

“FRENTE A FRENTE”: FRANCISCO DE ALDANA AND SUBLIMATIONS OF DESIRE

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It is customary to read Francisco de Aldana's lyric poetry with the circumstances of his death in mind. In August of 1578 at the personal request of King Sebastian of Portugal (1554-78), and at the king's side, the Spanish soldier and poet helped lead Portuguese forces against the Moors in North Africa. In a battle that Aldana had argued against and knew would be a fatal mistake, both the Spanish poet and the Portuguese king were killed. At the time the ruler was twenty-four, leaving as heir to the throne his old, feeble, and celibate great-uncle, Cardinal Henry, who himself soon died.¹ In 1580 Sebastian's maternal uncle, King Philip II of Spain, claimed the Portuguese throne, and Spain retained sovereignty over Portugal for the next sixty years.²

Born of Spanish parents in 1537, probably in Naples, Aldana grew up in the heady atmosphere of Cosimo de' Medici's humanist Florentine court.³ He apparently thrived there, but was forced to leave at the age of sixteen by his father, a military man who wanted a military son (Rivers 1955b, 48). We have little historical information about Aldana's emotional life, and he never married.

Aldana was deployed to the Low Countries in 1567, where he remained for nine years, engaged on the battlefield and at court. He was unhappy there and suffered a wound in battle from which he spent seven months recovering.⁴ He petitioned a number of times to return to Spain, and was finally allowed to do so in 1576 (Rivers 1955b, 63). At the age of thirty-nine, Aldana was ready to retire from active military service to the post of Alcaide of San Sebastián. In September of 1577, he wrote the poem for which he is best known, the *Carta para Benito Arias Montano*. The verse epistle praises the retired life, expresses a mystical aspiration, and invites Arias Montano to share this retirement in San Sebastián.

But the desires of two kings intervened. One of them was Sebastian of Portugal, a fascinating historical figure, as is the way in which the end of his life intersects with that of Aldana. Even before his birth he was known as "o Desejado," being the only son of Prince João, who had died before Sebastian's birth and had been heir to the throne of

King João III (1521-57). Considerable pressure therefore rested on Sebastian's shoulders to perpetuate the Avis dynasty.⁵ However, from an early age Sebastian's attendants were concerned about his mental and physical constitution. Contemporary documents express the conviction that Sebastian would be unable to generate successors. He hated women and resisted all attempts to marry him to suitable potential queens. He suffered bouts of a vague chronic illness that reportedly resulted in a *fluxum seminis* or 'seminal discharge' (Queiroz Velloso 81). Spain's ambassador to Portugal don Juan de Silva conveys concerns about Sebastian's illness and impotence in correspondence with King Philip (see Lefebvre and Rivers 1955b); and a 1585 Italian book (attributed to Ieronimo de Franchi Conestaggio and likely ghost-written by de Silva) assigns the physical and mental deficiencies of the young king to royal inbreeding (7b), exacerbated by a Jesuit education that encouraged chastity and militant defense of Catholicism (9a-b).⁶

Sebastian preferred to spend his time practicing war games, and declared his intention to crusade for the Catholic faith, a project that he planned to begin by conquering North Africa. In 1577 and into 1578, King Philip II of Spain unsuccessfully attempted to discourage his nephew from pursuing the campaign.

Francisco de Aldana was instrumental in the Spanish king's efforts. Philip, concerned about Sebastian's grandiose military designs, in 1577 sent Aldana to Fez, disguised as a Jewish merchant, to reconnoiter the forces of the Moors. Upon his return in June, Aldana's report was so pessimistic about the chances for a Portuguese victory, that he was immediately dispatched to Lisbon. His charge was to dissuade the young Portuguese monarch from the assault. Not only was Aldana unable to do so, but Sebastian took an immediate shine to the Spanish envoy, and the feeling was apparently mutual. Aldana writes to King Philip's secretary, Gabriel de Zayas, in June of 1577, "[Sebastián] me tiene lleno de amor y admiración, porque jamás crey ver en tan pocos años tanto entendimiento y destreza en las preguntas que me ha hecho sobre mi comisión, discurrendo por ellas tan soldadescamente que a sido menester abrir los ojos y las orejas para entendelle y respondelle."⁷ Aldana's highly positive impression of Sebastian was completely at odds not only with that of the Spanish ambassador, but also of the Duke of Alba, and King Philip II himself, both of whom had also dealt with Sebastian in person (see Rivers 1995b, 59).

Although Aldana was unable to change the king's mind about attacking Africa, Sebastian kept him in Lisbon for weeks. Sebastian wrote in his own hand to King Philip on July 30 to express his complete satisfaction with Aldana,⁸ causing Carlos Ruiz Silva to remark that it

is "en verdad infrecuente y extraño" that a relatively low-level functionary should receive such attention from a monarch (29).

Only in August of 1577 did King Sebastian finally allow Aldana to return to Spain, lavishing him with gifts and favors.⁹ Over the following months, as Sebastian prepared to leave for Africa, he wrote repeatedly to his uncle Philip to send Aldana along to lead the attack. King Philip refused to mobilize the Spanish forces that Sebastian had also requested, but at the last minute, in June of 1578, he conceded to send Aldana.

By the time Aldana set out, the Portuguese army had already embarked. Failing to reach Sebastian at Cádiz, Francisco de Aldana, ever the good soldier, eventually caught up with the king in Morocco. On the battlefield of Alcazarquivir, the two biographies, of king and poet, conclude, and following soon after, so too does Portuguese national autonomy.

