

# Mediating Andean Modernity: The Literary Oracular in *Muerte por el tacto* by Jaime Saenz

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## Abstract

Upon his return from Berlin in 1939, Jaime Saenz started working in La Paz for intelligence agencies and public relations offices of Bolivia and the United States, which led to correspondent positions with Reuters and McGraw-Hill World News. His trajectory into Cold War Bolivian state nobility seemed all but guaranteed. However, on the brink of this breakout moment, he renounced his job—and professionalism altogether—committing himself to a life of literature and alcoholism as his marriage unraveled. In response to repeated interventions, he justified his every loss with a further indictment of the precarious, which was an outgrowth of his belief in the existence of a higher truth that was both accessible and impervious to analytical reason. In this article, I ask how Saenz's poetry from the 1950s metabolized the rhetoric of indictment which it had inherited from the Tellurism of the Chaco generation. How might *Muerte por el tacto* (1957) be symptomatic of a broader aim of restoring to modern poetry its oracular legitimacy? On what grounds did Saenz indict precarious defenders of historical culture? And how did such an indictment mediate "national energy" (Tamayo) as it came into language through the nativist discourse of the land? Paying focal attention to regimes of revelation in Saenz's early poetry and the historical conditions of

its production, this article updates a discussion among Transatlanticists about the legitimization of irrationalism in 20th-century poetics and politics by assessing the socio-symbolic value of the oracular in the regionalist discourse of modernism.

**Keywords**

*Mediation, modernism, nationalism, regionalism, tellurism*

**Resumen**

A su regreso de Berlín en 1939, Jaime Saenz comenzó a trabajar en La Paz para agencias de inteligencia y oficinas de relaciones públicas de Bolivia y Estados Unidos, lo que lo llevó a puestos de corresponsal en Reuters y McGraw-Hill World News. Su trayectoria en la nobleza del estado boliviano de la Guerra Fría parecía casi garantizada. Sin embargo, en un momento de ruptura, renunció por completo a su trabajo y al profesionalismo, y se comprometió con una vida de literatura y alcoholismo a medida que su matrimonio se desmoronaba. En respuesta a repetidas intervenciones, justificó cada una de sus pérdidas con una nueva acusación de precaución, consecuencia de su creencia en la existencia de una verdad superior impermeable a la razón analítica. En este artículo, pregunto cómo la poesía de Saenz de la década de 1950 metabolizó la retórica de acusación que había heredado del telurismo de la generación del Chaco. ¿Cómo podría *Muerte por el tacto* (1957) ser sintomático de un objetivo más amplio de devolver a la poesía moderna su legitimidad oracular? ¿Sobre qué base acusó Sáenz a los defensores precavidos de la cultura histórica? ¿Y cómo tal acusación medió la “energía nacional” (Tamayo) cuando llegó al lenguaje a través del discurso nativista de la tierra? Prestando especial atención a los regímenes de revelación en la poesía temprana de Saenz y las condiciones históricas de su producción, este artículo actualiza una discusión entre transatlanticistas sobre la legitimación del irracionalismo en la poética y la política del siglo XX al evaluar el valor socio-simbólico de lo oracular en el discurso regionalista del modernismo.

**Palabras clave**

*Mediación, modernismo, nacionalismo, regionalismo, telurismo*

The absence of historical references, allusions, and quotations in nearly all the poetry of Jaime Saenz has invited readers to view him as an independent

literary outsider whose work exemplifies the autonomy of art.<sup>1</sup> Saenz himself promoted this tendency by denigrating the practice of criticism in interviews he gave and in prefaces he wrote for his students' books.<sup>2</sup> With the objective of setting cultural hierarchies off balance and blurring, if not erasing, commonplace binomials, I wish to cast suspicion on the supposed originality of Saenz's poetry and suggest that his profuse metabolization of the aesthetics of Tellurism has elevated his status as a literary pioneer. By retracing the intellectual history of Tellurism, I examine the characterization of the poet as a medium, who became possessed by delirium when he rejected the social conventions of instrumental reason and embraced the *genius loci* or spirit of the land. In this logic of mediation, the poet's exaggerated love for an unbridled anti-order convinced him that instrumental reason would dominate even spiritual affairs if he did not proactively assume the role of custodian. For as much of an outsider as Saenz may seem to be, in reality he belongs to a *community of the literary oracular*, since the work of the poet as an instrument of the divine is homologized with the work of the cultural custodian who mediates between pre-reflective immediacy and the unreflective subject of mass culture. Let me expand on this point with a brief anecdote.

In a recent account published in *Página Siete*, H. C. F. Mansilla<sup>3</sup> recalled his 1983 visit to Talleres Krupp,<sup>4</sup> where he found himself among Saenz and his

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<sup>1</sup> The exception to this claim is Saenz's late poem *Bruckner* (1978). However, although Saenz evokes the Austrian composer Anton Bruckner with some semblance of historical accuracy, the historical figure quickly becomes a paradigm for artistic creation.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see the prefaces that Saenz wrote to *Ciudad desde la altura* (1980) by Guillermo Bedregal and to *Asistir al tiempo* (1975) by Blanca Wiethüchter. See also Edgar Ávila Echazú's interview with Saenz, "Crear su propio lenguaje. Entrevista a Jaime Saenz." *Hipótesis* 2.2 (March 1977): 67–75.

<sup>3</sup> Hugo Celso Felipe Mansilla (1942–) is a prominent Bolivian social theorist and public intellectual whose work applies Frankfurt School critical theory (especially that of Theodor Adorno) to problems proper to so-called Third World countries. He is a corresponding member of the Real Academia Española, Academia de Ciencias de Bolivia, and Academia Boliviana de la Lengua. He has received visiting professorships around the world and enjoys a prolific publication record, equally in German and Spanish. Major works in Spanish include *Introducción a la teoría crítica de la Sociedad* (1970), *Los tortuosos caminos de la modernidad. América Latina entre la tradición y el postmodernismo* (1992), *Tradición autoritaria y modernización imitativa. Dilemas de la identidad colectiva en América Latina* (1999), *Teoría crítica, medio ambiente y autoritarismo. La modernización y sus dilemas* (2008).

