am sure I've had to surmount ideological bigotries, which typically are kept discreetly out of sight, or what Jonah Goldberg calls “polite fascism.”

But you've been very active as a promoter of Latin American artists as an art critic and curator, for over four

decades. Do you feel this political bias has also affected your career in the visual arts?

It is true that I was publishing articles on Latin American artists in major art journals, beginning in the mid-'70s, at a time when no one—least of all the enlightened editors who presumably had cosmopolitan sensibilities—had any interest in or knowledge of this vast region and its artists. I never looked at an artist's politics when writing about their work. I praised work that I deemed worthy and analyzed art that fed into my imagination and ideas. At the beginning of my career in the mid-'70s, politics was a marginal concern. This overall tolerance, that prevailed between professionals in the arts, vanished in the 1990s. Political correctness has become intractable during the last quarter century.

How has this state of affairs affected your personal relationships with editors, curators, and others when they eventually find out what your politics are?

I have never had personal interactions with editors and the like. Not belonging to any coterie and never having been someone's protégé—thankfully—I had to do it all on my own. I've never hidden my loathing for the "totalitarian temptation"—to borrow Jean-François Revel's phrase—which has tended to fascinate Western intellectuals and artists. It's the hysteria for uniformity that has more recently taken over culture, journalism, and academe that presents a very different picture. It's been a rapidly evolving takeover of the Western mind. Whereas having leftist tendencies was considered part of what being a writer or artist was all about, in the last two decades it's become an obligatory allegiance. In wishing to smugly fulfill their social role as rebels, most artists and intellectuals have become the obedient followers of ideas that, if installed in power, will certainly destroy them.

Why do you think this process has unfolded in this manner?

The central passion of democracy and American life has been the meritocracy grounded in the individual's work and talent. As culture became an industry—say the visual arts now governed by investment strategies—the maverick, the truly creative individual, has been superseded by the careerist. The process began in earnest when postmodernist criticism emerged and with it a shift in focus to the content orientation of works of art, specifically the political content. Activism replaced complexity and ambiguity; depth and—dare I say the words—beauty and enigma were derided. I recall one academic at Cornell, where I was giving a talk at the museum, telling me with unabashed dismissiveness that I was still in love with “beauty and nightmare” because I didn't care for an installation whose sole function was agitprop. I've had innumerable encounters like this one, by the way, in many museums and universities in America. Postmodernism revels in content because it considers all the layers of thought and reflection, which traditionally we associate with aesthetic experience, to be bourgeois and passé. It has turned “art” into nonverbal journalism of the most simplistic kind, or gibberish hiding its banality behind presumed depths available only to the ideologically primed cognoscenti. This content-obsession has enabled the elevation of so-called cutting-edge art that merely rehashes Dadaist ideas and methods, which had their innovative heyday over a century ago. Some brilliant artists do emerge, miraculously, now and then, but the difficulty they encounter to break through the morass of political expectations is becoming ever greater.

What other factors have shaped your political views, even when these have presented obstacles?

Having seen the real-world effects of communism versus the imagined bliss its propaganda offers. More than one writer has commented on how odd it is for me as a writer to be an anti-communist. Jonathan Kandell, for instance, in his article on Miami in *Cigar Aficionado* (August, 2000), calls me “the rarest of specimens, a poet of deeply conservative political convictions.” Earlier, David Rieff, in his book *Going to Miami* (Little, Brown, 1987), set the same theme. I drove a Volvo and didn’t look the bohemian poet type, and, of course, there were my political views. What none of these erudite commentators grasped was that my views were no different from those of other writers who heralded from then-communist countries, such as Russia and the nations of Eastern Europe, or those still struggling in China and other Marxist dictatorships. So knowing communism as opposed to fantasizing about it made the difference that was obvious to all but the “enlightened.”

You have written extensively about art, especially from Latin America, and published nine volumes of poetry. You are an avid collector of art, as well. How do these two areas of your intellectual life converge?

