

Willard Bohn

## Three Spanish Ultraist Poets

### 1. Pedro Raida

**D**ESPITE ITS BRIEF EXISTENCE, from 1919 to approximately 1921, the Ultraist movement played a decisive role in the evolution of Spanish aesthetics. Seeking to inject new energy into Spanish literature, it encouraged writers to emulate avant-garde accomplishments elsewhere in Europe. Like the Futurists, the Cubists, and the Dadaists, the Ultraists strove to create a poetry that was new and different. In contrast to previous poets, who had been attracted to music, they developed a taste for visual art forms. Cultivating surprising comparisons and ingenious metaphors, they experimented with visual poetry as well. The most important experiments took place between June and December 1919 (see Bohn 1986/1993: p. 146-84). Only Guillermo de Torre continued to write visual poetry after that date, culminating in the publication of *Hélices (Propellers)* in 1923. On November 20, 1919, for example, Pedro Raida published a composition entitled «EL FUTURO NIDO» («THE FUTURE NEST») (figure 1) in *Grecia*, an Ultraist journal published in Seville. A frequent contributor, Raida was a founding member of Ultra who lived in the Andalusian capital. Although the Ultraists generally disdained solid forms, he used them exclusively in his visual poetry. Piling four or five blocks of text on top of each other, he created an imposing structure resembling a step pyramid. Next, with the help of half a dozen linear phrases, he added four walls and a roof to create a primitive house. Since each block is smaller than the one below it, the finished building looks more like a wedding cake than an actual residence. The fact that the picture supposedly depicts a villa does not alter the viewer's initial impression.

**EL  
FUTURO  
NIDO.**

VILLA AZUL aún ES MI CHALET.  
no lo tengo.  
Sueño con poseerlo.

Lo  
edificaré  
y salvo error u omisión.

**VILLA AZUL**  
esquivará el fausto de la piedra sin  
propender a la ostentación del mármol.

**VILLA AZUL**  
suprema gala de sencillez y elegancia,  
ubérrima y breve, de una sola planta y  
un resplandor único, reverberará en la  
gracia de Atenas sobre la encarnación  
del severismo y la dureza romana;  
por cuanto el temperamento de villa  
azul abaluartará el Evangelio de Cris-  
to, trajeándose del bello sensualismo  
del paisaje andaluz.

**VILLA AZUL**  
acampará por sus muros, nubes de campanillas  
azules, emergidas de lechos jazminados entre  
rosas y en tropel de frondas y músicas, violadas  
por los pinceles del monóculo universal.

**Altos pinos, palmeras volubles**  
atraerán las chispas de los radiogramas que lanzan las aves en  
la mañana azul y el mediodía azul y la tarde azul. Los esposos,  
beberemos en el vaso de sol, la copa del aire, el ánfora de la  
luna y el cáliz de las estrellas todo el germen de la hermosura  
ultraista, semejante a un vino de pasiones sangradas en prima-  
vera. Los esposos emular quieren a las aves sedientas de luz y  
de espacio, de árboles y flores, de la tierra y la fuente, que sólo  
aspiran a un nido entre lujuriosa vegetación, para huir del frío  
de la noche oscura y buscar el lecho cálido que los refundiera  
en un solo amor.

Mientras nacen la piedra y la arena, el ladrillo y la cal, el  
agua y el bosque que constituyan el organismo de:

**VILLA AZUL....**  
**Pedro Raída.**

YO SOY  
AQUEL  
QUE AYER NO  
MAS DECIA

Figure 1

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THE  
FUTURE  
NEST.

AZURE VILLA                      IS MY CHALET.

I  
don't have it yet.  
I dream of possessing it.

I  
will build it  
save error or oversight.

<I AM>  
<SAID NO MORE>

<HE WHO>  
<YESTERDAY>

AZURE VILLA  
will avoid the vain splendor of stone without  
succumbing to the ostentation of marble.

AZURE VILLA  
supreme jewel of simplicity and elegance,  
luxuriant and concise, possessing a single floor  
and a unique brilliance, will incarnate Athens's  
grace rather than Roman harshness and  
severity; since azure villa's character will fortify  
the Gospel of Christ, clothing itself in the  
beautiful sensuality of the Andalusian landscape.

