A.

In 1931, Berardo Ortiz de Montellano, editor of the Mexican literary Journal *Contemporáneos*, summarized three years of work in the following lines:

En este año tres la palabra que con más frecuencia se advierte en las páginas de *Contemporáneos* es M…. o, con X o con j, escrita, siempre, con pluma fuente de marca universal.

In a few words, Montellano expresses the main paradox facing the group of young writers publishing their work in the journal. As many scholars have mentioned (Forster 1962: 15), one of the main roles of the journal was to open the gates of Mexican literature toward Europe. By publishing translations of French surrealist poets such as André Breton and Guillaume Apollinaire, the *Contemporáneos* played a major role in shaping post-revolutionary Mexican literature and setting new standards. But the *Contemporáneos* had another role that is often dismissed: in addition to modern poems by Breton or the young Mexican Xavier Villaurrutia, one could also find translations of indigenous literature. Fragments from the *Chilam Balam*, the sacred book of the Mayas that had recently been translated for the first time into Spanish with the support of Montellano, were published for the first time in the journal, as were adapted versions of the Mexican Cantos by Montellano. Mexico and its literary tradition had never stopped being of interest to the journal, however influenced it may have been by European literature.

It would appear that not all contributors to the *Contemporáneos* shared Montellano’s views. His obsession with indigenous literature was criticized by critics and colleagues alike as being alien to the zeitgeist of the journal. When indigenous motifs penetrated Montellano’s poetry and influenced his poem *Sueños,* Jorge Cuetsa accused him of abandoning the individual focus of the group (Montellano 1983: 109). But the individual’s experience had always been the main motivation for Montellano’s poetry, and poems by T.S Eliot were no less important to him than was the *Chilam Balam*. In his essays and poems, he urged the building of a bridge between modern, universal literature and Mexican indigenous heritage. Both, Montellano claimed, could and should serve the modern Mexican poet in his work.

Montellano’s claim was definitely revolutionary. Although several Mexican writers did introduce some indigenous material into their work, most considered the Spanish tradition to be the true literary tradition of Mexico. An extreme example of such a notion is to be found in an essay published by Jorge Cuesta in 1934. In *El clasicismo mexicano,* Cuesta differentiates between Classical and popular work. The classical, according to Cuesta, is not limited in time and space: it speaks to any cultural spirit. Popular literature on the other hand, being rooted in a specific background, cannot cross geographic and linguistic borders. Surprisingly, Cuesta reaches the conclusion that Mexican literature is, and always has been, classical literature, e.g. one with a “lenguaje y significación universal”. He reaches the following provocative conclusion: “En México no hay una poesía indígena”. Cuesta is fully aware of the existence of pre-Columbian Mexican literature, but he claims that it never would have survived had it not been written and adapted by the Spanish chroniclers. Using renaissance tropes, the chroniclers turned the popular literature into classical literature. This literature is therefore valuable, not because of its Mexican origin, but despite it.

Cuesta’s views gained more influence when adopted and developed by his successor, Octavio Paz. Paz expressed the same irritation with indigenous literature in opening his *Introducción a la Poesía Mexicana* with the word *España* (Paz 1988 [1952])*.* In this essay, Mexican literature is represented as being a product of the Spanish renaissance. In the Spanish renaissance, Paz sees a foreign style that was borrowed from Italy, a symbol of universalism, of literature that knows no borders. And since the Spanish conquest occurred during the Spanish renaissance, he claims it left a Universalist mark on Mexican literature.

But can a national literature be identified as universal? There is a certain paradox in finding the Mexican identity in the universal. Cuesta and Paz, though firmly arguing for the universality of Mexican literature, are still concerned with Mexican issues. Cuesta edited an anthology of Mexican poetry, and Paz often judged poets by the degree of their Mexicanity (Paz 1972: 64). In fact, Paz himself later softened his argument. In *Puertas al Campo* (1972 [1966]), he claims that, although Mexican literature borrowed its language from Spain, it still developed its own literary tradition: it grew into “Un árbol distinto, con hojas más verdes y jugos más amargos. Entre sus brazos anidan pájaros desconocidos en España” (Ibid: 15). After admitting the particularity of the Mexican tradition, Paz goes on to acknowledge the importance of the same indigenous literature he had dismissed earlier: “la influencia de la poesía Náhuatl en varios poetas mexicanos ha sido muy profunda, pero quizás esos poetas no se habrían reconocido en esos textos… si no hubiesen pasado antes por la experiencia del surrealismo (Ibid. 20).