Aside from having been taught by art how to see the world as a painter or sculptor would, I have also, gradually, turned to artworks as a basis for poetry. *Ekphrasis* is a term used to describe art that is inspired by other art forms, as, say, a musical composition inspired by a poem, or a painting inspired by music, or poetry that is triggered by painting. In my case, the latter. The ideas of Husserl on first putting aside, or “bracketing,” presuppositions when perceiving something and so reducing perception to its raw or vivid base—he used the term “eidetic”—and then “reconstituting” our sense of the object had been illuminating from the beginning. This, combined with grasping how painters would do this pretty much instinctively when pondering the subjects of their work, helped me approach the poetry

I wanted to write. I introduced into this process an awareness of tropes as devices that naturally came to mind when grasping a thing phenomenologically or eidetically. The power of tropes had already become obvious to me in studying poetry and also art, especially modern Latin American painting and sculpture. But the problem was that a painting is not a thing in the world that can be subjected to the Husserlian suspension, or *epochē*. The painting is a world unto itself, already the product of a complex process of ideas, reflections, and tropes. The painting itself could not be “reduced” to “essences” as these would include references, allusions, and tropes, the very things that get temporarily suspended in eidetic perception of objects. Still, Husserl’s idea compelled me to anchor my thought process on fundamentals and build from there, always focusing on the thought process itself as much, if not more, than on what is perceived or “intended.” Neither did I want to write poems that were basically commentary or interpretations of art works. So, drawing on Husserl to write ekphrastic poems turned out to be tricky, to say the least. Eventually, as often happens when one embarks on a new creative path, the matter resolved itself. Oddly, as the ekphrastic nature of my work accelerated, so did my renewed interest in form, especially the sonnet.

Why the sonnet? Why not conjure new forms?

I had always written sonnets and villanelles, on and off. I did also come up with new forms, variations on these and other traditional forms, but these represented an occasional incursion into formal verse. The precision of these forms was both a challenge and a means to attain a new focus for me. The tendency to spread out while writing free verse, which engaged complex ideas and experiences, was now supplanted by a need to simplify and congeal. The sonnet proved intoxicating, indeed addicting. At the same time,

I engaged art works from other periods and traditions—Japanese Edo prints, European baroque paintings, ancient Greek sculpture and pottery, T'ang Dynasty art and poetry, modern architecture, among other sources. Of course, Latin American art, as well. As I've gotten older, I've sought to more closely align in my poems my diverse interests in art, history, and philosophy.

Can we return to the role phenomenology has played in your work overall, including your art criticism and ekphrastic poetry? Specifically, how does the process first of suspension, and then reconstitution (restoring the presuppositions, function, and other aspects we know about a thing just by recognizing it) play out in writing poems?

I understood that between suspension and reconstitution there is a tropological step, a moment in which essences shared between objects come into the mind. On the basis of this, poets discover novel links in the form of tropes. Metaphor the most obvious, but also metonymy and synecdoche. These figures or tropes enable us to connect disparate experiences into coherent events or recognizable scenarios, or establish the connection between a scene or story and a society at a given time—i.e., microcosm. These tropes emerge spontaneously at certain points in the reflective process and are what turns this process into a creative one. Tropes—always meaning something other than what they “say”—also suspend our familiar consciousness of time in linear, causal ways. A metaphor compels us to intend two things at the same time, for instance. Metonymy triggers simultaneous transference of values between proximate referents, as between elements and the context they are experienced in. Now in a painting, one is intending—or experiencing in a focused manner—a scene whose tropological underpinnings may have been

purposely distorted. Take just about any painting by Magritte. Everyday objects, rendered faithfully, are assembled in unexpected, metonymically disruptive ways. It's a simple device Magritte used tirelessly. Duchamp's readymades, the *Bicycle Wheel*, for example, bracket function from two everyday objects—a stool and a wheel—and compel us to view the new object aesthetically. Pop art, and now most contemporary art, repeats these formulae ad nauseum, and what's odd is that many view the simplest subversion of the tropes we use in everyday life as new and even shocking. Hundred-year-old devices, novel in Magritte and Duchamp's day, are still thought of as cutting-edge. A little history is a dangerous thing.

But give me an example on how a given scene, metonymically organized by an artist, can lend itself to the process you've described?