AZURE VILLA  
swarms of bluebells will camp by its walls, sprung from  
jasmine beds among roses and in a jumble of fronds and  
tunes, violated by the paintbrushes of the universal monocle.

**Tall Pines, Voluble Palms**

will attract the radiograms's sparks that the birds send in the azure  
morning and the azure midday and the azure afternoon. From the sun's  
glass, the air's cup, the moon's amphora, and the stars's calyx, husbands  
and wives will drink the essence of Ultraist beauty, like the wine of  
bloody passion in the springtime. They will imitate the birds, who thirst  
for light and space, for trees and flowers, for the earth and water, who  
only aspire to nest among luxurious vegetation, to flee the dark night's  
chill, and to find a warm bed that will recast them in a single love.

Meanwhile the stone and sand, the brick and lime, the water and forest  
are being created that will constitute the organism of:

AZURE VILLA...<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

Since «EL FUTURO NIDO» was conceived as a (visual) poem in prose, it tends to observe normal reading conventions. Apart from a few unorthodox excursions, the composition reads from left to right and from top to bottom. The chief exceptions are the walls and the roof, which need to be processed separately. Whereas the right side of the roof reads from top to bottom, the left side reads from bottom to top. Forced to choose between verbal and visual conventions – between legibility and visibility – Raida chose the only viable solution. By contrast, the four walls read from left to right and from top to bottom (in two stages), but they privilege the latter operation over the former. While the roof reverses the normal reading direction, the walls reverse the normal reading sequence.

Although the poem requires that one pay close attention, a cursory reading suffices to reveal several interesting facts. The most important discovery awaiting the reader is that «EL FUTURO NIDO» is a devotional poem. The «nest» in the title is a metaphor for Raida's future abode in heaven where, as a pious Christian, he hopes to go after he dies. At the same time it is also a metaphor for the Villa Azul, which serves as the dominant metaphor for Raida's celestial dwelling. Among other things, the composition's devotional aspect explains the building's curious architecture. The reason the building is blue, it turns out, is because it is located in the sky. Despite the poet's repeated claims that it represents a villa, moreover, the picture clearly portrays a church. Doubling as the poem's title, the cross at the top confirms the building's identity. This encourages us to re-examine another curious feature: the vertical phrases, which in retrospect do not seem to represent walls at all. The fact that they are enclosed by heavy, dark crochets is puzzling to say the least. What could possibly be their function? In theory, the mysterious features could conceivably represent flying buttresses. However, a quick review of Gothic architecture reveals that they are niches harboring religious statues. While Spanish churches come in different styles, one of the more popular models features two niches on both sides of the entrance, one above the other – exactly as they appear here.

The verbal composition itself belongs to a lengthy tradition of mystical poetry dating back to the Middle Ages and before. While mysticism has always played a significant role in Spanish literature, it combines with a secular, Utopian vision in «EL FUTURO NIDO» to depict an ideal existence unsullied by human contingencies. The leading authority on Ultraism, Gloria Videla, dismisses Raida with the comment «no tenía cualidades poéticas» («he did not possess poetic gifts») (Videla 1971: p. 165). Although there is much in this poem to

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support her claim, the composition possesses a certain interest of its own. Raida confides initially that the edifice he is about to describe is only a dream. While he speaks of constructing it himself, this is simply a metaphor – albeit one that structures the entire poem. What he is actually talking about is earning the right to *inhabit* the Villa Azul – in other words, the right to enter Heaven. Although the building belongs to the Almighty, the construction metaphor creates the impression that God and Raida own it jointly. This impression is reinforced by the introduction, in which the poet clearly identifies with the villa. In particular, we learn the latter is endowed with a number of human virtues, including modesty and humility. Besides Athenian grace, Raida confides, it embodies Christian fortitude and Andalusian sensuality. Eventually it dawns on the reader that the poet is primarily talking about himself. These are the virtues he plans to cultivate in order to convince God to let him inhabit the Villa Azul.