Lee attributed the shift in Paz’s views to the increased publication of indigenous works by Miguel Angel Garibay (Lee 2014: 899). Garibay’s editions made the exuberance of this literature accessible to writers such as Carlos Fuentes and Paz. Indeed, these editions made the ancient materials accessible to a larger audience than ever before. However, they were not the first. Lee refers to Gonzalez Peña’s anthology (1928), that ignores any type of pre-Columbian literature, as evidence of the ignorance of indigenous literature in the pre-Garibay era. But years before that, in a small review in the *Contempráneos,* the young Montellano had criticized the lack of indigenous literature in the anthology (Montellano 1988 [1929]: 209-211). In the following years, Montellano’s interest in indigenous literature would grow and develop significantly. His essay and poems, thus, are a testament to an early attempt to revaluate the ancient literature of Mexico and consider various ways of using it in the modern literary world.

Three months after the publication of the review, Montellano wrote an essay called *Antiguos cantares mexicanos* where his views regarding indigenous literature were represented for the first time (Montellano 1988 [1929]: 222-224). In this essay, he clarifies that his interest is not historical. He is not interested in anthropological information about ancient cultures, instead, he is looking for “matiz verdaderamente propio de nuestra literatura popular” (Ibid.). These roots are primitive; they are religious; they belong to popular songs, and are thus significantly distinct from modern cultural poetry. It should be mentioned that Montellano was deeply influenced by Lorca’s *Romancero Gitano* at the time and waseager to find a parallel with the Andalusian popular tradition inthe indigenous cultures of Mexico. At the same time, he was also aware of the differences between the two. Whereas the Andalusian tradition was still alive, most of the indigenous traditions had ceased to exist and had been neglected. Moreover, the indigenous literature was written in indigenous languages such as Nahuatl and K’iche’, languages that most of the population of Mexico did not speak anymore. One more problem that Montellano mentions is the ambiguity of many of the symbols and expressions that are used in that literature, a fact that makes any translation partial and unsatisfying. Hence, he finishes his essay by wondering was there any way to connect modern Mexican literature with its archaic heritage.

It would appear that Montellano found an answer to his wondering two years later. In 1935 he was already familiar enough with the indigenous literature to write a comprehensive essay analysing its character and considering ways it could contribute to the modern Mexican writer. In the essay, Montellano adjusts a small anthology of fragments from the *Popul Vuh*, the *Chilama Balam* and the *Cantares Mexicanos* that supports and demonstrates his claims. These views represent a complex dialogue with the essay by Cuesta that was discussed above. Although he does not mention his friend, the essay is clearly an apologia to the indigenous literature, where Montellano rejects his friend’s accusations on the one hand, and accepts many of his ideas regarding the characteristics of classic literature on the other. The polemic attitude of the essay can be seen right from the beginning:

Me propongo en estos apuntes iniciar la revalorización de la poesía indígena de México, interpretándola por su significado espiritual más que por su contenido histórico. (Montellano 1935: 5)

Montellano is apparently arguing again against the historical approach to indigenous literature. But in these lines, he adds a crucial term that he borrowed from Cuesta: he is interested in the *spiritual* significance of the indigenous literature. The spirit which Cuesta had attributed to the Classical literature and deprived the popular literature of, turns out to be the most important characteristic of the indigenous literature. Throughout the essay, Montellano distinguishes between two layers that exist in any kind of literature. The first layer is the corporeal, and it contains the sound and the rhythm that affect the senses of the reader. The second is the spirit of the poem that is beyond sense perception, and it contains the figurative language and images that affect the spirit of the reader. Montellano claims that the indigenous languages are dead, and accordingly the corporeal layer of the indigenous poetry has lost its significance. However, while the original rhythms cannot survive the transition into the Spanish language, the spiritual value can. The unique images and figures can speak to the modern reader’s spirit even through translation. The Spanish language lends the indigenous poetry its body that preserves its soul.