<sup>4</sup> With the credit that Saenz had accumulated from the publication of his *Obra poética* (1975) and with his embeddedness in the literary underground of La Paz, he obtained a position at Universidad Mayor de San Andrés in 1976, where he established Talleres

disciples. Objecting to the notion that Saenz's circle was a progressive organization that promoted intercultural exchange, Mansilla describes a place that demonstrated the poet's admiration for a strong, severe and disciplined Germany that no longer existed and that he was sure he had observed firsthand when he visited Berlin on a military delegation in 1939. On a wall hung a large, red, German flag from the 1933-1945 period, with the swastika in the center. The entire scene could have taken place in *Estrella distante* by Roberto Bolaño. Mansilla reports that the students were quick to defend the "positive" elements of German national socialism (its supposed popular solidarity and messianism) without accounting for the human atrocity of the holocaust. Then, as if in passing, he contended that their anti-bourgeois stance toward such eminent intellectuals as Guillermo Francovich<sup>5</sup> was undermined by the fact that they all admitted to never having read him. Saenz himself, according to Mansilla, dismissed the philosopher in resignation: "De noche todos los gatos son pardos" [In the dark, all cats are grey].<sup>6</sup>

It is hard to take Saenz at his word and believe that he did not know or was indifferent to Francovich's work, especially *La filosofía de Bolivia* (1945), where the philosopher described "una mística de la tierra" and highlighted none other than Franz Tamayo, the same Tamayo whom Saenz would lionize in *Felipe Delgado* and in *Talleres Krupp*.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, there are certain

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Krupp, a creative writing workshop that combined social structures of masonic secrecy, religious fanaticism, and political fascism. By all accounts, Talleres Krupp seems to have embodied the secret, fascistic sort of literary lodge which Roberto Bolaño so deftly parodies in his novels. The name of the workshop alluded to the German industrial giant that produced arms for the Axis Powers during World War Two.

<sup>5</sup> Guillermo Francovich Salazar (1901–1990) is perhaps the most recognized authority of Bolivian intellectual history in the 20th century. He was a professor of philosophy at Universidad Mayor de San Francisco Xavier (1922–1928), before serving as rector of that institution (1944–1951). In 1976 he was inducted into the Academia Boliviana de la Lengua and received the Premio Nacional de Cultura. His vast body of work put continental philosophy in conversation with Bolivian social reality and Andean mythology. His major works include *Los ídolos de Bacon* (1942), *La filosofía de Bolivia* (1945), *La filosofía existencialista de Martin Heidegger* (1946), *Todo ángel es terrible* (1959), *Restauración de la filosofía* (1967), *La búsqueda. Ensayo sobre la religión* (1972), and *Los mitos profundos de Bolivia* (1980).

<sup>6</sup> See H. C. F. Mansilla, "Una visita a Jaime Saenz." *Página Siete*, May 12, 2019. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Spanish are my own.

<sup>7</sup> Saenz famously championed Franz Tamayo in *Felipe Delgado* (2016, 139-55). He also includes Tamayo's *Creación de la pedagogía nacional* among the curriculum of Talleres

benefits to believing Saenz, even when he dissimulates. For the moment, let us believe his indifference to Guillermo Francovich. Let us also suppose that he thought little of Humberto Palza, Roberto Prudencio, or Fernando Diez de Medina for that matter.<sup>8</sup> If we grant that Saenz was unaware that Tellurism had ever been theorized and practiced at the same time that he started writing, then the concept of *genius loci* would seem to reveal itself in his poetry as an unavoidable metabolization of Tellurism. Whereas Romanticism dared to disavow tradition in the name of originality, post-romantics like Saenz belong to a tradition of renunciation.

Jaime Saenz stands in an historical community of modernism that grew out of the Tellurist discourse of the land. The theoretical framework of Tellurism, however, was animated by the irrationalism of Germany –an inheritance that can easily go unnoticed given the firmly nativist positions of intellectuals like Humberto Palza and before him Franz Tamayo. Albarracín (1981; 1996) has convincingly argued that while Tamayo was in Germany as a young man, he believed to have found a way to condemn the enslavement of Bolivia’s indigenous majority. His thinking was profoundly shaped by Nietzsche and Fichte who, each in his own way, were committed to exalting life with a philosophy capable of breaking away from the exculpations of reason which ailed 19th-century Germany as an oppressed nation in the heart of Europe. The other line of German irrationalism that animated the framework of Tellurism came from Count Hermann Keyserling, who described “minerality” as a devolution of the self into a primitive state of spiritless senility. Adherents of Tellurism retooled this negative concept into the alienated subject’s virtuous

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Krupp in his retrospective prologue to *Ciudad desde la altura* by his student Guillermo Bedregal (1980, 16).

<sup>8</sup> These three figures represent major figures of Bolivian nationalism in the first half of the 20th century. Humberto Palza Soliz (1900–1975), poet, novelist, and essayist, is best known for his anthropological-philosophical works *El hombre como método* (1939), *El hombre y el paisaje de Bolivia* (1943), and *Tierra adentro, mar afuera* (1949). Roberto Prudencio Romecín (1908–1975) fought in the Chaco War before founding and directing the influential magazine *Kollasuyo* (1939–1975), in which he published literary and polemical works associated with the Tellurist movement, including many of his own essays. Fernando Diez de Medina (1908–1990) was a prolific and multifaceted public intellectual who wrote novels, plays, poetry, and essays, and militated during the Chaco War and in the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR) following the National Revolution of 1952. His best-known works include *Thunupa* (1947), *Pachakuti* (1948), *Nayjama* (1960), and *Teogonía andina* (1973).

reintegration into a pre-reflective order, and, following the lead of Tamayo, they passed it off as a product of Bolivian nationalist culture.