Aldana's death denied him the retirement from worldly concerns to which he had aspired in some of his poetry, including the *Carta para Arias Montano*.¹⁰ That and other religious verse, together with his personal involvement in King Philip's attempts to forestall the invasion of North Africa and the faithfulness with which he carried out his final mission did, however, serve practically to beatify him for succeeding generations of Spanish writers. Cervantes, Lope de Vega, and Vélez de Guevara, among others, knew Aldana as "el Divino Capitán," memorializing his persona in poetry and drama.¹¹ The perception by both early modern Spanish writers and twentieth-century scholars that some of Aldana's poetry seems eerily to foresee his death on the battlefield has further romanticized his image.¹²

These idealizing judgments tolerate significant contradictions in the writing from poem to poem, and occasionally within individual compositions. It is true that sometimes Aldana condemns war and earthly pleasures as he aspires to commune with God, which is why Luis Cernuda called him a metaphysical poet. But at other times, the poet enthusiastically praises war and embraces the sixteenth-century Spanish imperial agenda.

One example of pro-war verse—albeit with an anxious subtext—is a piece written not long after Aldana went to Flanders, where he spent time at the Flemish court when not in combat. *Pocos tercetos escritos a un amigo* is evidently pro-military, consisting of a series of strophes contrasting the corruption of court life with the noble vocation of combat.

Mientras andáis allá lascivamente,
 con flores de azahar, con agua clara,
 los pulsos refrescando, ojos y frente,
 yo de honroso sudor cubro mi cara,
 y de sangre enemiga el brazo tiño
 cuando con más furor muerte dispara. (289-90.7-12)¹³

Ruiz Silva (184) points out that here courtly life is portrayed as effeminate—and, I would add, sexually dangerous (lascivious). In this sense, combat becomes a refuge from the sexual threat; Aldana's self-protection from that sexual menace is a patina of honor, covering his body parts in the armor of his own sweat and his enemy's blood.

The anti-war verse is equally intriguing, and still more troubled by carnal matters. In this essay I would like to focus on internal tensions in two of Aldana's most widely read poems, the sonnet beginning "Otro aquí no se ve que, frente a frente," and the *Carta para Arias Montano*. I will suggest that logical discord within these poems speaks to psychic discord, at the source of which lies the body. Implicated in the violence of the sonnet and in the verse epistle's talk of war, death, God, and friendship, is an acute anxiety over specifically masculine physicality, so that the male body's destruction in one case and its abandonment in the other give the poems their driving force. The historical tethers for this argument are King Sebastian of Portugal and the addressee of the *Carta*, Benito Arias Montano (1527-98), himself a poet, scholar, and chaplain to King Philip II of Spain.

After Aldana's death his brother published two volumes of his poetry, and thanks to Cosme de Aldana we have access to a substantial amount of the work.¹⁴ The edition includes the following sonnet about war. Its interpretation has been a bone of contention, because of the equivocal tone and the unexpectedness of the last line.

Otro aquí no se ve que, frente a frente,
 animoso escuadrón moverse guerra,
 sangriento humor teñir la verde tierra,
 y tras honroso fin correr la gente;
 éste es el dulce son que acá se siente:
 <<¡España, Santiago, cierra, cierra!>>,
 y por suave olor, que el aire atierra,
 humo de azufre dar con llama ardiente;
 el gusto envuelto va tras corrompida
 agua, y el tacto sólo apalpa y halla
 duro trofeo de acero ensangrentado,
 hueso en astilla, en él carne molida,
 despedazado arnés, rasgada malla:
 ¡oh sólo de hombres digno y noble estado! (344-45)

The sonnet begins with unremarkable praise of Spanish forces in battle, strong imagery embedded in automatic nationalist language. Yet in the tercets, the vivid representation turns to extreme suffering, bodily disintegration, and death. The sweet sound of the battle cry and the "süave olor" of gunpowder collide with flesh grinding on splintered bone. The tercets' evocation of the graphic ugliness of war intensifies and revises the positive valuation generated in the previous verses, until we reach the concluding line: "¡oh sólo de hombres digno y noble estado!" It is a twist back to the earlier nationalistic expression, with a force capable of dislocating the joints of the poem so that the structure threatens to collapse in self-contradiction. Contained within the unstable composition is the violent impact of two constructions of war, the mythic with the foul, pro-war propaganda juxtaposed with images of fragmentation and dehumanization.

For Alfredo Lefebvre in 1953 (50), it is Aldana's most enthusiastic praise of the excellence of the soldier.¹⁵ Other readings assert that the contradiction breeds irony subverting the pro-war rhetoric. Most astutely, Elias L. Rivers (1955a) notes that this meditation on war is a composition of place. Aldana follows a practice of St. Ignatius of Loyola in the *Spiritual Exercises* by naming all five senses in the description of the glorious wreck of battle: the blood staining the grass, the sound of the battle cry, the smell of sulphur, the taste of corrupt water, the caress of bloody steel. Rivers demonstrates that by way of Aquinas, the poem recapitulates Aristotle's order of the senses in *De Anima*, from highest (sight) to lowest (touch).¹⁶

Crucially, Rivers shows that Loyola follows this order in the "Meditación del Infierno," a text which reverberates through Aldana's poem.¹⁷ The first thirteen lines of the sonnet, as in the meditation, reverse the Neoplatonic ascent of the senses toward God; instead they describe a descent into hell, transforming nationalist cliché into physical suffering and disintegration. Although the concluding line — "¡Oh sólo de hombres digno y noble estado!" — returns to the hackneyed patriotism of the earlier verses, in the context of the sonnet's development, its very abruptness has the effect of sending the Spanish battle cry to hell.

When one comes to this sonnet after reading the well-known Renaissance genre that also fragments the body — that is, love poetry — through the lens of feminist psychoanalytic commentary on Petrarch, the result is jarring, to say the least. Aldana did not write much of the kind of poetry that we would call Petrarchan love lyric; although thanks to his formation in the Florentine court, he certainly had the opportunity to assimilate Petrarch's influence. He did write some poetry about carnal love. The most interesting and accomplished is highly sensual,

and un-Petrarchan in describing physical fulfillment rather than desire. Furthermore, there is little or no fragmentation of the lady into discrete parts equated with natural objects, of the kind we find in Garcilaso, Du Bellay, or Sidney. These writers catalog the body parts of the female beloved: her eyes are two suns, her hair burnished gold, her hands white snow, and so forth. Nancy Vickers famously argued that Petrarchan love poetry dismembers or scatters the beloved in order to objectify her, to take away Laura's subjectivity so that she cannot gaze back at the poet and make an object of him, in a figurative castration. The woman is cold, cruel, and unavailable, the love poetry becoming a narcissistic chronicle of the poet's emotional pain and dread of his own psychic disintegration.¹⁸ Giuseppe Mazzotta notes that in this "poetics of fragmentation" (60), there is often in Petrarch a shift of perspective reversing subject and object: the poet is both and neither Actaeon and Diana (68), Echo and Orpheus.¹⁹ The woman serves as a mirror in which the poet can contemplate his own suffering and project his own fear.

