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Anne-Claudine Morel

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DESCRIBING SPACE IN THE “LAND OF THE IMAGINARY LINE”. HOW THE NOVELIST JAVIER VÁSCONEZ DEPICTS ECUADOR IN HIS NOVELS.

ANNE-CLAUDINE MOREL

The Ecuadorian writer Javier Vásconez (1946) is currently one of the best known authors in his country. His depiction of Ecuador is problematic because the country is never named in his novels and short stories. It is hinted at through a network of spatial references, place names and topographic forms, such as volcanoes, *quebradas*¹, the *páramo*² or the cordillera, which refer the reader unmistakably to Ecuador and the Andean region; evocative metaphors such as “the land of the imaginary line” and “the country of the invisible line” replace direct designation. Some Ecuadorian towns are mentioned, but the capital city, for example, is never named. A discerning reader will recognize the city from street names or emblematic places and buildings: the Dos Mundos hotel, the racecourse, the El Ejido or La Alameda parks, the La Floresta district, the El Madrilón café. The writer’s decision to blur the references to the capital or the country itself is intriguing. Why does he not name Ecuador, when the country welcomes the main character in his first novel (Vásconez, 1996), Dr Kronz, a Czech doctor who has chosen to settle Barcelona? And why does the narrator dilute the spatial referent in an approximation that makes the country hard to pin down, although it is recognizable to anyone familiar with the region? I shall show that writing about space in Ecuador and in the twenty-first century is a matter of tension between a universal denomination and widespread ignorance of the rest of the world. Paradoxically, it forces the writer to seek visibility: he strives to reveal both the nation and its literature, but from an unusual perspective far removed from the tradition of *indigenism* or the social realism cultivated

¹Ravine.

²Barren, cold, high plateau in the Andes.

by contemporary writers. The first part of this paper will deal with the evocation of this invisibility, which creates a mythical, and therefore universal territory. The metaphor of the “land of the imaginary line” is used to reveal an Ecuador whose geography is redefined through literature. The second part will examine this new geographical configuration as a host country for illustrious foreigners: Javier Vásconez invites the world's greatest writers to Ecuador; this approach is another way to connect Ecuador and its literature to the rest of the world and give them a measure of visibility.

1. From the Invisible Line of the Equator to a New Mythical Territory

I studied Vásconez's novels and short stories, interviews and rare theoretical writings in search of the reasons for his reluctance to name his native country. The first clue came from his scathing attack on the fortuitous, historical link between two disciplines, geography and geometry:

I ended up thinking that Ecuador is not a country but rather an imaginary line, whose fateful, abstract name we owe to eighteenth-century Spanish and French geodesists. Curiously, this contradictory, equivocal feeling that we Ecuadorians are used to living with, has an enigmatic, luminous side. How can we write on an imaginary line?³

For Javier Vásconez, the name of the country is both a fatality and fortuitous. A fatality, because it conflicts with the idea of a border, that invisible line which delimits the shape of a territory -- a horizontal line cannot trace the contours of a nation, or else it reduces the country to an abstraction that its inhabitants have trouble imagining. Fortuitous, because the name of Ecuador was given by “foreigners,” European colonists, whose main intent was the economic, and incidentally scientific, exploitation of the territory. The name therefore refers to a geographical concept which only partly characterizes the country, but nonetheless reduces the nation to an invisible line and a simple segment of a perfect circumference. So it is

³ “A veces he llegado a pensar que Ecuador no es un país, sino una línea imaginaria cuyo nombre fatídico y abstracto se lo debemos a los geodésicos españoles y franceses del siglo XVIII. Este sentimiento contradictorio y equívoco, con el que los ecuatorianos nos hemos habituado a vivir, curiosamente posee su lado enigmático y luminoso. ¿Cómo escribir sobre una línea imaginaria?” (Vásconez, 2002, 195, our translation).

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the notion of instability, inherent in the writer as well,⁴ that is displayed in the name of the country, and Javier Vásconez expresses it through a key question that conditions his entire production: How can we write on an imaginary line? How can writing be used to give thickness and depth to this country whose name fatally refers to a geometrical abstraction?

