WEST BRANCH WIRED
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An Interview with Orlando Menes

By Annie Leister and David Moffat

Orlando Ricardo Menes's poems have appeared in several prominent anthologies and in such magazines as *Ploughshares, Antioch Review, Prairie Schooner, Shenandoah, Chelsea,* and *Green Mountains Review.* He has also published translations of such poets as the Argentine Alfonsina Storni and the Cuban José Kozer. His third poetry collection, *Furia*, was published in 2005 by Milkweed Editions. Menes is also the author of *Rumba atop the Stones*, published in 2001 by Peepal Tree Press (Leeds, England), and has edited the anthologies *Renaming Ecstasy: Latino Writings on the Sacred* (Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 2004) and the forthcoming *The Open Light: Poets from Notre Dame, 1991-2008* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2010). He is an associated professor of English at Notre Dame. Poetry by Menes appeared in *West Branch* 66, Spring/Summer 2010.

West Branch: In your poem "Palma y Jagüey" the character Omar claims "Whether sweet or bitter, / words will not fill our bellies." How do you respond to the argument that poetry has no practical value for the average person? Do poets have a responsibility to appeal to skeptics and attract a wider audience?

Orlando Menes: Omar, my wife's uncle, represents the cynic, a man of humble origins who had supported the Revolution in his youth. A student of economics at the University of Havana, he read volumes of world literature published in inexpensive editions, even writing a few poems and short stories in the neo-baroque style favored by many of his generation. He attended as well Fidel's hours-long speeches and was mesmerized, then finally took a job as an economist at the ministerial level. During those arduous years of the Special Period in the early 1990s when Cuba had lost her Soviet subsidies, Omar proposed all sorts of reforms at the Ministry but was rebuffed at every turn, even by Fidel himself, and he was soon removed from his position. In those new economic times he could not earn a living as an economist anyway, so he began to work as a carpenter, doing odd jobs for foreigners who would pay him in dollars. (Other professionals took jobs as waiters or cab drivers.) That experience exacerbated his doubts about the system, amplified his grievances, and altered his views about art. The man who had loved literature as a university student began to doubt whether art had any viability in a totalitarian society racked by poverty and despair, a society in which, he would say, propaganda and artful lies had seeped into all areas of public discourse.

Yes, it is true that poetry cannot fill an empty belly, that words cannot be sown for harvest or caught in the fisher's net. But poetry can, and does, provide sustenance to the spirit if not the body. It is the deep song that gives us hope, that makes us resolute, that binds us in the face of hardship. Poetry, as any art, represents experience while at the same time transforming it through the imagination.

It is this power to transform the quotidian to the metaphorical, the ordinary to the orphic, that I find so entrancing about poetry, as in, for example, William Blake's vatic "London," a poem that makes me tremble every time I recite it to myself.

WB: You mention this personal connection to Blake's "London" and its orphic qualities. To what degree have the English Romantics inspired your work?

OM: The Romantics, plus those poets writing in the Romantic tradition, had an indelible influence on my development as a poet. Among the most formative for me were Keats, Wordsworth at times, Blake always, of course, Yeats as well, and the contemporary American poet Galway Kinnell. I was drawn to their intensity of emotion, their musicality, their ecstatic revelations. I find kinship with these poets, not just in terms of my poetic sensibility but also in how one crafts language to realize flashes or glimpses of the rhapsodic, though not in some ethereal or rarified context but in ordinary human experience, in memory, in ritual. As a young poet I was also drawn to those Modernists who still embrace elements of Romanticism, such as Hart Crane, a voice partaking of the Ecstatic tradition while at the same time embracing a poetics that I call the American Baroque. His language possesses a riveting intensity that relies on an impacted line and a complex turning (or lathing) of conceits. One could even say that Crane's poetry suggests a certain tropical lushness, a certain Caribbean copiousness, those heady flavors of the Cuban barroco found in the poetry of Lezama Lima, for example. Crane knew Cuba well. His family even owned a house on the Isle of Pines. Crane's last poems were about Key West, just ninety miles from Havana. Above all other poets, it is Crane who anchors me, even if fleetingly, to our nation's poetic tradition, someone who gives me comfort, someone who gives me hope that I can somehow find my own strand in the American tapestry.