The desiring male subject's pre-emptive fragmentation of the female occurs in early modern Spanish poetry, but in general, this is not Aldana.²⁰ On the contrary, he boldly spurns the convention in a sonnet that celebrates corporeality as the female beloved explicitly rejects the typical language seeking to objectify her. In fact, with her lips she rejects all language and becomes the aggressor in the lovemaking:

Mil veces digo, entre los brazos puesto
de Galatea, que es más que el sol hermosa;
luego ella, en dulce vista desdeñosa,
me dice, "Tirsis mío, no digas esto."

Yo lo quiero jurar, y ella de presto
toda encendida de un color de rosa
con un beso me impide y presurosa
busca atapar mi boca con su gesto.

Hágole blanda fuerza por soltarme,
y ella me aprieta más y dice luego:
"No lo jures, mi bien, que yo te creo."

Con esto de tal fuerza a encadenarme
viene que Amor, presente al dulce juego,
hace suplir con obras mi deseo. (204)

Here the female rejects Petrarchan hyperbole, silencing it as her body works her will on the poet. With Cupid's collaboration, she gently forces him into a passive posture, which satisfies his desire.

Elsewhere, physical fulfillment is also attained, but *fails* to satisfy:

“¿Cuál es la causa, mi Damón, que estando,
 en la lucha de amor juntos trabados
 con lenguas, brazos, y pies encadenados
 cual vid que entre el jazmín se va enredando
 y que el vital aliento ambos tomando
 en nuestros labios, de chupar cansados,
 en medio a tanto bien somos forzados
 llorar y suspirar de cuando en cuando?”

“Amor, mi Filis bella, que allá dentro
 nuestras almas juntó, quiere en su fragua
 los cuerpos ajuntar también tan fuerte
 que no pudiendo, como esponja el agua,
 pasar del alma al dulce amado centro,
 llora el velo mortal su avara suerte.” (201-02)

Tongues, arms, feet entwine like a vine among the jasmine; lips are inelegantly exhausted from sucking, and the consummation that results is also un-Petrarchan. Nevertheless, unfulfilled desire abides and is a cause for melancholy. While love (or again, Cupid) has united their souls, he cannot succeed in forging into one the lovers' bodies in the way that a sponge absorbs water: physicality is the barrier to the type of satisfaction that the lover seeks; the corporeal frustrates because it is ultimately the obstacle to complete union with the beloved.

Otis H. Green reconciles the fulfillment in some of Aldana's poetry with its lack in this sonnet by identifying an underlying philosophical consistency. Neoplatonically, the beauty of the body and that of the soul are compatible, since the former is capable of leading one to appreciate the latter (122-23). Damón simply fails to achieve that understanding. In a different reading of the Neoplatonism, Arthur Terry locates the problem “not in the lovers, but in love itself, as if the poem were saying: ‘An ideal union would involve both soul and body; human love is always imperfect, because, although it allows us to conceive such an ideal, it cannot help us to fulfill it’” (240). Correspondingly, Olivares explains the lover's melancholy by way of the *besar-chupar* association, which leads to the brilliant conceit of the blacksmith's forge. By kissing, the lovers take in each other's breath, and

a través del aliento las almas se unen . . . El aliento de los amantes es como el aire del fuelle que el herrero echa a las brasas para acrecentar su calor. Con este calor intenso el herrero puede soldar, amalgamar dos metales. En su fragua, el Amor une las dos almas. Según Platón el beso es el medio mediante el cual los amantes pueden conseguir el mutuo acceso al alma ([véase] el *Cortegiano*). Siendo esto un amor espiritual, las dos almas, como dos metales iguales, pueden unirse para formar así una sola alma, un solo metal (...)

Donne, *The Extasie*). Pero es imposible que el herrero pueda amalgamar dos metales incompatibles.²¹

As in so many Petrarchan verses, though, in both of these sonnets Amor, or Cupid, intercedes.²² How is agency configured in “Frente a frente,” the sonnet on war discussed earlier? This poem describes the most violent objectification of young male bodies in battle, their literal dismemberment, their flesh and bone ground together into a single substance, adulterated with mail, armor, and steel. The Petrarchan *duro campo di battaglia il letto*²³—the bed where the suffering, rejected lover tosses and turns, fantasizing the scattered parts of his beloved—becomes in this fantasy a literal battlefield. It is, finally, site of the true fusion of bodies, Damón’s wish come horrifically true, but made unisexual: “¡Oh sólo de *hombres* digno y noble estado!” The poem constructs war as a masculine “estado” (*not* an action), in a masculine world with male victims—of the state: the agent of the hellish union is not Amor, but Nación (and the Spanish one, at that), carrying out its war on battlefield of the male body.

That body becomes Aldana’s own in an early passage of the *Carta para Benito Arias Montano*. In September of 1577,²⁴ after returning to Madrid from his visit with King Sebastian in Lisbon and slightly less than a year before departing for Alcazarquivir, Aldana wrote the verse epistle. The poem praises the retired life, aspires to communion with God, and invites Arias Montano, at age 50, to share this retirement in San Sebastián. This composition establishes the military life from which the poet would escape:

Oficio militar profeso y hago,
baja condenación de mi ventura
que al alma dos infiernos da por pago.
Los huesos y la sangre que natura
me dio para vivir, no poca parte
dellos y della he dado a la locura,
mientras el pecho al desenvuelto Marte
tan libre di que sin mi daño puede,
hablando la verdad, ser muda el arte. (438.13-21)

Hell—in fact, two hells—emerge into the open here: in compensation for giving up his bones and blood to the military profession, Aldana’s soul earns “dos infiernos”: presumably, that of the battlefield; and his participation in battle sending his soul to the literal hell of the afterlife.