In this context, it appears that in poetry Jaime Saenz could not escape the discourse of Tellurism. Minerality, as both a negative concept (Keyserling) and a positive concept (Tamayo), was always a concern of the modernist poet who struggled with what Georg Simmel called “the tragedy of culture.”<sup>9</sup> After Tamayo had argued for the existence of a *genius loci* of Bolivia, the task then became a matter of tapping into the source, identifying who was best suited for that mediation, and establishing a discipline for the practice. Saenz answered that call in the middle of the century with a proposal of his own: he renounced the materialism of capitalist culture and the spiritual indifference of an emergent consumer class, calling for the literary revival of religious fanaticism that entered the domain of the abject.<sup>10</sup>

This renunciation of instrumental reason took the form of a “plunge,” a resigned, spontaneous confrontation with reality which could not be explained in words or attained by reason. The plunge came to describe the discipline of mediating what Tamayo called “national energy” and Keyserling “minerality,” but in Saenz this mediation was never theorized, never contemplated, only expressed. Since the *genius loci* now flowed through poetry, making the poet shudder, he felt the need to channel it, to let it name through him the truth of an old faith as a renunciation of instrumental reason. Whether or not we believe Saenz (or Mansilla), it does not seem unwarranted to ask: what is the status of this modernist medium, this mediator of the *genius loci*, this “ángel solitario y jubiloso,” this practitioner of the literary oracular?

## 1. Minerality and Modernism

Guillermo Francovich (1945) enjoys the distinction of having recognized the reorientation of Bolivian cultural production that had taken place during

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<sup>9</sup> According to Simmel, the process of modernization resulted in a surplus of “objective cultural products” (religion, rituals, art, literature, philosophy) which overwhelmed the individual’s subjective abilities, by presenting more options than one could possibly experience in a lifetime. “Within this structure of culture there now develops a cleavage which, of course, is already prepared in its foundation. It makes of the subject-object-synthesis a paradox, even a tragedy” (39). See Georg Simmel, “On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture” [1911] in *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*, 27-46.

<sup>10</sup> Javier Sanjinés (1994) has acknowledged this presence of the abject in what he describes as Saenz’s aestheticization of “the rural indigenous cultures of the Andes as the non-rational ‘otherness’ that invades the urban system and its order” (160).

the first half of the century. He observed that this “mística de la tierra” [mysticism of the land] was a system of beliefs in the land’s possession of a spirit which acts through human beings, establishing individual life forms and social relations. Such practitioners as Palza and Prudencio argued that the spirit of the land engendered “tipos culturales con fisonomía tan propia como los ambientes geográficos que las han producido” [cultural types with a physiognomy as unique as the geographical conditions that have produced them] (Francovich 155-156). The Andean geography of Bolivia was considered exceptional, and the humans who inhabit it, equally so. Andean civilization was represented as the residue of primeval cultures which these nostalgic modernists imagined among the ruins of Tiahuanaco. Francovich understood this admiration for the native landscape to be as exuberant as the admiration for the life and work of primitive inhabitants, which meant that if the tragic subject of modernism could reestablish his primary admiration for the land, he could produce a regeneration of cultural forms in the future. For Francovich, Tamayo was the exemplar of this anthropo-geographical discourse.

In reality, Tamayo had elaborated a theorization of this “spirit of the land” in the contentious cultural ecology of Bolivian liberalism in 1910.<sup>11</sup> In his debate with Felipe Segundo Guzmán over the future of public education, Tamayo (like John Dewey) famously argued against education that was inattentive to social conditions, and he accused the white minority political class of “pedagogical bovarysm,” adopting the felicitous phrase of Jules de Gaultier.<sup>12</sup> In no less than fifty-five opinion columns, which he claimed to have spent no more than fifty-five hours writing and which he published in *El Diario* of La Paz over the span of three months, Tamayo insisted that the Aymara majority had always been the base of Bolivian society and had endured the worse forms of exploitation with the most admirable resilience, which he attributed to an unbridled force that they inherited from the land:

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<sup>11</sup> The debate over liberal education reform during the first two decades of the 20th century has received significant critical attention. For a strong contextualization of Tamayo’s intervention, see Irurozqui-Victoriano (1992) and Lozada Pereira (2010). For more on the intersection of race and education policy, see Larson (2011). For more on the development and implementation of the reform, see Martínez and Talavera Simoni, in Aillón Soria et al. (2009).

<sup>12</sup> Tamayo draws on the Nietzschean philosopher Jules de Gaultier in *Le Bovarysme, la psychologie dans l’œuvre de Flaubert* (1892). See De Gaultier (1970).

La tierra hace al hombre; y es en la tierra que hay que buscar la última razón de su pensamiento, de su obra, de su moralidad. Cuando se dice tierra patria no solamente hay en ello un símbolo paternal, sino que realmente existe una relación generativa entre el suelo y el hombre. Físicamente, el hombre está hecho de las sales del suelo en que vive y genera. La poética ficción de que cada uno lleva un retazo de cielo patrio al fondo del alma es una realidad: *Humus, homo*. (82)

[Man is made out of the land; and it is in the land that one must seek the foundational logic of his thought, his work, his morals. When one says 'fatherland,' there is not only a paternal symbol, but a truly generative relation that exists between the soil and man. Physically, man is made of the salts of the soil he lives on and generates. The poetic fiction that every person possesses a piece of our nation's heavens at the bottom of his soul is a reality: *Humus, homo*].