The remainder of the poem describes Raida's vision of celestial paradise, which, like many poets before him, he equates with perpetual springtime. Remarkably, he manages to breathe new life into this ancient literary topos, which has a long and varied history (see Curtius 1953: p. 120, 185 ff). To be sure, the first three lines are traditional. The villa will be surrounded by countless flowers of every variety, whose extraordinary beauty will provide an unforgettable setting. The fourth line attempts to expand this portrait but unfortunately fails miserably. According to Raida, the flowers will be «violadas por los pinceles del monóculo universal» («violated by the paintbrushes of the universal monocle»). The phrase is so awkward and so convoluted that one begins to sympathize with Videla. How can a flower be violated, one wonders, especially by a paintbrush? How can a paintbrush be wielded by a monocle? What on earth makes the monocle universal? The rhetorical jungle seems nearly impenetrable. Little by little, one begins to grasp what Raida is trying to say. The flowers are so beautiful that artists come from all over to paint their picture. Or rather, since the final noun is singular, one artist in particular comes to pay homage to their beauty, an artist wearing a stylish monocle. The reason the monocle is universal, one gradually perceives, is because it belongs to God, who possesses an all-seeing eye. Unexpectedly, the phrase turns out to be blasphemous on two accounts. It is hard to say which is more shocking – the thought of the Almighty violating the flowers or the image of God as a Sunday painter.

By contrast, the remainder of the poem is thoroughly charming. Since the Villa Azul is located in the sky, a blue light suffuses the

scene all day long. Otherwise Raida's vision of celestial paradise resembles the earthly paradise described in the Bible. Like the Garden of Eden, it is filled with trees and flowers, grassy meadows, and gurgling streams. Like Eden, it is populated by countless birds and other animals, which live in harmony with mankind and each other. In addition, it is designed exclusively for couples who, like Adam and Eve, will live together in a state of natural grace. Inspired by the Ultraist beauty all around them, husbands and wives will cultivate simple pleasures, concentrate on their basic needs, and devote themselves to each other. The most interesting inhabitants are not the human residents, however, but the marvelous birds, which play a key role in the poem. Since they are Ultraist birds, they send radio-telegrams to each other instead of simply singing. Unfortunately, Raida confuses wireless telegraphy with conventional telegraphy, which utilizes electrical impulses. More importantly, the birds serve as models for the celestial couples, who strive to imitate them. Like their avian companions, they learn to appreciate the simple things in life, including a nice warm bed where they can curl up and be happy.

## 2. Andrés Nimero

Although Ultraist visual poetry was restricted primarily to the second half of 1919, poems containing visual elements continued to appear well into 1921. In particular, Raida and his colleagues experimented with a popular device that had been invented by the Italian Futurists: visual analogy (*analogia disegmata*). The first example was invented in January 1914 by Francesco Cangiullo, who transformed the word *fumare* («to

smoke») into **FUUUUUMARE**, so it appeared to expand like a puff of smoke. Several interesting examples occur in a poem by Andrés Nimero called «Poema alfa de la gran circunvalación» («Alpha Poem on the Great Circle Line») (figure 2). Like Raida, Nimero was a frequent contributor to the journal and member of the Ultraist group in Seville.

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**POEMA ALFA DE LA GRAN CIRCUNVALACION**

**0'35 ptas.**

SOBRE ESTE LADO ESTA EL AYUNTAMIENTO

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SUENA UNA CAMPANA Y RUEDA UN TUMULTO DE HIERRO VIEJO...

El cobrador moja los dedos  
y arranca el  
billete.  
(El cobrador nunca se afelta) y fuma...  
Trin... Trin. Tlan, tlon. Marcha el vehiculo.  
Plaza de la Constitución de San Francisco.  
La Audiencia está quemada.  
Se emnegreció la justicia.  
Una cocinera manda detener el tranvía  
y sube con un gran cesto.  
La Catedral.  
Por la Plaza  
del Triunfo  
Pasa  
un  
cura  
con un rojo quitasol.  
Rechina la curva

Y la estridencia se va  
por el Arco de Mañera  
Puerta de Jerez. El Ceibo Sagrado...  
(antes de Rebello, fué Sicomoro)  
En su copa no está el loro.  
La Pasarela es el armazón del Municipio.  
Arboles y la Casa de Socorro.  
Estamos en la Puerta de la Carne ( Plaza Monumental  
Torea Joselito.