Strangely, Aldana also writes his most belligerent and imperialistic poem during this period, at virtually the same moment that he expresses bitter regret over his life as a soldier in the *Carta para Benito*

Arias Montano, and that he is actively involved in attempting to dissuade Sebastian from attacking Africa. In the *Octavas dirigidas al rey don Felipe II nuestro señor* he urges the Spanish monarch to make war on the Infidel in the East, in Northern Europe, and in Africa, joining forces with "gran Sebastián" (417:581).²⁵ With "el guerrero Apóstol de Galizia" (424:777), Philip should fulfill Spain's destiny to spread Christianity "hasta el quemado mundo de Etiopía" (417:580).

Nowhere evident in the poem to the Spanish king is personal doubt about military action, and perhaps the differences from the epistle in tone and attitude owe to the differences in genre, purpose, and addressee. Ruiz Silva sees the two contrary impulses, pro- and anti-war, as reflecting the two conflicting currents that run throughout Aldana's difficult life (195). It is also possible that the drives both to retreat and to attack arise from a coherent spiritual conviction, and that having (he hopes) retired from military service, Aldana bequeaths the active—that is, violent—spiritual mission to younger men.

Robert Ricard explains Aldana's poetic support of Sebastian's cause despite his political mission in the language of sexual conquest. Arguing that it surfaced after Aldana had had personal dealings with the Portuguese king, Ricard asserts that the *Octavas para Felipe II* show the poet "obsédé par le danger musulman" (444), and that he took on the assignment to dissuade Sebastian "plus de conscience que de vraie conviction. Toujours est-il que, loin de se laisser persuader, le roi Sébastien s'obstina, séduisit Aldana et fut encor plus séduit par sa personne et son caractère" (444).²⁶ In this reading, Aldana's admiration for Sebastian does an end run around his duty, as he espouses the cause but recognizes that the current campaign is fatally flawed. He knows first-hand from his spy mission to Fez that the attack on Alcazarquivir would be foolhardy. On the other hand, he embraces the character and larger purpose of the man who conceives the attack.

Clearly, Aldana at various times in his poetry identifies with the state, and at virtually the same moment, figures himself as a disillusioned victim of the state. These radically opposing positions place him psychologically at the vortex of the violence portrayed in the sonnet "Frente a frente": the poet is both narcissistic victim and agent of suffering, the sonnet both mirror and auto-erotic experience for the poet. Such an interpretation casts Aldana's mail-on-male war sonnet as a variation on Vickers' paradigm of the European love lyric. In this context, I will further propose that the *Carta para Benito Arias Montano* is also a sublimated expression of desire.

Ruiz Silva (213-14) observes that while poetry about friendship is rare in Golden Age Spain, it inspires a number of Aldana's works,²⁷ and that no one conveys this topic as lyrically and passionately as does

Aldana. Ruiz Silva identifies the Neoplatonic roots of the poet's conception of *amicitia*: "[E]s, *por supuesto*, absolutamente espiritual, en el sentido en que la unión de los amigos se lleva a cabo a través del alma, hasta el punto de considerar que esa unión no es sólo posible sino que, una vez producida, los amigos viven con dos cuerpos pero con una única alma . . ." (215; italics mine).

The 451-line *Carta para Benito Arias Montano*, written in tercets, is a Horatian epistle, that is, a verse letter from one male friend to another, with a moral component and as is typical for this type of verse, adopting a familiar and intimate tone.²⁸ The work is also metaphysical. Following Aldana's condemnation of his own life in the military, he expresses a wish to withdraw to "algún alto y solitario nido" (439.53) where he might commune with God, a type of aspiration he also develops elsewhere.

The mystic desirer commonly adopts a passive attitude in relation to God. Just so, Aldana writes, "[E]l que temiendo espera / y velando ama, sólo éste prevale / en la estrecha, de Dios, cierta carrera" (458.433-35). For Cernuda, Aldana's mysticism here contains a passive element greater even than that of St. John of the Cross, although it is mitigated by an active emotion. That is, agency in the *Carta* is located, once again, in love, now divine rather than carnal. According to Cernuda,

[E]l alma va a anegarse en Dios como los ojos van "sabrosamente al sueño ciego." La inmortalidad a que aspira no es la exaltación personal del ser terreno, . . . sino el enajenamiento del mismo en su Hacedor, sin conservar de sí otro atributo que el impulso amoroso individual, el cual es, respecto de Dios, como el aire respecto de la luz por él extendida. (770)

Aldana longs for complete loss of self in the Lord, a desire in Cernuda's view (770-71) in some mysterious way tied to his ultimate disappearance at the Battle of Alcazarquivir.

In his quest for language adequate to express this metaphysical desire, and availing himself of biblical, mystical, and mythological imagery, Aldana experiments with configurations of gender. Just as cross-gendered references are not unusual in St. John's mystic poetry, Aldana's soul is like the bride Rebecca as she humbles herself before Isaac (449.247-58). Aldana's soul wishes to suckle at God's breasts.²⁹ Aldana's soul identifies with Echo (440.55-63), yearning submissively for union with the divine Narcissus.³⁰

Elsewhere, the poem alludes to Aldana's struggle with "su rebelde cuerpo" (453.338), in a reference to the battle to the death between Hercules and Antaeus. The wrestling match is a topic in early modern Spain,³¹ and Hercules a fascinatingly conflicted cultural icon. On the

one hand, he is promoted as a symbol of the Hapsburg line (Brown and Elliott 156-60). He is also hyper-masculine, of prodigious and not exclusively heterosexuality (see Loraux and Slater), a some-time cross-dresser who takes on a female persona, which is also well-represented in Renaissance art and depicted in Calderón's court play *Fieras afemina amor*, as well as in seven strophes of Aldana's own *Otavas del mismo Capitán Francisco de Aldana en diversas materias descontinuada y desasidas*.³² In the *Carta para Benito Arias Montano*, Aldana describes the battle between Hercules and Antaeus. Ultimately, in a fatal union, the son of Hera defeats the son of the Earth by lifting him off the ground and embracing him to death (453-54.334-51).