Tamayo argued that this relation was not always evident in physiological features but remained ever present in the "national character." Drawing a parallel, he claimed that the temerity attributed to European descendants in the United States was not of English origin, but rather was propagated by indigenous people of the north: "La Europa tradicional no ofrece nada semejante: la piel roja sí; y en este caso, no existiendo el genio de la especie, existe el genio del lugar: *Genius loci*" (82) [The European tradition has nothing similar to offer: the redskins do; and in this case, in the absence of a spirit of the species, there exists a spirit of the place: *Genius loci*]. Tamayo was convinced that a direct parallel could be drawn to Bolivia on account of the latent energy of the land. Whereas in the colonial era, the mestizo was seen as a degenerate, someone stained by the land, stigmatized by it, to the republican thinking of Tamayo the mestizo was the only subject who *fought and thought*, who possessed the resilience of the most exploited and the intelligence of their exploiters. The mestizo was the only subject in possession of national energy. Now, this national energy, this unifying character, developed by Fichte in his *Addresses to the German Nation*, was uncritically accepted by Tamayo who translated it in Bolivia where the possibility of national unity found its home in his own mestizaje.

If Fichte's idea of "national energy" was imported by a Bolivian nationalist, a quarter-century later it became a Bolivian concept discoverable to a German theosophist. Hermann Keyserling's Bolivian epiphany at the beginning of *South American Meditations* remains one of the great revelations of transatlantic modernism. He provides a testimony of a spiritual transformation he experienced during his visit to Bolivia, where he fell quite ill. Stricken by

what was probably altitude sickness, in the midst of his suffering, he suddenly was possessed by the revelation that he is the land:

During that illness I felt myself to be a part of the Cosmic Process as intimately as the embryo, were it endowed with consciousness, would experience itself as an element of super-individual organic evolution. Then did I realize: among other things, I am Earth and pure force of the Earth. I am Earth not merely understood as material; this non-ego is an essential part of that which I experience myself to be. In the melting-pot of the puna, the constellation of earthly elements which I myself incarnate, wrestled with other earthly elements of a power far greater than my own. [...] As I was struggling in the melting-pot of the puna for my identity, my own Minerality awoke and reached my consciousness. And then I learnt to understand in a new sense that longing for Death, which ever and again seizes me with the compelling force of a vertigo. Death, viewed from earthly consciousness, means liberation. (14–15)

Keyserling's testimonial exhibits an outlandish imaginary, insofar as it describes inhabitants of the Andes, "those souls of bronze," as actually mineral in nature. In fact, he claimed that early Alto Peru was populated by dwarfs, Catachthonian miners and smiths, who were creatures older than humans. On his literary tour through the Andes, Keyserling thought that Bolivians lacked spirit, and he characterized the senility of those bronze dwarfs as "mineral" in nature: "Indeed, does not everyone in whom Spirit is not predominant become mineral, as with age he draws nearer the Earth?" (17). Minerality, for him, was a negative value associated with the loss of the cognitive faculties, a stupefaction, a numbness. He fantasized that Andeans had not domesticated the llama, but on the contrary, that the llama had been the midwife of primitive Andeans and, in this way, was "the prototype of the responsible housekeeper," evoking a vision of the first mother of the world (18).

We may smile wryly at this primitivist imaginary, but what's really remarkable is that Keyserling accidentally seduced Palza into thinking that the geography of the Andes predestined its inhabitants to an exceptional historic function.<sup>13</sup> What Keyserling had in mind was quite different. He thought that the telluric was a degraded reality that must be combatted and overcome. For Palza and Tamayo, on the other hand, the spirit of the land acted directly in humans as a unitary life force capable of producing a nationalist compensation. Palza's Tellurism was a European idea presented as autochthonous to Bolivia. As Albarracín Millán (1996) argues, whereas no one in Europe militated in the

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<sup>13</sup> See Palza (1939).

name of the telluric, in Bolivia an avant-garde stepped forth to proclaim that the land exercised an essential force on the tragic subject of modernism, and while Keyserling inadvertently created this possibility, these mystics of the land tended to omit from their discussions his writings on Bolivia (53).<sup>14</sup> Palza transvaluated the concept of “minerality,” so that it came to denominate the essential bond between the Andean subject and the land he occupied. As we will see in the ensuing analysis, the myths of universal terror, the destructive power of the puna, the minerality of man, and the terrestrialization of the spirit all served Jaime Saenz as rationale for renouncing instrumental reason with the aim of restoring a lost faith in the redeeming power of the *genius loci*.

## 2. Discipline of the Plunge

*Muerte por el tacto* (1957) echoes the violent provocation of Jaime Saenz’s first book, *El escarpelo* (1955), which relied on the evocation of an instrument designed for corporeal excisions as a metaphor for the plume, the writing utensil that severs language from the author. It relied on the instrument’s medical meaning and a dark sense of humor —Saenz was after all a marvelously morbid humorist. The long poem *Muerte por el tacto* is a “death by touch” to the extent that “tacto” refers to the tactile sense, evoking a “death touch” through the habitus of a black magic practitioner. However, “tacto” is also operative as “prudent behavior,” “measured restraint,” “tactfulness,” rendering the equally valid and typically ironic “death by precaution.” Tact, respectability, social convention, these Saenz condemned as commercial, superficial, and spiritually hollow: *son la muerte*, the worst precaution of all, because they prevent the alienated subject of modernism from integrating into a transhistoric totality.