Since the spiritual layer of the indigenous literature is not limited by linguistic, chronologic or geographic borders, Montellano can easily compare it to Oriental literature or French surrealist poetry (Montellano 1935: 14). Thus, during his career, he never limited himself to Mexican literature: he translated Eliots’s *Ash Wednesday* and he did not hide his admiration for D. H Lawrence or Paul Verlaine. True poetry, he writes, is being created from the heart of the poet, and it does not matter whether he lives in the twentieth century or the fifteenth, nor whether he is Mexican or French (Ibid. 20). Montellano’s interest in indigenous literature is therefore not national, but rather poetic: his ultimate goal is to find the right expression for his individual experience. In the ancient texts, as in contemporary European poetry, he finds various elements that enrich his poems. The following pages are dedicated to an examination of two important elements in Montellano’s poetry: images and dreams. The origin of both can be traced back over two sources: modern European poetry and ancient Mexican poetry. By discussing the origins of Montellano’s poetry, I wish to explore how the ancient indigenous literature functions in modern literary works, such as Montellano’s. Does it make Montellano’s poetry any different?

B.

The image has been the focus of poetic discussion since the second half of the nineteenth century. Through exceptional images, poets such as Paul Verlaine and Charles Baudelaire attempted to break the frozen realism that dominated European poetry at the time. A more comprehensive image theory was developed at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the Surrealist movement in Paris and the Imagist movement in the United States and England explored new kinds of images. Montellano was deeply impressed by their discoveries. Following Verlaine, he states that images are “creación pura del espiritú”. Images enable the poet to explore different realities:

La imagen para los nuevos conceptos de la estética, es una realidad del espíritu y el lenguaje propio de la poesía… es también del dominio de la psicología contemporánea… las imágenes y las formas misteriosas de la poesía obran, por vías subconsciencias… (Montellano 1935: 16)

But Montellano is convinced that there is nothing new about these images. They were already being used by Mexican indigenous poets centuries before. Images served in their poetry as sophisticated poetic tropes, crossing borders between man and nature and creating spiritual reality (Montellano 1988 [1930]: 241).

One might argue that, had he not first read Freud’s writings and surrealist manifestos, he would not have noticed these qualities of the indigenous images. Indeed, as Paz noticed, many Mexican writers passed through European conceptions before approaching their Mexican literary tradition (Paz 1972: 20). However, we should not conclude that his reading of indigenous writing is prejudiced or futile. The unique images of indigenous writing led Montellano to reconsider surrealist theories and to develop a slightly different poetic.

In fact, the use of images in the *Cantares Mexicanos,* for instance, is so remarkable that it stimulates the reader of these poems to decipher the enigmatic images and think about their exceptional functions. Moreover, in the *Chilam Balam* one finds a full poetic discussion regarding the significance of poetic language and metaphor. An *apasionado* of the indigenous literature, in *La poesía indígena de México,* Montellano brings together a handful of examples of indigenous images that helped him crystalize some of the principal ideas of the indigenous image.

He starts by distinguishing between metaphor and image. Under the heading of metaphor stands the simple simile, such as “your eyes are like a pair of stars”. The metaphor compares two subjects. The image, on the other hand, does not compare, but instead synthesizes (Montellano 1935: 61). Whereas the metaphor is a mere rhetoric device that aims to clarify, the image is a novel spiritual creature. A few examples of indigenous images collected by Montellano illustrate his claim.

An expression like “se encenderá fuego en los cuernos del venado” (Montellano 1935: 29) is used as if to state a simple fact. By using poetic language, the poet creates new physical possibilities that are unknown in our world. While it is based on a simple metaphor that compares the deer horns to branches, the poet skips that step and takes us to the next one: if branches burn, and deer horns are like branches, then why would deer horns not burn in a fire? A similar effect is to be found in another citation that Montellano brings to our attention: “Por cuatro veces amaneció y cuatro veces oscureció el zopilote” (ibid.) Once again, the image leans upon a similarity: between the movement of the eagle and the movement of the sun, and once again, this link is not stated. Instead, the poet goes straight on to bestow the eagle with the cyclic quality of the sun: its taking off is described as sunrise and its landing as sunset. In some images, it is harder to find the link between the two subjects, and this makes them more enigmatic. For example: “lluvias de algodón, lluvias de los gallos, lluvias de los venados”. Here, the rain and the chickens are synthesized into one solid enigmatic entity. By using the possessive pronoun *de* instead of the simple comparison *como* the two subjects merge into one.