The first solution is to keep explicit references, such as metaphors or certain place names, and to leave out the real name of the country and its capital in order to create a sense of mystery and suggest a territory where anything can happen; writing and various stylistic devices allow this transformation. It is in his short stories that Vásconez is most successful in bringing about this change by disrupting Ecuador’s real geography. The story called “A Stranger in the Port” encapsulates this desire to escape from a fatal, simplistic national name, but also from a sometimes stifling natural environment. A brief analysis of the classic opposition between the ocean and the cordillera updates these writing processes typical of Javier Vásconez’s style. It also maps out the country’s geographical space as the characters perceive it.

Some real Ecuadorian towns, such as Manta, Manabí and its beach, or the seaside town of Salinas, are clearly named. These coastal towns are opposed to the Andean capital, which is hemmed in by the mountains and dwarfed by the volcano Pichincha. Several characters in the stories talk repeatedly of suffocation or asphyxia and the coastal towns are mentioned in counterpoint to the capital encircled by high peaks. Talking about the ocean gives the characters endless possibilities for making plans and dreaming, while the capital city locks up their destiny. So the jockey César Lagos, in the story entitled “The Jockey and the Sea”,⁵ talks about a race on the beach at Salinas; winning it seems at first unlikely, then possible and finally becomes a reality:

The sea opened up my horizons... That sea was hurling me towards an abyss, perhaps with nothing in its depths. [...] [My horse] was running like

⁴ “The narrator in a constituent discourse cannot position himself outside or within society: his writing is necessarily fed by the radically problematic nature of his own belonging to that society. His utterance is constituted through this very impossibility of assigning himself a real “place”. **Paratopia** is a paradoxical locality, which is not the absence of place, but a difficult negotiation between place and non-place, a parasitic location, which feeds on the impossibility of its own stability. Without localisation, there is no institution that can legitimise and manage the production and consumption of literature, but without delocalisation, there is no real constitance.” (Maingueneau, 2004 , 52-53, in bold in the original text)

⁵Vásconez, 1989, 164. All quotations are taken from: Vásconez, 2009, 77-87.

an angel. And I won because I had the sea in front of me, doctor. A sea that cheered me like the best crowd ever, the wildest and most uproarious crowd I have ever raced for.⁶

When they gaze out to sea, the characters are jubilant and exultant, while they feel sad and stifled in the landlocked city: “They all lived in the shadow of a rather comfy sadness, ensconced in their humdrum life; they were waiting for something better, sensing vaguely that life was elsewhere.”⁷ So by a process that I shall call “incrustation”, the writer creates a special, new geography which scorns the laws of science. For in several stories, an unlikely sea is “incrusted” in the mountains or else an ocean and a port loom up in the cordillera. These maritime spaces are an escape from the feeling of suffocation produced by the Andean city.

This is the main theme in “A Stranger in the Port”. From the very first paragraph the narrator hints at the possibility of a port. The chimera of the ship mooring in the midst of the Andes is cleverly served by the narrator’s alcoholic haze: “After my first whisky for the evening, I let myself be carried along on the flow of this story which starts with a foghorn sounding through the misty port, although there has never been a port in this town.”⁸ Realizing the impossible, that is, bringing a port into being in the Andes, is in my view an aesthetic invention, which answers one of the questions asked in the introduction: How does the writer imagine the geography of this country and its capital that he never names? This story brings an astonishing answer: Quito is not the landlocked city it is thought to be, just as Ecuador is not only the country crossed by an imaginary line. Fiction allows a broader view, sweeps away prejudices and theoretical knowledge. “Fiction does not mimic reality, but [...] actualizes new virtualities hitherto unexpressed, which then *interact* with the real according to the hypertextual logic of interfaces [...]” (Tally 2011, 103) as Bertrand Westphal has pointed out. I would add another comment by Westphal,

⁶ “El mar se me abrió en el horizonte... Era ese mar el que me estaba arrojando hacia un abismo donde quizá no había nada. [...] Corría [mi caballo] como un ángel. Y yo salí vencedor porque al frente tenía el mar, doctor. Un mar que me aplaudía como el mejor de los públicos, el más entusiasta y alborotado de los públicos ante el que yo haya corrido nunca.” (Vásconez, 2009, 86-87)

⁷ “Todos vivían instalados en una cómoda tristeza, amparados en el pasillo de los días, en espera de algo mejor, y presintiendo que la vida estaba en otra parte.” (Javier Vásconez, “Café concert”, *Estación de lluvia*, 175)