For Saenz, the *genius loci* was an idealized erotic anti-order that existed in a distant time which had been interrupted by the ascendancy of instrumental reason. Like Keyserling, Saenz thought that Bolivian geography predisposed Andeans to an extraordinary connection to the land, but he, like Tamayo and Palza, attributed a positive value to this minerality. On the other hand, since Saenz was more loyal to a transhistoric colloquium than to a nationalist compensation, as Tamayo and Palza were, minerality gave him the language to name a discipline that could mediate between the spirit of the land and the spirit of capitalism which saw in the land only the potential of

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<sup>14</sup> See Prudencio Romecín (1990) 7-15.

commercial mineral extraction. The discipline has taken the form of “the plunge” and, accordingly, turned Jaime Saenz into a miner, a veritable “underground man,” a post-Romantic *maldito* who, as María Zambrano has said of Lautréamont, felt condemned because he longed for a mythical paradise that he had no room for in himself even if he could find it, which he could not.<sup>15</sup>

In its disavowal of instrumental reason, the plunge was a form of resignation, a discipline of facing things as they are.<sup>16</sup> The subject who takes the plunge no longer aims to transform life in the presence of truth but only to gaze at all that is transitory in life without ever looking away, knowing that one day he too will have to write his last will and testament. The plunge was a discipline of submerging into the base of the social structure where the resilient poor Aymara majority remained enthralled in their labor through a channel that was inaccessible to the tragic subject of modernism. However, this discursive submergence into the land instigated a crisis of representation. In this way, by the midpoint of the 20th century, the mediating logic of the *genius loci* produced a so-called death of the author, a poetry in which “el lenguaje deviene acontecimiento” [language becomes event] (Wiethüchter 2002, 151). This submergence can be observed at the beginning of *Muerte por el tacto*:

es necesario que escriba una carta para poder ver  
mejor la luz de las cosas

luego de leerla alumbrado por el antiguo vuelo  
de mis amigos muertos

<sup>15</sup> See María Zambrano, “La confesión: Género literario y método” 20-51, particularly pages 45–51.

<sup>16</sup> The social text of the plunge can be appreciated in Saenz’s “Letters to Bertha” which may have been letters of a juvenile love affair, or may have been a literary enterprise, an epistle, since the author of those texts calls into question the legitimacy of his own authorship. On November 5, 1942, Saenz wrote: “Y así, sucesivamente, hasta que hubo un momento en que tenía, necesariamente, que venir una variante fundamental en mi vida: o sumergirme en forma total y absoluta en un caos de horror y desesperanza, anonadarme paulatinamente, o, en virtud de una causa que forzosamente tenía que ser emocional, renacer plenamente a la vida, sentirme tal como soy, vivir en forma sincera y noble con relación a mí mismo y al mundo circulante” [And so it went, until the moment came, when I had to face the dilemma: either plunge totally and absolutely into the chaos of horror and hopelessness in gradual astonishment, or, in virtue of a cause that necessarily had to be emotional, be born again completely into life, feel that I am as I am, live sincerely and nobly in relation to myself and to the world around me]. See “Cartas a Bertha” in *La Mariposa Mundial* 18 (2010): 156-161, particularly page 157.

es necesario que recuerden todos su amor a la  
música, su sosiego y su desdicha,

y su propensión a la risa así como las arquitecturas  
que urdían cuando podían hacer lo contrario

y su lamento, el lamento que ya fue analizado sin  
usar la substancia humana,

sin planes, sin palabra ni consulta, pero con ademanes  
repetidos bajo la mirada

que caía desde un pedestal diseñado en otro tiempo  
para ensalzar a los mendigos, a los valientes y a  
los inventores del azúcar y del resorte,

y sus proyectos,

los rigurosos alegatos en favor del desquiciamiento,  
de un anti-orden, para el retorno profundo al verdadero  
ordenamiento (80)

[I must write a letter to see  
the light of things more clearly

then to read it enlightened by the ancient flight  
of my dead friends

You all must remember their love for music,  
their sighs and their misfortune,

and their propensity for laughter along with the architectures  
they concocted when they could have done the opposite

and their laments, the lament that already was analyzed  
without using the human substance,

without plans, without a word or council, but with repeated  
expressions under the gaze

which fell from a pedestal designed in another age  
to lionize the beggars, the brave and the  
inventors of sugar and elastic spring

and their projects,

the rigorous pleas in defense of madness,  
of an anti-order, for the profound return  
to the true code]

The gaze of the “dead friends” is cast from a pedestal in the distant past, monumentalizing the valor of the most exploited and elevating the category of madness [desquiciamiento] to a redemptive function capable of merging the tragic subject into an idealized “anti-order,” with an eroticism that Arthur Rimbaud once described, paradoxically, as a “rational disordering of *all* the

senses" (XXX). Likewise, in Saenz, the lyric subject's vocation is awaiting "la revelación integrada por los ríos y la esencia de la música y por el desaliño de la vida" (*Muerte por el tacto* 91) [the revelation comprised of rivers and the essence of music and the disarray of life]. The literary oracular is at work in the subject's access to this state of "rational disordering," this "desaliño de la vida," which was made possible by the plunge, by an assault on expository discursivity and a crisis of representation. As Maurice Blanchot argued a decade earlier:

Literature does not act; but what it does is plunge into this depth of existence which is neither being nor nothingness and where the hope of doing anything is completely eliminated. It is not explanation, and it is not pure comprehension, because the inexplicable emerges in it. And it expresses without expressing, it offers itself to what is murmured in the absence of speech. (340)

From this perspective, truth in poetry is never sought and seized, but is discovered with a spontaneity that becomes available when life is discovered in poetic disarray. It is a truth with which one comes into contact but cannot seek, a sudden jubilation that overwhelms the solitary poet whose withdrawal from the conventions of social life and commerce has stirred in him strong historical affiliations. In Saenz, Tamayo's "national energy," Keyserling's "minerality," Francovich's "mysticism of the land," and the Tellurism of Palza and Prudencio were conflated with a postmodern position toward authorship which transferred the voice of poetry to the voice of language itself, in such a way that the unitary life force emanating from Bolivia's extraordinary geography received the religious denomination of "júbilo." It was an enthusiasm, delirium, the ecstatic shudder that flows through the poet, possessing him, which is why it could be expressed but not explained. Saenz understood the poet to be a medium, whose exaggerated love for the *genius loci* convinced him that instrumental reason would dominate even spiritual affairs if there was no custodianship, no conduit and its loyal protector. For as much of an outsider as he may seem to be, in reality Saenz belongs to a *community of the literary oracular*, since the work of the poet as an instrument of the divine has become homologous with the work of the cultural custodian who mediates between pre-reflective immediacy and the unreflective subject of mass culture.