My point is that the hybrid genre of the *Carta para Benito Arias Montano*—a Horatian (man-to-man) epistle with a metaphysical component sometimes figured biblically, sometimes mythologically—sets up conditions permitting the poet to try on different subjectivities in language of intimate relationships. The female soul prostrates herself before the all-powerful male; she suckles at God's breasts; one potent male body presses fatally against another, mention of Hercules also adumbrating other unconventional masculine sexual behavior. The license granted by mystical expression and mythological reference opens up a wide semantic ground upon which the poet can fantasize desire, including perhaps Cernuda's "voluntad de aniquilación," outside the normal bounds of Counter-Reformation Spanish discourse on love.

Nevertheless, in the epistle Aldana's desire to escape the material remains unfulfilled; the poem describes aspiration, rather than achievement. His soul is unable to attain the desired union, on his own, that is. Aldana can only hope for spiritual success, he writes, with the help of Benito Arias Montano, so that the nobly failed mystical aspiration of the first 285 lines may be seen as a preface to an invitation. After rejecting the military and wrestling against the body, the last third of the *Carta para Benito Arias Montano* imagines, literally, a trip to the beach. Here Aldana visits the sublunary details of the retirement to which he aspires in San Sebastián, to spend the rest of his life far from the madding crowd, almost but not *quite* solitary. As the contemplation of a future retirement begins, he writes, "quiero el lugar pintar do, con Montano, / deseo llegar de vida al hora extrema" (454.353-54).

For the rest of his life, Aldana would be solitary except for Benito Arias Montano. Aldana beckons his friend to "[n]uestra soledad contemplativa" (458:440). Our solitude, he writes, will be above the sea; the "alto y solitario nido" of line 53, by line 365 is "nuestro nido." He frames his invitation in such a way that seeks to inoculate against improper physical desire, at this point preparing for the Hercules

conceit: “[E]l alma que contigo se juntare / cierto reprimirá cualquier deseo / que contra el propio bien la vida encare” (453.334-36).

Roughly the first two-thirds of the *Carta para Benito Arias Montano* describe the ascent of the mount toward union with God—which is never quite within reach. Robert Archer’s careful reading of the *Carta* shows that Aldana’s interior struggle to achieve the passive “unstriving expectation” necessary for the mystical experience is repeatedly foiled by bouts of “excited longing” that climax in the exclamation, “¡Oh grandes, oh riquísimas conquistas / de las Indias de Dios, de aquel gran mundo / tan escondido a las mundanas vistas!” (450:274-76). Aldana, recognizing that unaided he will be like Icarus, on a doomed course, beseeches Arias Montano to guide him to the proper state of mind and spirit. And, Archer writes, “The effort necessary to achieve conquest of the flesh is seen here as nothing less than Herculean, sustainable only with Montano’s help” (244).

Only Benito Arias Montano, nine years Aldana’s senior, eminent scholar and chaplain to a king, possesses the wisdom and the authority for the task. Aldana rhapsodizes through his pastoral persona, Aldino:

¡Dichosísimo aquél que estar le toca
contigo en bosque o en monte o en valle umbroso
o encima la más alta, áspera roca!
¡Oh tres y cuatro veces yo dichoso
si fuese Aldino aquél, si aquél yo fuese
que, en orden de vivir tan venturoso,
juntamente contigo estar pudiese,
lejos de error, de engaño y sobresalto,
como si el mundo en sí no me incluyese! (451.295-303)

In the post-*casi*-divine quiescence depicted in the invitation, Aldana returns to earth with Benito Arias Montano. At this point, Archer writes (243), the poet “launches into an extensive allegory based on a simple play on *monte* and his addressee’s surname (304-33). This passage [is] a case of *tota allegoria*, to use Quintilian’s term, in which we do not normally perceive the underlying metaphorical sense until it is explained to us.” Aldana finally eschews the precipitously high craggy peaks and the humid valleys for the “middle” place, the “monte,” the Aristotelian Golden Mean.

And then he turns his attention to the natural wonders of the seashore, the better to comprehend God’s beauty. Aldana describes future walks on the beach together with Arias Montano: “Bajaremos allá de cuando en cuando,” he muses, “altas y ponderadas maravillas / en recíproco amor juntos tratando” (455.373-75). Clearly aware of Montano’s interest in seashells,³³ Aldana envisions the “mil blancas

conchas" (455.378) that they will find on the beach and in the tide pools. He ponders the small creatures, without nerve or bone, that grow inside the hard shells. He marvels that the water could nurture

. . . un cuerpo tan espeso
 como la concha, casi fuerte muro
 reparador de todo caso avieso,
 todo de fuera peñascoso y duro,
 liso de dentro, que al salir injuria
 no haga a su señor tratable y puro (456.400-05)

Remarkably, as Lefebvre points out (160), for eleven of the twenty-six tercets in this section Aldana goes on describing in wonderful detail the vast array of *conchas*, great and small, that the two friends will find together. There will be "mil retorcidas caracoles," "almejas," "veneras."³⁴ As Walters puts it (138), the seashore becomes a microcosm of the world, and in the seashell, "the poet finds an analogy for the conditions for his own soul's spiritual movement—equally imperceptible to outer gaze but inwardly equally sure—that has been the poem's principal concern." The *concha* also could be said to represent the protective solitude sought by the poet. Furthermore, it harbors the peaceful and natural union of flesh and body frame, in such a contrast to that atomizing image, of bone grinding against flesh, in the sonnet about the glory of war.