The influence of the indigenous image on Montellano becomes apparent in a comparison of his early and later poetry. In his early years, Montellano was deeply influenced by the Mexican poet Amado Nervo (Montellano 2005: 19). Under his influence, Montellano used many classic metaphors to describe his beloved and his love:

Como el fuego consume sus alas en ceniza

Así mi vida quema las horas en tu amor! (Montellano 2005: 71)

The use of comparison words such as *como* and *así* clarifies the metaphor. The poet´s love is being nurtured by the poet’s hours, just like the fire is consuming its burning material. The poem *Fruta* is also based on a simple comparison: “FRUTA que el pájaro pica \ no madura ya \ Amor que no se complica \ se va” (Montellano 2006 [1925]: 104). Although he does not use the word *como,* it is not difficult to decipher the simile. The love is the fruit and the bird the lover that have tasted some but still desire more.

After *Primero Sueño* (1931), these similes disappear from Montellano’s poetry and new enigmatic images take their place. The image becomes a powerful device for expressing the dreamy state of mind that Montellano is trying to convey, where no borders exist, either mundane or between subjects. Inspired by the indigenous images, Montellano creates new images: “vivir en el trasmundo de las puras floraciones del cielo submarino” (Montellano 2005: 216). The reader, in trying to find a link between skies and flowers, might draw the conclusion that the stars are like flowers, but Montellano eliminates such a possibility by placing the sky underwater. In some cases, we can follow the poet in constructing the image, such as when Montellano suggests various images for the sleeping body:

Este cuerpo sin voz, metal sin fuego

Mano sin despedida que no muevo

Brazo lirio de lava y de ceniza

The first verse could be a simple metaphor in that the inure body is compared to a metal, but the addition of fire makes it more enigmatic. The hand image is more obscure, although the poet helps us a little by mentioning that it does not move: the hand does not wave goodbye. The last verse, however, is absolutely hermetic. While we can figure out that the arm is mentioned after the hand, it is still unclear what a flower-arm of fire and ashes is. Montellano takes advantage of the possessive pronoun *de* to synthesize completely separate subjects: the human body, plants, and chemical reactions.

It should be noted that the metaphor and the image have contradictory goals. Whereas the metaphor intends to clarify, to explain an idea better to the reader, the image hides more than it reveals. The poetry of Montellano after *Primero Sueño* becomes more obscure as it gains more images. We should not, however, see this as a negative side effect. The obscurity is an intentional effect that functions as a veil between the text and the reader. We can have a better insight into the role of obscurity in Montellano´s work by examining a play that he wrote in 1930.

Written a few years after the start of Montellano’s interest in indigenous literature and a little before the writing of *Primero Sueño, El Sombrerón* represents a shift in Montellano’s approach to indigenous literature: from a folkloric to a spiritual focus. The audience of Casa del Estudiante Indígena who came to see the young poet’s play were probably expecting something different when they bought a ticket for a play called *El Sombrerón,* a mythical figure from Mayan folklore. As some scholars have stated, the play is disappointing from a folkloric point of view (Dauster 2015: 21). The poetic language made the play difficult to follow and inaccessible to the public. While the main figure of the original legend is the Sombrerón, the main figure of Montellano´s play is the language. The attribution of the legend to the Maya allows Montellano to introduce references to other Mayan writings: the *Popol Vuh* and *Chilam Balam*, and thus, to create a demanding play that challenges its spectators. At the end of each scene, without any apparent connection, the following dialog appears:

Padre – ¿Tu eres, hijo mío?

Hijo – Yo soy, padre.

Padre – ¿Tu eres noble, hijo mío?