### 3. Channeling through the *entrañas oscuras*

The desire to restore an old faith that had been lost to the capitalist logic of the marketplace was manifest in 20th-century poetry as an oracular practice. The claims of this lost faith were based on an epiphany revealed to the subject whose language could speak through him the names of transitory appearances, without causing him to look away from them, or seducing him to seize them in their abstract ideality. As Bolivia entered the second half of the 20th century, the value of the *genius loci* had been put in peril by the ascendent value of instrumental reason. This occurred concurrently with the growth of a new class of readers literate in Spanish and the growth of the vernacular print industry. As magazines and newspapers came to be consumed with greater voracity than books, the literary field of production grew crowded and the writer was desacralized, as the spiritually adept poet was suddenly contending with the lay writer. The poetics of revelation in Saenz is a reflection of this anxiety, this fear that the legitimacy of the oracular could be lost forever if left unprotected.

Saenz thought that oracular legitimacy could be restored in the form of a “modernist mystic,” an abject, underground man who by choice lives in the depths of the *urbe*, in the resilient substratum, where the telluric forces of the region pulse. He believed this superman had to know the secret language of things,<sup>17</sup> that he was counted among the few who have the training and the will to face things as they are, to say the unsayable, to integrate into a whole of which the subject of mass culture can identify only a fragment. The lyric subject is not just the voice of the street (that is just his mask), but the mineralized voice of the land. In the geography of La Paz, as mountainous as it is urban, this meant that the poet could also be the voice of the city’s darkest corners, its taverns, where his religious fanaticism could be dissimulated as vulgar drunkenness, and vice versa.<sup>18</sup> The cultural production of the literary oracular, however, was not only the outcome of

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<sup>17</sup> The idea of a magical language capable of expressing enigmas is also explored in *Los papeles de Narciso Lima-Achá*, when a giant abyss appears to swallow the world, and Narciso and Huanca speak only in Aymara, which is said to be able to name the unnamable, a capacity absent in Castilian. What is more, they hold the superstition that speaking Castilian courts disaster (38-51). The myth of Aymara as a secretly primordial language more capable of truthfully expressing reality than any other dates back at least to 19th-century philology of Emeterio Villamil de Rada (1939).

<sup>18</sup> Saenz made this abundantly clear in his *tableaux vivant* “Una bodega” (*Imágenes paceñas* 123). See also Antezana y Paz Soldán *La bodega de Jaime Saenz* (2005).

Saenz's self-fashioning; on the contrary, it also was the creation of commentators (Wiethüchter 1975; Blanco Mamani 1998; Monasterios 2001) who received that self-representation uncritically and promoted it as an alternative to the cultural imperialism of western modernity.

As in the poetry of many conservative intellectuals of Saenz's generation, the discourse of radical solitude—a marked withdrawal from the concerns of society and a submergence into the problems of modern subjectivity—always had to deal with the problem of “the people.” In Saenz's poetry, there is often such a ‘rebellion of the masses,’ as it were. The retreat of the poet is encroached upon by “the people.” In *Muerte por el tacto*, this takes the form of “clusivity,”<sup>19</sup> when the poetic subject adopts the first-person plural, and the “we” of the poem does not refer to “you, I and possibly others” but to “you, I and not certain others.” People who do not take the plunge are not granted access to this modernist minerality, because they deny solitude, entangled in the everyday life. More afflicted by vertigo than by claustrophobia, “people” ignore the possibility of their own inexistence:

Conocemos a las gentes pero sólo tal cual son y  
no las sabemos tal cual no son

pese a que carecen de la facultad de no ser porque  
no saben que pueden no ser o ser

las saben en toda su magnitud mis amigos muertos  
y yo hablo de ellos con seguridad y orgullo

son mis maestros (82)

[We know people but only as they are and  
we don't know them as they are not

even though they lack the faculty of not being  
because they don't know that they can be or not be

my dead friends know them in all their magnitude  
and I speak to these friends confidently and proudly  
they're my masters]

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<sup>19</sup> The term “clusivity” refers broadly to the distinction in descriptive grammars between inclusive and exclusive linguistic expressions. See Elena Filimionova (2005).

The “gentes” of the poem are unthinking matter that floats along. They are what Ortega y Gasset called “mass man,” mass because they are swept along by the tides of history in the wakes produced by extraordinary men. Yet rather than lacking the secret knowledge possessed by the lyric subject, what these “gentes” lack, is the will power, since they live “cautamente entre sí [y] no prefieren alaridos” (*Muerte por el tacto* 83) [cautiously among themselves and do not care for the shrieking]. The precautions allow this lyric subject to set himself apart. He does not inhabit the city, but rather contains it: “[s]algo encorvado a contemplar el interior de la ciudad y uso del tacto desde mis entrañas oscuras / en el secreto deseo de encontrar allá, allá el medio propicio para hacer que el mundo sea envuelto por el olvido” (81) [hunched over I go to behold the inner city and I make use of tact from my guts/ secretly desiring to find there the ideal means to envelop the world with oblivion].

