Amanda Berenguer: Some Notes by Way of Preface
Roberto Echavarren

Three years ago, Amanda Berenguer told me she had a book ready. Its title would be *La cuidadora del fuego* (*The Keeper of the Flame*). Could I write the prologue? "Fine," I said, "where is the book?" She pointed to a pile of notebooks, seven in total, fattened by loose papers, notes, bills. On the reverse of a check she had scribbled a short poem: "Final." Such notebooks were Amanda's *vademecum*. Everything was thrown together in them, her poems mixed with notations about household affairs.

Amanda had no computer and no typewriter. "You should get someone to sort out the poems and type them for you," I would say in one fashion or another, now and again. Soon she became too ill to make any arrangements about that. By Amanda's birthday in 2009, she was no longer able to work on the poems. I suggested to Dr. Álvaro Díaz Berenguer, her son and executor, that I compile *La cuidadora del fuego* from her notebooks, and he agreed.

Transcribing the verses, I maintained the horizontal *tiret* she used to divide one segment of the verse from another, in a way reminiscent of Emily Dickinson. Amanda had translated several of Dickinson's poems. This suspension, this dash, creates a pause, both in order to ponder what has been said and to prepare for what follows. Thought advances by steps, and the reader should take her time also, in order to appreciate and relish what is being offered. Amanda's poetry is an exercise of the intelligence, a testing of perception, an examination of spatial conundrums such as the Möbius strip or Klein bottle, figures explicitly investigated by Berenguer in books like *Materia prima* (*Prime Matter*) and *La botella verde* (*The Green Bottle*). Topology is a geometrical discipline linked to mathematics which studies the engendering of some forms out of others. A rectangle elongates and folds on itself, in two faces that are also one: the Möbius strip; a surface curves and invaginates itself: a Klein bottle. Intuition, here, is not the negation of reason but a faculty that questions it from the perspective of lived experience. Insight and vision have to do with life, with movement and change, with mutable qualities and difference, rather than with quantity or unity.

The book that brought her to immediate critical attention, both in Uruguay and beyond, is *Materia Prima* (1966), which includes one of her most famous poems, "Las nubes magallánicas" ("The Magellanic Clouds"). For Amanda, the incorporeal is nothing but the body's capacity for segregating indefinitely modulated, puzzling

shapes through movement. The soul is a movable feast born with the body. The soul is the modifier of space.

One could say that Amanda's poetics is supported by physics. Following this view, a poet most akin to her would be Lucretius. Amanda herself was stimulated by Leonardo da Vinci's inventions of space. "Las nubes magallánicas" is an astronomical poem witnessing the procession of the galaxies from a female body stretched on the rocks by the coast: Andromeda exposed, both on earth (the poet) and in the sky (a galaxy of the same name).

Andromeda's body on the rock. The soul inventing spatial sky, an invention of forms emerging from forms, a process, an associated unfolding of their various streams. Everything manifests here and also there: the scientific account of physical processes drives a poetic impulse when reference is obliterated by the sheer suggestive relevance of the words themselves—effects, echoes—that which exceeds information.

A flight through the galaxies starts from a female body, poised on the rocks. The flight of the soul, and the physiology of the body. Nothing is left out of the poem, although everything is stylized. "Las nubes magallánicas" can be compared to "El sueño" ("The Dream"), the canonical seventeenth century poem by Juana Inés de la Cruz. They both bring a nocturnal experience to light, the constellated sky. The sky as the place of thought and elations of the spirit, of elucubration and conjecture, the body as realm, supporter, the working physiological condition for experience and achievement. Everything is implicated—the soul and the body, outside and inside, like the two surfaces of the Möbius strip which are one. Everything takes place in time: is that time linear or circular? It seems clear that she explores both modes.

La cuidadora del fuego is her last book; a calm, nearly classical summation of her work. The view from her study, the birds and plants in her yard, changes of light, the inception of the seasons. In this scenic parterre, all her resources for emotional felicity are present, not least a keen awareness of the encroachment of death.