WB: There are many references to both South American and Caribbean folklore and symbols in your books, especially Rumba Atop the Stones. You were born in Peru to parents of Cuban heritage and you have spent time in Cuba since publishing Furia. In what ways have Latin American culture and its canon informed your literary sensibility?

OM: I cannot, and will not, abandon my roots in the Spanish language, my Latin Catholicism, my memories of Lima and Cuba, though the latter tend to conflate with those of my parents-borrowed memories, if you will. I am more a poet writing in English with a Latin American sensibility. To say that I write out of a Spanish-language tradition would not make any sense. Though I have spent many years translating the poetry of the Argentine Alfonsina Storni, I cannot say that I have been influenced by her work, at least not in ways that I can readily discern. Translation is for me more a contribution to my profession. As a native speaker of Spanish, why should I not make available to English readers the best possible translations that I can craft of poets who are little known or maybe have been inadequately translated?

And while I honor Spanish as my native tongue, it is English that I am enamored with, the one I hear (enchantingly like a Sirenian song) whenever I write, especially its liquid rhythms, the protean richness of its assonance and alliteration. Nonetheless, Spanish does intrude (necessarily in my view)

because of how memory pressures or compels the imagination to be truthful to the past, in my case that amalgam of recollections of place, cultural legacies, and family histories. Yes, I love the English language, but I cannot forget who I am: a Peruvian-born Cuban who immigrated to the US at the age of ten. Strangely enough, the one Latin American writer who had considerable impact on Rumba atop the Stones, my second poetry collection, was the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier. Such works as Ecue-Yamba-O (Praised be Thou, Lord) and El reino de este mundo (The Kingdom of This World) introduced me to Afro-Cuban culture by way of a baroque aesthetic. So formative was Carpentier that without his remote yet luminous influence I would not have been able to write that book. It is to him that I owe my education in the Cuban avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s. I do not mean, however, that poets like Nicolás Guillén and José Lezama Lima did not influence my poetry a decade ago. It is just that I found Carpentier's vision of the Caribbean a more fertile ground to cultivate my own poetry.

***WB*:** You often write about food, frequently in relation to the divine. For example, in the poem "Bacalao," you use the image "nailed to the larder's crucifix / long cords of dried pimento." In "Frogs" you describe a "rosary / of garlic bulbs." Do you see an underlying connection between food and the sacred?

OM: As a Roman Catholic, how can I not? The very Host, this thin wafer I was taught to let dissolve in my mouth and never chew, is the transubstantiated body of Christ, not a symbol, not an idea, but His very flesh. This kind of concreteness is compelling to me as a poet, and thus pervades just about anything that I write creatively, my use of language to connect body and mind, earth and spirit, the ordinary and the miraculous. I cannot bear any type of disassociation, division, fragmentation. I have a passion for amalgamation, not just as a trope but as a way of thinking, a style of living. No wonder my attraction to the Baroque, besides my ongoing interest, perhaps fascination, with Santería, a syncretic Afro-Cuban religion in which food plays a substantial role in ritual, divination, and in the very lives of the orishas, Yoruba deities who must be fed their favorite foods, whether fresh fruits, spirits like rum and aguardiente, animal flesh and blood. Physical sustenance, apart from prayer, is a vital component of this and other ancient spiritualities. Such ritualized feeding is the essential, inviolable component in the bond between the human and the divine; otherwise, the believer will incur the wrath of his or her orisha (Yemayá, Oshún, Shangó, etc.). The sacred exists in the realms of earth, fire, water, and air, which I find more inspiring than any notion of transcendence. To feed a god means to love a god. Aren't words too the food of poets-what sustains our imagination? Those fertile tropes that stave off what we fear most: writer's block, the famine of creativity? As Wallace Stevens writes in Esthétique du Mal, "the greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world . . . ."

***WB*:** What are you working on right now? More poetry? More translations? After reading on the back of your chapbook Borderlands with Angels that you are a photographer, we wondered if you had any current projects in photography.

OM: I am now working on my fifth poetry collection, which is pushing my imagination back toward questions of the sacred, my principal preoccupation in *Rumba atop the Stones*. I am also doing research for a longish essay on the baroque, encompassing the poetry of both Latin Americans and North Americans. Perhaps an anthology might be in the offing, too. I left photography a long time ago, preferring to take pictures with words rather than with atoms of silver bromide. (I was pre-digital, you know.)

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