The “entrañas oscuras” manifest the poet’s logic of mediation in a celebration of the gaze of the child, the exemplary believer in his own unlimited capacity, a gaze that keeps the world magical and uncontaminated by pragmatism. The naiveté of the child’s gaze is idealized by the poet who longs for the lost faith of the *genius loci* which was inaccessible to the alienated subject of modernism and which the poet could feel in his guts. He evokes this innocence in a *costumbrista* portrait of urban life, populated by bakers on every corner, women in the doorways, an animal trotting down a cobbled street, but suddenly the entire scene is radically internalized through the symbol of the “entrañas oscuras”:

juzgo conveniente alabar la esencia de aquel  
anciano y detenerme cuando el ayudante del hornero le  
hace muecas descriptivas

al animal que pasa fugaz ante la sonrisa de la  
viejecita del dintel

en fin, adoro las voces claras, los trenes y las  
ciudades

y por todo lo que digo

adoro mis entrañas oscuras (84)

[I deem it convenient to praise the essence of that  
old man and linger when the baker’s helper  
makes descriptive faces

at the animal who rushes by smiled upon by the  
old maid in the doorway even  
in a word, I adore clear voices, the trains and the  
cities  
and given all that I have said  
I adore my dark innermost recesses]

Everyday life deserves adoration insofar as it directs the subject inward, toward his “entrañas oscuras,” (recesses, guts, but also caverns, dens), which is counted among the principal metaphors for inwardness in the tradition of Hispanic mysticism.<sup>20</sup> Saenz is fond of exploiting the metaphor’s anatomical meaning at the service of the grotesque, so that the image is not merely the most hidden regions of the soul (“the innermost recesses”), but also the human bowels, an image of human viscera that would offend the prudence of bourgeois culturalists. In his 1976 prologue to Rigoberto Paredes’s collection of Andean myths, Saenz again recurred to the metaphor of the “entrañas” in a form of primitivism more explicit than what we find in *Muerte por el tacto*: “Con una prodigiosa energía que fluye del cosmos y que confluye en sus entrañas, el indio, que en plenitud es lo que realmente puede llamarse un ser civilizado, en el más alto sentido de la palabra, nada tiene que ver con la mera sobrevivencia, pues conviene saber que el indio es prácticamente eterno” (8-9). [With a prodigious energy that flows from the cosmos and converges in his innermost recesses, the Indian, who in his plenitude is what can be called a truly civilized being, in the loftiest sense of the word, has nothing to do with survival, since the Indian, let us recall, in practice is eternal].

Saenz learned early on how to harness Tamayo’s “national energy” as a consolation for his own anxiety over mid-20th-century social change and a reorganization of values by internalizing the *genius loci* so that its truth could be extracted from the body as in a ritual sacrifice, which he described in *Bruckner*, where the act of writing –the creation that is made and unmade– has the sole objective of “desentrañar la revelación del júbilo personificado” (13) [disemboweling the revelation of jubilation personified]. Once the *genius loci* no longer had to be defended in a nationalist discourse that exalted the resilient indigenous majority who lived in close proximity to the land, poetry could lay claim to it by elevating the lyric subject’s inwardness to the

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<sup>20</sup> For examples of the predominance of this metaphor in the poetry of in the early modern Hispanic tradition and its 20th-century reinvention, see De Santiago (1998).

status of religious fanaticism —jubilation— as an anti-imperialist critique of instrumental reason.

The mediator was no longer a discerning cultural critic, but simply the mouthpiece of the latent energy itself which passed through his “entrañas oscuras,” endowing him with oracular legitimacy, authorizing him to compose a poetry of the absolute future, a poetry whose “maker” is himself an instrument of the divine. Saenz recurs to the absolute future tense through the second two movements of *Muerte por el tacto*, evoking the tone of the diviner, whose messianism held the promise of integration into the longer-for totality: “Cuando encuentre mi alma, otros serán los ruidos y otros los acicates que me conduzcan a un camino para el encuentro final con el mundo” (85) [When I find my soul, the noise will be different and different the incentives that lead me down the path to the final meeting with the world].

In the absolute future, the poetic subject is a conduit, having abandoned “lo inútil” [the useless], where the value of “utility” has been inverted. What is referred to now as “inútil” suggests the kind of activity that is motivated by the logic of the marketplace. Its opposite, which the poem advocates, disavows that logic in a bid to restore spiritual values that had eroded under the regime of instrumental reason. The subject awaits the day when there will be no need to speak at all and his relation to reality will be absolute, when “no habrá palabras y el silencioso mundo vivirá solamente para ser sentido —desaparecerá la maligna diversidad y todo será uno solo para ser sentido por uno solo” (86) [there will be no words and the silent world will live only to be felt – malignant diversity will disappear, and all will be one to be felt by one alone].

#### 4. The Jubilant Angel

Through his own self-fashioning and his commentators’ uncritical reception of it, Saenz transformed the status of the Bolivian poet into something of a modern curandero, an urban medium, a modernist seer. The *genius loci* now was vigilantly guarded by the anti-bourgeois religious fanatic, equally antagonistic against enlightened intellectuals and agents of the global economy, an *Übermensch* who emerged from dark alleys, since he is a “custodio del callejón” and blood-relative of the *aparapita*.<sup>21</sup> The oracular legitimacy of this mediator is supremely manifest in his admonitions of the

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<sup>21</sup> See Saenz (1979): 111–113.

nonbeliever in *Muerte por el tacto*, the individual who is committed to civil society, a professional career, industrial modernization, global commerce, the democratization of politics, and so on. These ideals, the poem argues, are forms of self-deception that comprise a cowardly strategy to avoid life, devised by someone who would prefer the stability of deceit over truth that demands change: “te estás yendo burlonamente / pero antes abre algo y ve qué pasa” (88) [you carry on mockingly / but first open something up and see what happens]. This act of revealing, this opening up, is the literary oracular at work.

hay que neutralizar los límites y las limitaciones  
con un poco más de perejil  
y tener el secreto de los tallos  
y conocer el sentido del cuerpo

y hacer que de los volcanes salgan cosas más  
razonables

e invocar para que el alma esté menos distante  
—tenga más confianza en uno (89)