La carne adherida al hueso:  
Puerta del Osario. Sandías.  
Perneo. Laguna. Laboratorio.  
La Trinidad: Cárcel de las Santas Patronas.  
Fábricas. Por aquí se va a Miraflores.  
Ruum... Ruuum... Ruuum...  
Y llegamos a Capuchinos.  
Templo de aldeas.  
¡Ya se quedó atrás el DOLOR  
De los tuberculosos!  
El dolor persiste sin embargo  
Los pobres sin albergue:  
Sanchezdelp...  
Camino del cementerio.  
Hospital civil.  
Hospital militar.  
(¿Un civil es militar?)  
Lejos destila la lepra.  
(Coaur de Jeannete)  
«Levaba una mano fuera...»

«Mare mía e la Esperansa...»  
( Tambores... Cornetas )  
( MEDIODÍA DEL VIERNES )

La Feria. No es Jueves.

□ Hércules □

El amor ronda

Por la planicie afrodisiaca y étnica. Cinc.  
Entre la Avenida del Amor Profano  
Y la calle del Amor de Dios

Eunopa  
Aquí fueron:  
Barrera  
Variedades  
Amigos del Arte  
Realito  
Todo, todo torrefacto.

La vejez de Novedades  
La Campanilla y la Campana.  
Caramelos y juguetes.

**Ruido** El prestigio de calle Sierpes

Sujeta esquinas. Tránsito ininterrumpido.  
La Fiambrera.  
Comesibles.  
Málaga. A las 8 hay pescado.  
O'Donnell - La Magdalena.  
Una triste fuente seca en el Pacífico.  
¡The Seville Water Works!  
Y vamos por Méndez Núñez.  
Hotel. Hostal. Fonda. Hospedería.  
Novios de moro.  
The Berlitz School.  
El Arte ha roto la monotonía.  
De la contrata.  
PLAZA NUEVA. San Fernando.  
Se ha completado el ciclo.  
Llegada. Es de noche.  
El tranvía. - Minotauro número **24**

Enciende su ojo rojo  
Y busca otra vez el camino.

Andrés NIMERO

Figure 2

Published in *Grecia* on October 12, 1919, the composition consists of some eighty-four lines accompanied by eight visual elements. Situated in Seville, it recounts a trip on Streetcar 24 along the Great Circle Route, beginning and ending in the Plaza Nueva (also called the Plaza de San Fernando). Surrounded by hotels and bordered with date palms on all four sides, the latter was the largest square in Seville. On summer evenings, people would come from all over to hear the municipal band play. According to contemporary maps, the Great Circle Route was one of six streetcar lines serving the city, five of which departed from this square (Baedeker 1913: p. 390). Unlike the Pequeña Circunvalación cars, which were decorated with green stripes, or those on the Línea San-Pedro-Calzada, which had blue stripes, the Great Circle cars were emblazoned with a red cross. Whereas the other streetcars left at twenty-minute intervals, the Great Circle cars departed every ten minutes. At the top of the page, Nimero quotes the price of the ticket in large boldface numerals: **0'35 ptas.** Immediately below, a rectangular diagram represents the Plaza Nueva, whose four sides read as follows: «Hay coches, caballos, autos... Hotel de gran ciudad / DE PALMERAS POLVO / SOBRE ESTE LADO ESTA EL AYUNTAMIENTO / 2 LARGAS FILAS» («There are carriages, horses, autos... Large city hotel / THE PALMS DUST / THE CITY HALL IS ON THIS SIDE / 2 LONG LINES»). For some reason, probably because he needed more room, Nimero moved the handsome Renaissance city hall from the eastern side of the square to its southern edge. Otherwise, the rectangular diagram is reasonably accurate. The two long lines on the left may represent people waiting for the streetcar or, more likely, the streetcar tracks themselves. The palms on the right may be actual trees or the name of the hotel or both. The «polvo» next to them may be a dusty stretch of pavement or an advertisement for some kind of powder, possibly a medicine or a cosmetic. In the center of the square, which is filled with «NIÑOS, SOLDADOS, LIMPIABOTAS, y VAGOS» («CHILDREN, SOLDIERS, BOOTBLACKS, and LOAFERS»), an oval marks the spot where a statue of San Fernando was about to be installed.