Hijo – yo lo soy, padre.

Padre – ¿Qué es de tus compañeros, hijo mío?

Hijo – Padre, están en el monte buscando al tigre. “no hay tigre”, decían.

Padre – Y entonces el tigre estaba pasando por delante de ellos.

The dialog is taken from the fifth chapter of the *Chilam Balam* in Mediz Bolio’s translation. The chapter deals with the figurative language that is used for making riddles. Throughout the chapter, the father puts forth various requests in a figurative way, and they all sound impossible. By using figurative language, the father is testing his son: only the true noble son will be able to decipher the figurative language and to understand its true meaning. The last request, which appears before the quoted fragment, is a flying jaguar. The father asks him whether he is his true son and so understands the true meaning of the request. The son answers that he is, and unlike his friends, he does not go to look for the jaguar in the mountains.

In the first scene, the father, aware of the tendency of the sombrerón to seduce young ladies, wishes to make sure that his son is his true son. Like the father in the *Chilam Balam*, he chooses the figurative language as the *Shibolteth* as an ultimate test for revealing the true son*.* The son, therefore, is not just required to defend his mother, but also to demonstrate his poetic abilities. Throughout the play, he illustrates these skills. When his mother asks him when he will be coming back, he answers “antes de que brillan los ojos del tigre” (Montellano 1986: 170), and the father says that the son will come back together with “el olor de las luciénagas”. Moreover, the son also illustrates his expertise in Mayan folk tales when, in the second scene, together with his mother, he tells the story of the frogs and the snakes.

Poetic ability is also required of the audience. To understand the play, they must be able to decipher the poetic images and also have a strong background in Mayan literature. Montellano does not make it easy for them. On the contrary, just like the father in the *Chilam Balam*, he poses riddles for the audience to test them. Thus, the whole tiger fragment that is crucial for the understanding of the play is given without any context or additional explanation. Montellano challenges the audience, the members of La Casa del Estudiante Indígena, to see if they are the real heirs of the indigenous traditions.

But even an attentive spectator who has a strong background in indigenous literature will probably not be able to claim a complete understanding, since one of the main themes of the play is the rejection of intellectual hubris. Besides being a professional seducer of young ladies, the sombrerón is also known to be attracted to sages. In Miguel Angel Asturias’s version of the legend that was published in the same year, the sombrerón is a kid who distracts the monk from his studies and thus stops him from exploring the secrets of the universe (1970: 86). In the third scene of Montellano’s play, the sombrerón ridicules the human’s passion for knowledge: “Los hombres quieren descubrirlo todo: lo que está detrás de la jícara del cielo y lo que está esparcido y ardiente en el corazón de la tierra” (Montellano 1988 [1931]: 176). At the end of the play, the human’s arrogance fails. The sombrerón pretends to be dead and thus deceives the father once again. No matter how educated we may be, claims Montellano, we cannot beat the mysteries. Hence, the sombrerón recommends to us at the beginning of the play:

Creed en los sueños, en los esfuerzos de los poetas y los sabios, trabajadores en las minas de mi silencio a voces… creed en los dioses como creéis en el dinero, en el contraco socialy en la velocidad. (Montellano 1988 [1931]: 170)

Montellano believes in poets, modern European poets as much as ancient Mexican poets. From the outset, he learns about the ability of images to explore the subconscious and penetrate the depth of the poet’s personality, and the latter teaches him to create spiritual worlds through the use of exceptional images. But at the same time, he is also aware of the limits of poetry, of the inaptitude of any poet, modern or ancient, for full comprehension of the mysteries of the soul and the world. There is an internal tension in Montellano’s work, between the eagerness to explore and understand on the one hand, and the awareness of the impossibility of these activities on the other. This tension might be the reason for Montellano’s attraction to dreams. As a natural phenomenon that reveals unnatural phenomena, the dream takes on an important role in Montellano’s work. In the following pages I will discuss the origins of this interest and the role it plays in Montellano’s poetry.

C.