[one must neutralize the limits and the limitations  
with another dash of parsley  
and hold the secret of the stalks  
and know the meaning of the body  
and make volcanos spew something more  
reasonable  
and invoke so the soul draws nearer  
— place more trust in oneself]

The poem accuses the nonbeliever in “tacto” of lacking the resolve to face the absolutism of reality, the will to live in resignation, to come into contact with a unitary life force capable of restoring values which have eroded under the regime of instrumental reason. This was not a metaphysical problem, but a problem of volition. Poetry in Saenz had to legitimate itself as a dare to deny the logic of Western capitalism with the religious fanaticism of ritual land worship. The mediator was fashioned with an oracular capacity unavailable to the nonbeliever who refused to take the plunge and who remained attached to a bourgeois life of commerce and consumption. Although the nonbeliever claimed to have seen, the subject accuses him of seeing only himself and of adverting his gaze precisely when his self-perception disintegrated before his eyes: “te has palpado y te acordaste de tus sueños pero no querías saber” (90)

[you touched yourself and remembered your dreams, but you didn't want to know]. What the nonbeliever refused to accept is that the truth of the old faith in the spirit of the land now possessed the modern poet, whose disavowal of instrumental reason made him look mad in a nation beset by a delayed modernization.<sup>22</sup>

This mineralized subject of the literary oracular is an underground man, whose life is a plunge, and whose poetry is the byproduct of his will to integrate into a totality without altering the order of things. This post-Romantic illness of *malditismo* spread to the urban subject whose struggle to maintain legitimacy in the field of cultural production could not find support in the religious institution of the church on account of its moderation. Poetry had to take the place of religion in an act of heresy, as occurred with the Romantics, but unlike the Romantics it now did not manifest in the lamentations of an ignored prophet; instead, it elected to empty itself of intentionality to make room for the jubilation which would announce the old faith in the redeeming power of an erotic anti-order. The nonbeliever remained entangled in his life project, whereas the lyric subject denied himself intentionality, convinced and trying to convince others that only through resignation could one make oneself possessable, as it were, by the *genius loci*. The minerality that poetry expressed as “the disarray of life” was nourished by the technique of collage, which juxtaposed disjointed, heterogenous, unharmonious images:

Estoy cada vez más enfermo que todo, más  
enfermo que un colibrí. Los días, las lunas y las  
moscas aparecen forjados en la colina pálida que recorre

—deja que esa espada esté en mis sueños

esté en mis pobres sueños de ángel solitario y  
jubiloso (92)

[I am ever sicker than everything,  
sicker than a hummingbird. The days, the moons and the  
flies appear carved into the pale hill that they cross

—Let that sword be in my dreams  
in my poor dreams of a solitary and jubilant angel]

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<sup>22</sup> For a further example of his poetic treatment of the figure of the madman, see Saenz 1979, 169.

Collage offered itself as a technique for that paradoxical rational disordering of the senses, that expression of disarray crafted as if it had been captured during an unmediated encounter with the incommensurable. More a mystagogue than a proper mystic, the lyric subject fashions himself as a “solitary and jubilant angel,” an oracle who shudders before apocalyptic visions, since like the Romantic he was convinced that the world took notice of him only when it was about to end. From its earliest utterance, jubilation has denominated a state of frenzy, whether it is the joyous call to someone who returns, an exclamation celebrating manumission, or the return of alienated lands.<sup>23</sup> “Júbilo” (as both jubilation and jubilee) is the delirium of the underground man, whose plunge into the absolutism of reality convinced him that his channel to the spirit of the land had to be protected against a new technocratic social order and the dominance of instrumental reason.

The lyric subject dares the reader —the nonbeliever— to live in resignation, to give in to things, without trying to alter the order of the cosmos. Since the dare has not worked and the stubborn nonbeliever refuses to resign, the “solitary and jubilant angel” chastises him for being blind. What the nonbeliever fails to see and what the lyric subject refuses to look away from is “una totalidad ciega y callada” [a blind and mute totality]. This antagonism, far from threatening to break down the relation between the seer and the nonbeliever, actually guarantees the stability of their formal relation, insofar as “justifican [los] jubilosos la vida para que otros duerman” (92-93) [the jubilant justify life so that others may sleep].

The accusation that concludes the poem returns to the nonbeliever’s volitional debility, his fear, his precaution: “te tocas y no hay / tienes miedo —sabes que no habrá / formulas una sonrisa para la vida / y ensayas tu tacto / desconfías” (93) [you touch yourself and there isn’t anything/ you’re scared – you know there will not be anything / you formulate a smile for life / and

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<sup>23</sup> The etymology of the term sheds light on the redemptive function that Saenz assigns to it. In Vulgar Latin, *iubilum* derives from the verb *iubilare* which meant “to shout or call to someone in joy.” Added to this, recent scholarship has suggested that *iubilare* gave rise to *iobileus* [jubilee]. The “iu-” is an Indo-European root that designates an exclamatory interjection, such as the joyous cries or whistles of rural dwellers. The *-bilare* derives from the Hebrew “yobel” (and by extension, the shofar or ram’s horn) which refers to the sound of a horn and appears in Leviticus 25:11: “So you are to consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty in the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be your Jubilee, when each of you is to return to his property and to his clan.” For more on this, see Mallory, J. P. and Adams, D. Q. *The Oxford Introduction to Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-Indo-European World*.

rehearse your prudence/ you distrust]. Tact turns out not to be the realization of an intuition, but what the nonbeliever rehearses in preparation for reality, hesitating, lingering in the anticipation of coming into contact with something greater than himself. Tact is the worst precaution of all, as it were; that is, the conviction that a life more authentic than the everyday does not anxiously wait to be discovered. Voluntarist through and through, the poem decries the nonbeliever's lack of self-confidence, which is considered cowardice by the jubilant angel who, defending oracular legitimacy against instrumental reason, found consolation in sowing seeds of instability in the conviction that reality does not need to be revealed.

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