Some years ago I wrote a poem on Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Winter Landscape with a Bird Trap* (1565). Let's focus on the painting. On our left, Bruegel gives us the ultimate cliché of peace and happiness—families and friends skating on the frozen river, walking along, enjoying the day. It is a consummately theatrical piece, by which I mean a painting in which context is the protagonist. On our right, we have a different emphasis, dominated by leafless trees and tangled dark branches and birds. People in a festive moment versus birds under threat. The right foreground is an uninterrupted thicket of these naked plants—nest-like, one could say, which fits in nicely with the right-side middle ground, where houses come closest to the viewer. Two forms of habitat, human and avian, dominate this portion of the scene, but there's a third shelter in play, the stick-propped board, under which kernels have been dropped to lure birds. Metaphor governs the connection between nest, house, and bird trap. A string arcs from the

trap to a nearby window, small and dark, where an unseen hunter waits to catch birds driven there by hunger. Bruegel's theater uses metonymy to transfer moods between both halves of the painting. Winter, after all, is the opposite of the comforts of spring and the plenty of summer and fall. Is there a joy, however, to need's season? Yes, among the skaters and, metonymically, for the clever trapper in the dark room who may not have had the same chance of success in spring as the one winter provides. Winter is the hunter—the time that makes hunting most urgent and the time when the weak will more likely succumb. Yet it is cloaked in innocent white. We are reminded of Robert Frost's wondrous sonnet "Design." Snow unifies the Bruegel scene, forming its syntax, as it were. The calming, engulfing, even ravenous white enables the metonymic transference between both halves of the painting to be more convincing and clear.

Your seventh book, *Man*, draws heavily on biblical references while centering on a psychological portrait of a character, the "man," whose circumstances take us to ideas and events in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. How do you see tropes setting scenes or establishing links in this series?

Both metaphor and metonymy drive these poems. The man in the poems is a common citizen of our secular world. Despite his complete unawareness of the Bible, the events of his life and the conditions they frame have connections with Scripture. A divorce, professional conflicts, loneliness, crises in maturity, triumphs—all these and more enable the reader to see direct and indirect links to recurring human predicaments, which, naturally, the Bible deals with in great abundance and clarity. The issue here is how does metaphor establish a link between two metonymically conceived contexts—those in the secular man's everyday life and those in biblical narratives?

Is this a “complex trope” of the kind you analyze in paintings, when two or more tropes are active in a single image or work of art?

Yes. In many ways, I imagined the settings in *Man* in very theatrical and pictorial terms. Individual tropes establish a synthesis of meaning and apprehension, or “intention” in the Husserlian view. We instantly grasp the theater or context that defines a space or room—store, bedroom, church, grocery, prison cell, car, airplane, etc. Anomalies or disruptions in this context are what Surrealist paintings and films utilize to create the sense of the “marvelous” or simply the unexpected. The spatial metonymy generates a complete thought, much as syntax metonymically compresses a sequence of words into a sentence. Metaphor then establishes the dynamic between each of these thoughts, seeking, as all tropes do, to produce another synthesis. Or other tropes can also enter into the dynamic of intentionality, synecdoche or irony, for example. The same applies to the theatricality of a painted scene or an immanent one in the world. Tropes are fundamental to creative thought, but they must be used in complex ways to generate a lucid, original vision. Contrast this with boring, predictable Pop Art and its contemporary remoras who rule the visual arts, with their infantile tropes and “shock” attempts that shock no one.

But aren’t conceptual artists and other contemporaries seeking that “synthesis” of which you speak?

No. It’s the opposite, actually. Mostly, these alleged artists of installations and ephemera have a pre-cooked notion or position on a trending issue and mix up a stew of things to manifest it. Most of it is two notches down from window dressing. The synthesis of which I speak emerges from the trope-based creative thought I described. The

synthesis of these complex tropes cannot possibly be preestablished, and it rarely if ever has anything to do with virtue signaling by means of taking a recognizable stand on some political or public issue. Content-orientation has produced an “art” that is basically no different from propaganda or advertising, except it is disguised with gratuitous weirdness so as to appear new and “artistic.” The whole point of art is to endure in the minds of others, which requires innumerable encounters with the work and the new approaches to it that genuine, thoughtful criticism provides. The whole point of most contemporary art, ephemeral or not, is to vomit a notion onto the viewer, who either gets it or not and moves on to the next piece. There is an overt rejection of enigma, which is really a rejection of the imagination. High culture as industry, and most mass media, has been diligent in preparing us for distrusting our intelligence and imaginations. Real art always calls us back home.