The poem's two predominating images also have sexual connotations going back to classical times. Of Latinate roots, *montel montano* suggests variations on *montar*, *monte de venus*, etc. The "concha," shaped like a vulva, figures prominently in medieval European art as a sexual talisman. Pilgrims returning from Santiago de Compostela wore the scallop shell (*venera*) against the evil eye, the Spanish word derived from the Latin *concha veneris*. Hence the saying, "De tales romerías, se sacan tales veneras" (Correas 957b). The phallic connotations of the *caracol* also have a long cultural history, due to the extending shape and horns when the small creature, without nerve or bone, emerges from its hard shell.³⁵

Not to put too fine a point on it, the war sonnet "Frente a frente" and the *Carta para Benito Arias Montano*, as Neoplatonic and/or mystically-inclined as they may be, are fraught with sexual tension. The sonnet in its concentrated fashion, in addition to challenging with irony the national imperial project, violently dismembers the male body, itself a grave threat to the poet's metaphysical project. And in the *Carta*, Aldana conjoins two literary currents intrinsically at odds with one another. The invitation in the traditionally intimate Horatian epistle

to a friend queers the metaphysical expression of a desire for solitude. It is what Massimo Noto calls “una solitudine relativa” (202).

Elsewhere, Aldana’s definition of solitude is still more capacious. Cosme’s list of his brother’s lost works³⁶ includes *Ciprigna*, a dialog “do fingía cierto retiro de caballeros en vida solitaria en la isla de Cipro.” It appears that Aldana’s ideal seclusion could sustain a fairly large population, as long as it consisted only of a certain class of men. In the context of his early formation and his affinity for Benito Arias Montano, this utopia might have been a reconstruction of the humanist community in the Florence of Aldana’s salad days. Alan Stewart (3-37) shows that for the *quattrocento* Florence of Lorenzo de’ Medici’s court, a new social economy was evolving centered not on the exchange of women, but on the exchange of texts between a scholar and his patron. That seventy years later the young Aldana was immersed in the literary circle of Lorenzo’s great-grandson Cosimo and writing verses, may have alarmed his father. Considering that Florentine humanism was known for harboring sodomites (see Stewart), it is no surprise that Antonio should wish to remove his son from the threat to the family and its tradition of military service that such an environment would present.

I have not considered evidence of Benito Arias Montano’s sexuality, except to show that he is an object of Francisco de Aldana’s desire. I will briefly note that the cleric was what J. López Prudencio calls a “sembrador y cultivador de amigos” (qtd. by Jones 68). He maintained close relationships with many men, including Pedro de Valencia (1555-1620), who was his amanuensis and as Montano’s will stated, became like a son to him. The scholar bequeathed to the younger man most of his property. Jones, after devoting an entire article to this friendship, remarks in his conclusion (81) that Arias Montano was “equally close” to Juan Moreno Ramírez, and had many other friendships. Jones does not mention Aldana at all.³⁷

Interestingly, Benito Arias Montano also travels between Madrid and Lisbon in early 1578, acting as courier and representative of the royal uncle, within months of Aldana’s visit there. The Spanish ambassador writes to the Spanish monarch that King Sebastian is also very favorably taken with Arias Montano.³⁸ According to González Carvajal, his secret charge is to impress upon the young king the highly sensitive and urgent matter of producing an heir, dovetailing with King Philip’s desire to prevent the march on Africa. In the same letter, de Silva writes that on the morrow Arias Montano will return from Lisbon to Spain having eaten none of Lisbon’s seafood, but “cargado de conchas de caracoles” (180b).

So for a few months King Sebastian is the site of the comings and goings of both Aldana and Arias Montano, in what one might call a channeling of sublimated desires. And the violent, poetic crashing together of flesh and torn mail in the sonnet, of hyperphysical and metaphysical in Aldana's opus, finds historical resolution at Alcazarquivir. He seems to have spent his adult life desiring: to be a good soldier, a good Christian, a good friend, pursuing an honorable and manly end—whether it was to be at the side of Benito Arias Montano in San Sebastián, or of King Sebastian in North Africa. Achieving that death in the right way would be a consummation of his desires, a completion of his opus, the final erasure of that pesky body. And, I would argue, war and God are but two of the forces that give his poetry meaning.³⁹

Notes

¹Because Sebastian's father had perished before his birth and his Spanish mother left for Spain when he was an infant, his great-uncle Cardinal Henry became regent in 1562. The cleric's aversion to the demands of the office led him to have Sebastian declared king at the age of fourteen, in 1568. Henry had also declined to govern Portugal during Sebastian's absence in Africa, on the grounds that he was too old and infirm (Cabrera de Córdoba 843). After his nephew's death in 1578, the Cardinal's petition to the Pope to have the requirement of celibacy lifted so that he could marry and produce an heir to the throne was blocked by Philip II. Cardinal Henry's death in 1580 occasioned the Spanish king's successful claim to the Portuguese throne (see Bovill 7-9; 85; 149-51).

²For a brief excursus on Sebastian's extensive literary afterlife, see Fox 39-40.

³The Grand Duke Cosimo I (1519-74) was great-grandson of Lorenzo il Magnifico (1449-92).

⁴Aldana wrote a poem entitled by his brother Cosme *Diálogo entre cabeza y pie, escrito por el capitán Aldana siendo herido de un mosquetazo en un pie sobre Alquemar en Flandes, sirviendo el oficio del General de la artillería* (*Poesías castellanas completas* 385-88). In these verses, the head and the foot blame each other for causing the injury.

⁵Harold B. Johnson has written about the very optimistic horoscope cast on King Sebastian's birth. See also Sérgio, and Boxer 367.

⁶With respect to the question of whether Sebastian was sexually normal, see Fernández y Fernández (226). He quotes Cabrera (vol. II.343-45) that the monarch was believed to be sterile. Johnson surmises that Sebastian's chronic illness was a venereal disease, contracted from sexual abuse by Sebastian's tutors when he was eleven years old (158-62).

⁷Qtd. by Rivers 1955b, 88-89.