Montellano’s interest in dreams is already apparent in his earliest poetry. In his debut *Avidez,* the dream is described in an oxymoronic way: "Así en el sueño blanco de la noche” (Montellano 2005:76). It is a place where contradictions such as black and white are eliminated. In his second book, *El trompo de siete colores,* he starts referring to dreams as an alternative for life. They contain the possibility of approaching a distinct state of mind, of approaching death. However, it is only in *Primero Sueño* a few years later that dreams take on a major role in his poetry, when he writes poetry intended to represent a dreamy state of mind.

Scholars have referred to the Surrealist movement as being the main influence on Montellano in this regard. Indeed, the Surrealist movement had a significant impact on the literary milieu of Mexico overall. In 1925, Gorge Astrada wrote an essay that describes the main characters of the movement, where he mentions their focus on dreams: “Los surrealistas de escuela, trabajaban, aunque no lo adviertan, en la infrarealidad, es decir, con los materiales del sueño” (Schnider 1978: 5). He also pays attention to the significance of psychoanalysis to the movement and to the use of primitive and childish material in their poetry. Other Mexican writers describe the metaphysical motives of the Surrealist movement and their intention to cross natural borders towards a transcendent comprehension (Ibid: 7).

Like other Mexican writers, Montellano also read and was influenced by these essays. He uses Astrada’s inaccurate translation when he calls the movement *Sobrerealsimo.* Moreover, Montellano read French and probably read some of the surrealist manifestos and poetry. He spent some time on psychoanalysis theories too. His daughter tells us that there were some Spanish editions of Freud’s writings in his library, and he also quotes Jung in his essays. Like the Surrealists, he hoped to extract the repressed subconscious through dreams. The poet, according to this view, acts like a scientist attempting to decipher the enigmatic rules of the spirit. Though poetry seems chaotic, it obeys an internal logic of transcendental laws (Montellano 1988 [1930]: 241).

We should note a subtle difference between Montellano’s view and that of the Surrealists. Whereas the Surrealists are interested in penetrating personal psychology, Montellano’s mission is much more ambitious. He wishes to transcend the personal. “Eso que fui le he olvidado” (Montellano 1988 [193?]: 182), he writes in one of his poems. He tries to describe the undescribed in prose as follows:

Por encima, y por separado, del mundo natural existe un mundo extraordinario cuya presencia advierten hasta las fieras en el bosque, por la noche… los sentidos irrumpen en un plano de esencias en donde parece que palparan lo impalpable. (Montellano 2006: 76)

*Palpar el impalpable*, to perceive the unperceivable; this is the urge that motivates the poetry of Montellano. A desire to reveal the secret world: “Oculta detrás del alma”. Since this transcendental world is free from mundane restraints, the poet must abandon conventional linguistic restraints. Montellano’s poetry, that once was clear and simple, becomes hermetic: as he abandons the natural world, he abandons the rules of syntax. The absence of verbs, in one of his *Segundo Sueño* poems for instance, makes the poem obscure but at the same time revealing: “Alúcida veloz clara ceñuda \ desnuda sofocada misteriosa \ menuda pura impura deseada \ libre precise frágil despojada \ Sola solmene solitaria y alma".

These verses could be seen as automatic writing in surrealistic style. But the reader should note that the automatism does not reveal sexual desire as is often the case with the poetry of the French Surrealist movement. Following Freud, the Surrealists were deeply occupied with sexual symbols. In Montellano’s poetry, however, one can find love and eroticism, but never as the final goal. Instead they function as a device for transcending the corporeal: “te busco entre el cuerpo y el alma” (Ibid: 204). Montellano is interested in nudity, but not of the body. He is looking for the nude soul:

A cuatro sueños encima de tus nublados ojos…

A cuatro sombras más allá de tus cabellos de humo…

A cuatro vientos arriba de la mano que toco…

It would appear that the differences between Montellano and the Surrealist movement originate in indigenous poetry. As I mentioned before, psychoanalysis and the Surrealists were interested in primitive cultures too. But whereas they were looking for anthropological knowledge and analysed their customs and religions, Montellano investigated their literature and looked for poetic guidance. In *La Poesía indígena de México* Montellano cites from the *Cantares Mexicanos:*

Parece falso todo lo que decimos sobre el dador de la vida, como si fuese un sueño que al despertar relatamos en el mundo, y es que a nadie queremos decir la verdad.