Each poem by Amanda questions our reason from a specific angle: "La dama de Elche" ("The Lady of Elche"), "Los culos de El Bosco" ("The Asses of Bosch"). Poetry (in her) is a powerful intelligence, the novelty of astonishment and delight.

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Möbius Strip

I slowly sense
a Möbius strip feel
that brief vertigo of homeliness
or a shudder in its cage I touch
that bird on the outside and oyster on the inside
successive palpitating
I follow its unilateral ambiguous leaf
hermaphrodite
exterior and interior at once

I press the noxious vibrating sediment
of pure truth
the pseudopods reaching toward the dark
the sleepwalking ideas pacing
about around noon
the quiet cell the room "for rent"
in the patio of the loud citizen mouth

I brush against wilting flowers of vision
recently pollinated
their shiny seal leaves on account
of a black spring the straight-haired bodies
of scaly cornea fiber hanging
on the smoky platforms or the docks
where the porters spit dirt
or in the passenger lounges

hence springs jammed in safes
memories
hence unused sparklers
memories
hence parked express trains empty
memories I caress
the memory ready to jump elastic

an instant photo on the parapet
of a thirty-story office building a factory
in Tokyo or Brasilia
toward the natural resting position

I probe traverse walk on the other face
the fabulous face the double face the same
face your anachronistic face
my face social alchemy
scared? are you breathing? get it?
I see you and they see us exceedingly
a face countenance façade
or prior surface do not forget
remember the front side presence
marching toward until in order to because of
as per without over behind the face of two interminable
turns

hurry judge-face your verdict
listen face-in-the-crowd listen
dog-face and yet another one
long-face don't mix
grease oil boiling water
vinegar-face
funny-face the manifest
none other than the one with a gas mask
heads and tails embracing
producing golden eggs in the cellar
of the "Santa María" crossing the Acheron
fire rifle sub-machine gun
reach the deep marrow the exposed marrow
holy smokes! hideous mask
I slide I enter I dig
this centripetal cave shelter
alluring carboniferous mine
(32 thousand cubic meters of live rock

to build the Simplon Tunnel)
rife with poisonous diamonds
redeemable for life for less
than life for the liveliest life
this corridor with no exit looping
corridor ball of yarn around the coiled rope
winding staircase ramp
which of us finds the skein's end?
vagabonds wanderers there
there in the hollow of your hand

you see there
the three uncertain Fates miners
researchers educating
Guinea pigs electric filaments
bats of ultra short wave
for an experimental course
taught by experts on corruptology
there at the end of the annunciation crypt
we ascend uterine dove shield
shell clay cupola elevator up
Le Corbusier wall cement sky
top floor
spherical steel tower cantilevered
construction of glass bricks
astronomical ceiling openmouthed
astrolabe
equipped with limbs calibrated
to measure the angle subject to error
of the eternity between us
between the observatory house
between you and I lovers
turned into a same body-and-soul velocity
we moonland on own heart
we circled Möbius's earth
we marched over its gloved field
at kilometers light years from vertiginous
bliss

Molten lead the air falls

$$\frac{\text{lead air } + \text{ stone sky}}{\text{black water}} = \text{ fall}$$

$$\text{dunes } = \text{ silence}$$

$$\text{rain } \simeq \text{ ballistics } \simeq \text{ 3rd dimension}$$

$$\sum \begin{array}{l} \text{a) 18 gray hours} \\[6pt] \text{b) 20 gray hours} \end{array} = \text{ wall in the nick of tm.}$$

$$\text{wall in the nick of tm. } = \text{ word } - \big[(\text{imagination } + \text{ strategy})\big]$$

$$\text{weight } = \text{ terror of flight}$$

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Outline (Derivative 3)

sand line and outline that?

                              I comprehend   wind   and
follow this nothing written? wind I will follow it this   nothing
where I begin the where   deep line   the other
                              wind   and on
this time there soon invading   but deep
the where the and long   line is deep
                              erases desert   wind
a dune there is sandbank   more   not   other   long   but   line
                              leaf

and erases it

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