Sandwiched between two parallel lines representing tracks, the next sentence evokes the sounds of the streetcar preparing to depart: «SUENA UNA CAMPANA Y RUEDA UN TUMULTO DE HIERRO VIEJO...» («A BELL RINGS AMID THE NOISE OF OLD IRON»). «El cobrador moja los dedos», Nimero adds, «y arranca el / billete. / (El cobrador nunca se afeita) y fuma... / Trin... Trin. Tlan, tlon. Marcha el vehículo» («The conductor moistens his fingers / and collects the / tickets. / (The conductor never

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shaves) and smokes... / Ding... Ding...Dong, dong. The vehicle departs»). Thereafter the poem records the streetcar's itinerary street by street, monument by monument, until it has covered half the city.

Constitution Square of St. Francis.  
The Courthouse burned down.  
The Palace of Justice was burned black.  
A cook signals the streetcar to stop  
and climbs aboard carrying a large basket.  
The Cathedral.  
Through the Triumphal  
Square  
A  
priest  
passes  
with a red parasol.  
Clanking around the bend  
the noise disappears  
through the Mañara Arch  
Jerez Gate. The Sacred Flame Tree...  
(before Rebello it was a Sycamore)  
There are no parrots in its branches.  
The Footbridge is the Town's backbone.  
Trees and the Emergency Hospital.  
We are at Butchers' Gate  
    Bullfight Arena  
        Joselito is fighting today.  
Meat stuck to the bone:  
Ossuary Gate. Watermelons.  
Perneo. Laguna. Laboratorio.  
The Trinity: Patron Saints Prison.  
Factories. This way leads to Miraflores.  
Ruum... Ruum... Ruum...  
And we arrive at Capuchinos.  
Rustic church.  
The PAIN of the tuberculosis patients  
remained behind!  
However pain persists  
Homeless people:  
Sanchezdalp.  
The cemetery road.  
Civil hospital.  
Military hospital.  
(Is a civilian a soldier?)  
Leprosy files past in the distance.  
(*Coeur de Jeanette*)  
« Her hand was sticking out... »

Running along the northern edge of the Plaza Nueva, the streetcar heads east and enters the Plaza de la Constitución (behind the actual City Hall). One of the busiest parts of the city, it is surrounded by balconied houses and bordered on the east by the Courthouse. As Nimero remarks, the building burned down at the turn of the century but was rebuilt in 1908. Proceeding directly south, the streetcar traverses the Plaza del Triunfo enclosed by the Cathedral, where Christopher Columbus is supposedly buried, the Alcázar, the former palace of the Moorish kings, and the Casa Lonja, where the Archivo General de Indias is located. Continuing until it reaches the Mañara Arch and the Jerez Gate, it turns left and proceeds along the Calle San Fernando past the immense two-story Tobacco Factory – made famous by Bizet’s *Carmen* – until it comes to the Pasarela. Turning left again, the streetcar heads north along the ring road in a counter-clockwise direction. On the right, it passes the emergency hospital and the gate leading to the slaughterhouse, both of which are mentioned in the poem. The Butchers’ Gate reminds Nimero that the famous matador Joselito is fighting in the Bull Ring on the other side of town. As Spanish custom dictates, the bulls he dispatches will be butchered and the meat given to the poor. Continuing on its way, the streetcar passes the church of La Trinidad and the Capuchin Convent, which, as Nimero informs us, resembles a rustic temple. The sight of the Hospital Civil y Militar prompts him to question the wisdom of treating soldiers and civilians under the same roof. It reminds him as well of the poor, the sick, and the homeless who have to beg for a living.

The reference to *Coeur de Jeanette* at this point, which was a famous French perfume, is somewhat puzzling. It may allude to a store where it was sold, or perhaps to a passenger who is wearing it. Juxtaposed with the mention of leprosy in the preceding line, the reference seems highly ironic. The (inexact) quotation in the next line was prompted by the road leading to the Cemetery San Fernando, also known as the Bullfighters’ Cemetery. It refers to a story by Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer entitled «La Venta de los Gatos» («The Cat Market»), situated in a dance hall of this name in the very same quarter. Recalling his sweetheart’s burial in the San Fernando cemetery, the protagonist exclaims:

En el carro de los muertos  
ha pasado por aquí;  
llevaba una mano fuera,  
por ella la conocí



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The Lunch Box.  
Groceries.  
Málaga. At 8:00 they have fish.  
O'Donnell – La Magdalena.  
A sad, dry fountain in the Pacific.  
*The Seville Water Works!*  
And we continue along Méndez Núñez.  
Hotel. Inn. Tavern. Hostelry.  
Moorish newlyweds.  
*The Berlitz School.*  
Art has broken the monotony.  
Of the contract.  
PLAZA NUEVA. San Fernando.  
The cycle is complete.  
Arrival. Night is falling.  
The streetcar. – Minotaur number

## 24

Ignites its red eye  
And continues on its way.