⁸Ruiz Silva reproduces the letter, in Sebastian's handwriting (31).

⁹The ambassador don Juan de Silva wrote to King Philip's secretary that on Aldana's departure Sebastian made him a present of a very valuable good

chain (among other things), and extracted from Aldana a promise to return to serve him (Rivers 1955b, 91).

¹⁰On the treatment of the *contemptus mundi* theme in Aldana and Quevedo, see Olivares 1990.

¹¹On the notice of Aldana taken by various sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers, see Lefebvre 65 and Ruiz Silva 51-60.

¹²In the introduction to his edition of the poetry (13-20), Lara Garrido reviews the idealizing tendency of Aldana commentary.

¹³All citations of Aldana's poetry are from the *Poesías castellanas completas*.

¹⁴On the other hand, Cosme was a poor editor. His carelessness so frustrated Quevedo that the latter expressed a desire to edit Aldana's poetry himself. See Ruiz Silva (50) and Rivers 1999.

¹⁵Ruiz Silva locates Lefebvre in a cohort of commentators sympathetic to Franco, who were predisposed to find pro-nationalist themes in the Spanish classics (63-64).

¹⁶Julián Olivares pointed out to me that the sonnet also inverts the pastoral *locus amoenus*. The "sangriento humor" staining the "verde tierra" recalls Garcilaso's *Tercera égloga*, where the beloved lies "entre las hierbas degollada"; the "dulce son" is not of the *flauta* or *zampoña*, but of the battle cry; "suave olor" not of flowers, but of sulphur; "corrompida agua" opposing the topos of *agua pura y cristalina*.

¹⁷Rivers (1955a 20b). The Meditation reads as follows:

"[65] Quinto ejercicio es meditación del infierno; contiene en sí, después de la oración preparatoria y dos preámbulos, cinco puntos y un coloquio. (. . .) *El primer preámbulo*, composición, que es aquí ver con la vista de la imaginación la longura, anchura y profundidad del infierno. *El segundo*, demandar lo que quiero: será aquí pedir interno sentimiento de la pena que padescen los dañados, para que si del amor del Señor eterno me olvidare por mis faltas, a lo menos el temor de las penas me ayude para no venir en pecado. [66] *El primer punto* será ver con la vista de la imaginación los grandes fuegos, y las ánimas como en cuerpos igneos. [67] *El segundo*, oír con las orejas llantos, alaridos, voces, blasfemias contra Christo nuestro Señor y contra todos sus santos. [68] *El tercero*, oler con el olfato humo, piedra azufre, sentina y cosas pútridas. [69] *El cuarto*, gustar con el gusto cosas amargas, así como lágrimas, tristeza y el verme de la consciencia. [70] *El quinto*, tocar con el tacto, es a saber, cómo los fuegos tocan y abrasan las ánimas . . ." (*Ejercicios* 76-77).

¹⁸See Thomas Greene, especially ch. 6, "Petrarch: The Ontology of the Self," 104-26. Greene sees Petrarch in the *Rime Sparse* as both master and victim; he is "a speaker who is chief actor and sufferer and mythic center" of the verses (117), his subjectivity always threatened by internal disintegration.

¹⁹"In a real sense," writes Mazzotta, "the paradigms of the poet's voice are Echo and Orpheus: Echo, the maiden who loves Narcissus and whose love is not returned, is damned to repeat sounds and exist as pure voice, while her body by the mercy of the gods is changed to stone. Orpheus, the poet who wishes to seduce death and recover Eurydice by his song, loses Eurydice. Their voices, like Petrarch's, speak their losses and are veritable allegories of a presence which the self, caught in the riddle of language, can never recover" (79).

²⁰Verses in which he assumes Petrarchan frustrated desire are not particularly original. For example, see Ruiz Silvas's commentary (92-93) on Aldana's Sonnets VII and VIII.

²¹Correspondence with the author of May 12, 2005, cited with permission.

²²In Petrarch's *Canzone* 23, for example, the poet/lover is victimized by Laura in collusion with Amor: "ché sentendo il crudel [Cupid] di ch'io gationo / infin allor percossa di suo strale / non essermi passato oltra la gonna, / prese in sua scorta una possente Donna/ ver cui poco giamai vi valse o vale / ingegno o forza o dimandar perdono: / facendomi d'uom vivo un lauro verde / che per fredda stagion foglia non perde" ("For that cruel one of whom I speak, seeing that as yet no blow of his arrows had gone beyond my garment, took as his patroness a powerful Lady, against whom wit or force or asking pardon has helped or helps me little: those two transformed me into what I am, making of me a living man, green laurel that loses no leaf for all the cold season" [trans. Durling 60-61.32-40]).

²³This is line 8 of Petrarch's, Poem 226, "Passer mai solitario in alcun tetto" (383). Garcilaso translates Petrarch's line in Soneto 17, "Pensando que'l camino yva derecho" (112: 8). In his note to Garcilaso's poem (112-13) Rivers gives a brief Spanish history of the *duro campo de batalla el lecho*. My thanks to Julian Olivares for pointing this out to me in correspondence.

²⁴The date is cited at the end of the poem, 458.450-51.

²⁵According to Cosme, Francisco composed the *Octavas para Felipe II, Nuestro Señor* shortly before his death (qtd. by Lara Garrido, n. p. 398).

²⁶See Lara Garrido n. 68 p. 34.

²⁷Ruiz Silva cites especially Sonnets X, XIV, XXI, XXVI, and XXI. Lefebvre comments that in the *Carta*, Aldana tells Arias Montano that he is "de mí lo que más vale" (438), and addresses other friends in other poems in the same kind of intimate terms: "le dirá a Bernardino de Mendoza [in *Carta al Señor don Bernardino de Mendoza*]: 'sois de mí la mejor parte' y Galanio [in *Carta a Galanio*] también es la mejor parte. Una frase que se puede aplicar a tantas personas no es ni más ni menos que una convención social, un mero instrumento que puede llevar algo de vestigios del afecto, pero que en el presente caso no nos determina nada de la específica relación que entre los dos personajes queremos aclarar" (87). I would note that female poets write quite a lot about friendship among women; see Olivares and Boyce, *Tras el espejo la musa escribe: lírica femenina de los Siglos de Oro*.