The ambiguity of these lines opens many possible interpretations. It can be interpreted in a historical manner: the Aztec poet cannot accept the new reality that seems like a dream (Damrosch 1991). Alternatively, a philosophical explanation can be given: the dream is a false reality which the poet wishes to transcend into the clarity of the day (Portilla 1974:60). Montellano, however, is not interested in historical or philosophical interpretations. In the following note, Montellano interprets the dream as a symbol for spiritual wisdom: “La voz verdadera de su personalidad” (Montellano 1935: 35). He interprets another quote similarly: “Despierto a nuestro hermanos adormecidos porque juzgan que nunca amanecerá. De su sueño en medio de la noche tenebrosa” (Montellano 1935: 38). The dream, according to Montellano, is a symbol for poetry: it is obscure and enigmatic and at the same time clear and true.

Montellano, so understood, is aware of the importance of dreams in indigenous poetry, and that they have a spiritual, transcendental value. In the *Cantares Mexicanos* there is a common refrain: “Sólo venimos a soñar, sólo venimos a dormir: \ no es verdad, no es verdad \ que venimos a vivir en la tierra”. The mundane life is represented here as being a lie, and the poet expresses his desire to transcend it: “mañana o pasado, \ como los desee tu corazón \ dador de la vida \ iremos amigos a su casa”. Dreams function as an escape from this life: through dreams, just like through death, the poet can approach god’s temple. In Montellano’s anthology of indigenous poetry we can also find fragments from the *Chilam Balam* that deal with dreams[[1]](#footnote-1): “Sueña que tú coges, hasta el día que seas cogido de la tierra. Sueño es el rocío del cielo, el jugo del cielo; la flor amarilla del cielo es sueño”. Once again, the dream is related to transcendent themes, to the skies, to death.

However important the pre-Columbian texts were to Montellano, the Mexican writer that affected his dream perception the most was clearly Sor Juana de la Cruz. Sor Juana is not an indigenous writer par-excellence: she was born to a Spanish family in Mexico and was educated in Europe. But among her sonnets and baroque poems, there are popular songs that she wrote using indigenous folkloric rhythms. The Tico-tin, for instance, which is very common in the *Cantares Mexicanos*, is used in some of them. Montellano’s *Primero Sueño* echoes Sor Juana’s celebrated poem by the same name. But we should notice how he addresses her to his readers. He opens his poem with a quote from Sor Juana’s poem: “Que mágicas infusiones \ De de los indios herbolarios \ de mi Patria, entre mis letras”. In these lines, Sor Juana confesses that her poetry, as much as it is a product of Spanish education, is affected by local traditions. In quoting these lines, Montellano legitimizes Sor Juana. He turns her into an indigenous writer and her dreams into one more component of the Mexican obsession with dreams. We should also bear in mind that, unlike Cuesta, Montellano does not see in any of the colonial Mexican writers a mere imitator of Spanish genres. He claims that they are deeply influenced by the local culture, and even their Spanish is different to their colleagues’ in the Iberian Peninsula (Montellano 1935: 26).

Since Sor Juana had a fully developed dream theory, Montellano could easily have enriched his knowledge through a close reading of her poem and through borrowing various elements for his own. He had already tried this a few years before in writing *Romance de Amor Fugaz* (Montellano 2005 [1925]: 122)*.* Sor Juana’s night is characterized, not only by the sleeping of the human being, but of nature too. Fish, lions, trees, all fall asleep at night. In his *Romance* Montellano paints a similar picture, as he describes the sleeping of the fish, the owl, and the moon. It should be noted that Montellano, at that moment, was trying to make Sor Juan´s poem more Mexican. He replaced the figures from Greek mythology, such as Actaeon, with figures from Mexican folklore, such as the Sombrerón.