Amid snatches of an anonymous song, the streetcar descends the Calle de la Feria («Fair Street») until it encounters the Calle Correduría angling off to the right, leading first to the Plaza de Europa and then to the Alameda de Hércules. In 1574, two Roman columns were erected at the south end bearing statues of Hercules and Julius Caesar. Momentarily adopting an aerial perspective, Nimero depicts these as two squares on either side of the word **Hércules**. Continuing in a southern direction, the streetcar descends the Calle Amor de Dios, which occasions some wordplay about love, crosses the Calle Campana («Bell Street»), and enters the Calle de las Sierpes. A narrow but extremely fashionable street, the latter originally derived its name from a tavern sign depicting serpents. Like the intersection, which resembles a tic tac toe diagram, it is depicted visually. Amor de Dios and Sierpes streets were lined with shops, cafes, and clubs, which Nimero evokes in considerable detail. Although many of them were relatively new, the venerable Cafe de Novedades – whose name belied its age – was still there. At the end of the first block, the streetcar turns right onto the Calle O'Donnell and then left into the Plaza del Pacífico where, ironically, there is not enough water to power the fountain. Offering a brief glimpse of the splendid Santa Maria Magdalena church, it continues south on the Calle Méndez Núñez until it returns to the Plaza Nueva, where it pauses to unload passengers and pick up new ones. As night begins to fall, Streetcar 24 acquires an unexpected mythological dimension. Surrounded by a jumble of

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labyrinthine streets, it resembles the legendary Minotaur ensconced in his famous maze. Equipped with a single headlight, it disappears into the darkness like a mechanical Cyclops in search of wily Odysseus.

### 3. Eliodoro Puche

A third poem, by Eliodoro Puche, is short enough to quote in its entirety:

Silencio  
El camino nublado  
asciende hasta la cima  
del Sol.  
Mis pasos  
muertas  
EL RELOJ  
(fuga de las horas que caen)

y el aroma de mis primaveras

(  
c  
o  
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p  
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a  
d  
a  
)

TIENE EL DEDO EN LA BOCA

(Silence: «The cloudy path / leads to the Sun's / summit. / My steps / and the aroma of my dead primroses [or springs] / THE CLOCK / (flight of the hours that fall) / (like a plumb line) / HAS ITS FINGER IN ITS MOUTH»).

Published in *Ultra* on May 21, 1921, «Silencio» recalls a number of poems by Pierre Reverdy in which an earthly journey becomes a rite of passage during which the poet crosses from life into death. Like the French poet, Puche juxtaposes sparse, suggestive phrases to produce a

drama of ellipsis. Like Reverdy, he creates an eerie silence in which the poem seems to exist outside time. Among other things, this suggests an explanation for the last, enigmatic line. While of the thumb-sucking clock was probably cultivated for its shock value, the image dovetails nicely with the poem's larger preoccupations. For that matter, imagining a timepiece with fingers is no more ridiculous than speaking of the «hands» of a clock (the same expression exists in Spanish). The poet has simply taken the dead metaphor and developed it to its logical conclusion. Furthermore, the fact that the clock has its finger (minute hand) in its mouth means that its hands are no longer revolving. In other words, time has stopped altogether. This accords with what we already know about the poet's destination: the realm of death, where time stands still. We are left with the visual analogy of the plumb line – itself a metaphor for the «falling» hours – suspended vertically in the air. At some point, the reader realizes that the poet is evoking a grandfather clock and that the vertical phrase is intended to represent its pendulum. This identification confirms our earlier interpretation of the finger in the clock's mouth. Judging from its vertical position, moreover, the pendulum is stationary – another indication that the clock has stopped running. Hanging absolutely motionless, the pendulum symbolizes the plight of the poet himself, for whom time has ceased to exist.

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