²⁸See Rivers 1954 and Navarro Durán 202.

²⁹Following what appears to be an interpretation of Isaiah 66:12-13, Aldana figures his soul drinking from the Lord's breasts: "... el alma en los divinos pechos / beba infusión de gracia sin buscalla, / sin gana de sentir nuevos provechos" (447.214-16). In Isaiah, as God speaks, the Latin is "Ad ubera portabimini," which early modern Spanish exegetes interpreted as "Ad ubera [mea] portabimini," referring to God's body: in the Spanish he says, "Seréis llevados a mis pechos." A 1619 commentary by Fray Juan de los Angeles on the *Song of Songs* has a section entitled "Por qué se le atribuyen a Dios pechos." The King James version and modern commentaries construe the breasts as Jerusalem's. See *Isaiah 56-66: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. On maternal imagery relating to God and other figures of

religious authority in the Middle Ages, see Bynum 110-69. Bynum writes, "The males who popularized maternal and feminine imagery were those who had renounced the family and the company of women; the 'society' out of which their language comes is a substitute for (and implicitly a critique of) the world" (144).

³⁰In an intimation of Jupiter's insemination of Danäe, Arias Montano is the one "en quien el cielo sus noticias llueve / para dejar el mundo enriquecido" (451.287-88).

³¹In the *Philosophia secreta* (1585), Juan Pérez de Moya explains the moral import of the Hercules-Antaeus episode: "Hércules significa el varón virtuoso que desea vencer el deseo de su carne, con quien tiene gran combate y lucha de ordinario. La codicia o deseo carnal se dice ser hija de la tierra, entendida por Anteo, porque esta codicia no nace del espíritu, sino de la carne, como dice el Apóstol (Lib. I.5); y cuando el varón virtuoso, que es Hércules, pelea con el deseo carnal, véncelo algunas veces, mas como Anteo, cayendo en tierra, recobraba fuerzas, así la carnal codicia ya mortifica o pacificada, una vez se suele levantar más recia con la ocasión; y así para que Hércules venza a Anteo, es necesario apartarle de su tierra. Quiere decir, apartar ocasiones y conversaciones, y viandas cálidas, y del vino, y camas regaladas, y otras muchas cosas que incitan a lujuria" (II.114-15).

³²The *Otavas* (pp. 251-74) focus on interesting mythological love obsessions, including Venus for a satyr, Xerxes for a banana tree, Pasifae for the bull, and so forth. Aldana devotes seven strophes to the story of Hercules and Omphale, Queen of Lydia, who makes the Greek hero her slave. She forces him to dress as a woman and do woman's work; weeping and fussing, he is her concubine. Lara Garrido (n. p. 258) notes that Cossío believed that Aldana's verses were a source for Luis de Góngora's depiction of the cyclops in *Polifemo y Galatea*, although Dámaso Alonso disagreed. Juan Ferraté thinks Aldana would not have wanted these verses published: they are "tal vez la más extremada, incontinente e irresponsable acumulación de extravagancias, no sólo en la forma (abundantísimas en nuestro poeta) sino también en el orden del contenido" (216). See Ruiz Silva 170-78.

³³Montano studies seashells at length in his *Naturae historia*, which he began planning in 1571 and which was published in 1601. Lara Garrido (n. p. 455) quotes an extended passage of the Latin treatise translated into Spanish, with some interesting correspondences with Aldana's verses on the shells.

³⁴Respectively, in ll. 382 (p. 456); 406 (p. 457); 407 (p. 457).

³⁵See Hildburgh, Randall, and Pinon. Jill Barker, who considers the phallic properties of the snail's image in English Renaissance drama, writes, "Boneless, and apparently capable of extension and diminution, the snail rather irresistibly resembles both the tongue and the male sexual organ (. . .), both the tongue that persuades and a means for implementing that persuasion" (22a). In *Poesía erótica del Siglo de Oro*, Alzieu, et al. include verses in which the snail shell stands for 'penis' (n. p. 163). For example, poem 90 begins, "Caracoles me pide la niña / y pídelas cada día." Louise Vasvári summarizes, "The girl supposedly wants 'caracoles' for her melancholy. The poem continues with further double entendres about whether *caracol* is to be 'carne' or fish; she claims it is meat and yet is 'golosa' for it during Lent, but

a certain Padre Ledesma told her as penitence she could only eat it on Saturdays. Further, although it is a viscous meal and causes 'opilación' ['obstruction' or 'cessation of menstruation'] it has 'salsa sabrosa' and when it puts out its 'cuernos' gives 'gran consuelo y alegría.' " (e-mail to the author dated October 2, 2003, cited with permission). An entry in Gonzalo Correas' 1627 compendium of proverbs and popular sayings reads as follows: "Sal caracol, con los cuernos al sol" (718). Correas glosses it as a children's saying, "y viene a otros propósitos." According to editor Louis Combet's note, the "otros propósitos" probably allude to the snail's phallic connotations.

³⁶Qtd. by Lara Garrido, "Introducción," 109.

³⁷Joaquín Pascual dedicates an article to Arias Montano's "relación más afectuosa" (869) with the bishop Pedro Serrano.

³⁸The letter from don Juan de Silva to Philip II written in late February of 1578 reads in part, "El Doctor Arias Montano ha estado aqui seis ó siete dias, y quedan todos los hombres de letras y entendimiento aficionadísimos suyos, y el Rey especialmente que le ha mandado llamar tres ó cuatro veces, y teniéndole mill horas en diversas pláticas: no se puede negar al Rey la particular afición y gusto de favorecer y comunicar hombres insignes; y asi ha conocido y admirado mucho la particular habilidad y bondad de que Dios ha dotado á Arias Montano" (González Carvajal 179a-180b).

³⁹With apologies to Hedges.

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