But in writing *Primero Sueño,* Montellano is no longer interested in folklore; instead he attempts to penetrate the depth of Mexican consciousness by learning the full significance of the dream in Mexican literature. He starts by borrowing Sor Juana´s frame. Sor Juana opens with pyramids, “Piramidal, funesta de la tierra” (2015: 285), and closes with enlightening, “el mundo iluminado, y yo despierta” (Ibid: 303). Similarly, Montellano places pyramids at the beginning of his poem, “por escalar pirámides” and finishes with light and awakening, “¡Fuego! ¡Fuego! \ Y despierto”. For Sor Juana, dreaming is the moment when the spirit leaves the body, it is the closest situation to death: “Un cadáver con alma, \ muerto a la vida y a la muerte vivo” (Sor Juana 2015: 303). Montellano obviously noticed the great similarity to the indigenous conception of dream. A fan of oxymorons, he was fascinated by the oxymoron of being both alive and dead, and he turns it into a central theme in his poem.

In Sor Juana’s poems, he also found the additional layer that the Surrealists could not teach him. Whereas for the Surrealists the dream was a spiritual journey toward revelation of the personal subconscious, for Sor Juana it was an intellectual journey where the rules of nature were being revealed to her. Like the indigenous poets, she believed that the truth hides under a false appearance. Only through dreams or death is it possible to gaze at the naked truth of the world. This revelation is symbolized in her poem by the light which enables her to see properly (Oviedo 2014: 246), to see the immortal truth “toda convertida \ a su inmaterial ser” (Sor Juana 2015: 292). Thus, the dream functions as an advanced science class: her spirit learns biology, geology and zoology. Writing in the twentieth century, Montellano lacks Sor Juan’s naivety in that he does not look for scientific knowledge in dreams. However, he definitely endeavours to reveal something beyond the personal experience. In his poetry, he rises above the primordial point: “donde crece la luna \ donde aganoniza el pájaro” (Montellano 2005: 185). The last stanzas of his *Segundo Sueño* clarify that through his poetry, however hermetic and ambiguous it is, he wished to understand the world better: “Luz que el sueño torna – forma clara” (Montellano 2005: 191).

Montellano’s dream conception is therefore a unique amalgam of various origins. He is influenced by surrealist and psychoanalysis theories, and eager to penetrate his own subconscious by using the same techniques. But he does not stop there. Years of reading the indigenous literature and Sor Juan’s poetry had taught him that there was something beyond the personal subconsciousness, a transcendental truth. It should be clear that Montellano sees no contradiction between the two: the modern personal poetry and the ancient national lore lead to the same goal. An anecdote from Montellano’s diary demonstrates this.

Years after writing *Primero Sueño*, in Pio Baroja´s novel (Montellano 1988 [194?] 347), he found a traditional Andalusian custom: in Córdoba,closet builders also used to build guitars. He had not been aware of this custom when, in the opening lines of *Primero Sueño,* he wrote:

Formado, en grupo, aparecen algunos indios. Cada tres hombres conducen una guitarra, larga como remo, compuesta de tres guitarras pintadas de colores y en forma cada una de ataúd.

Montellano does not see in it a mere consequence. He is convinced that the dream, as in many other cases, revealed a hidden truth to him. Moreover, since his family origins were in Andalusia, he believed the traditional knowledge had been hiding inside him and that it only emerged through the dream. It was not the historical backup that fascinated him the most, it was rather the convergence of his two origins that was so important. He seems to find final proof of the correspondence of the traditional lore and personal experience.

Regarding five Mexican poets of the second half of the twentieth century, Frank Dauster (1987: 165-166) wrote the following lines:

They are all heirs to the Occidental literary tradition. They write in Spanish and their meters are, basically, those learned in the European models […] At the same time, those poets are very much Mexican, participants in the complex culture that has roots both in the European Christian tradition and in the Aztec world of kings, priests, warriors, and sacrificial rituals.

The poetry of Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano, the underrated poet of the *Contemporáneos,* represents an early stage of this dilemma. Having one leg in the contemporary Occidental literature and the other in the ancient Mexican cantos, Montellano’s poetry and essays give us an excellent lesson on modern applications of ancient poetry.

1. Although the *Chilam Balam* and the *Cantares Mexicanos* represent a distinct culture from a historical and cultural point of view, for Montellano, such differences have no significance for the poet who is interested in their spiritual value. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)