⁸ “Ahora, cuando me he servido el primer whisky de la noche, tras haberme sometido al flujo de esta historia que comienza con la sirena de un barco sonando entre la niebla del puerto, aunque en esta ciudad jamás hubo un puerto.” (Javier Vásconez, “Un extraño en el puerto”, *Estación de lluvia*, 203)

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insisting on the “representation of the real” and “an experience of the real” which appear in works of fiction as new worlds, and as the creators of new worlds:

The analogy between the world as we experience it and its representation is less and less meaningful. But in any event, representation reproduces the real or, better, an experience of the real. For we must not forget that human space exists only in the modes of this experience, which, now becoming discursive, is the creator of the (geopoetic) world. Any work, no matter how far from sensed reality, as paradoxical as it seems, is part of the real – and, perhaps participates in forming the real. Unreal realism is therefore an option, only just a bit more disconcerting than other postmodern processes. (Tally 2011, 85).

In his fiction, the writer can therefore conjure up the sea, or the memory of the sea, in the heart of the Andes. The paradox is all the easier to envisage if the name of the city or the country is not given. Geographic reality is indeed “unreal”, or rather “surreal” in that the narrator adds a geographical reference, the ocean, to an existing reality. Imagination and the principle of confusion, aggravated by exhaustion and inebriation which affect the narrator’s perceptions, work together to reveal a new geographical feature in the Andean city; Vásconez’s use of tenses (the unreality of the present, the imperfect which freezes the action first stated in the simple past) and adverbs is also remarkable:

Although the doctor had not brought the letter, I was sure I could hear the distant booming of a foghorn of a ship that must be berthing in the port, at this hour of night. The tide was relentlessly pushing the waves, it was no doubt washing scraps of paper and driftwood to the quayside, because there where the *páramo* and the Andean city began, I again heard the sound of a foghorn.⁹

The metaphor of the “imaginary line” in this short story rolls three separate geographical spaces – the ocean, Ecuador and the Andean city – into one : “The fuzzy lights of the port faded little by little until they

⁹ “A pesar de que el doctor no había traído la carta, escuché a lo lejos la sirena ululante, persuasiva, de un barco que a esa hora estaría atracando en el puerto. La marea seguía agitándose, incansable, y seguramente arrastraba papeles y astillas hasta los bordes del muelle, porque allí donde empezaban el páramo y la ciudad andina yo volvía a escuchar una sirena.” (Vásconez, “Un extraño en el puerto”, 225)

formed an imaginary line in my memory.”¹⁰ The city with its characteristic mountain range and high desert plateaus is no longer assimilated to a prison or a closed space, since the novelist uses fiction to alter the environment. The story depicts Quito as a port, facing the sea and freed from the grip of the Cordillera of the Andes.

There is another example of this process of geographical re-creation. In “Café Concert” a seascape is incrustated in the city through the imagination and ingenuity of a photographer, Félix Gutiérrez. A Bolivian cabaret singer dreamed of being photographed by the sea. The photographer satisfies her wish by posing her alongside a mediocre painting of a seascape. In fact, the trick is “suggested” by the narrator-writer, who works his way into the story as a writer called J. Váscónez, “an impossible writer” but a real demiurge able to remodel geographic realities and suggest other spaces. It is while he is reading a few lines of an article signed by J. Váscónez that the photographer thinks of a way to bring the Bolivian singer’s impossible dream true. The article enlightens and guides the character: writing becomes the vector of the imagination which makes any project possible.¹¹ Imagination liberates and transcends geographical laws and everyday reality:

J. Váscónez, an impossible man who claimed to be the town’s new chronicler, had written these lines in the morning newspaper: ‘Never will the sea bathe these high ports doomed to nothingness in this unfathomable cordillera of the Andes. No, never will we see a ship enter the harbor, unless we start to dream of it...’ The idea had traveled, by land or by sea, who cares; in any case it came to Gutiérrez in a flash. That morning he thought of nothing but the young woman, fixed in a photograph as if he had already taken it.¹²

¹⁰ “Las luces amortiguadas del puerto se fueron desvaneciendo hasta formar una línea imaginaria en mi recuerdo.” (*Ibid*, 219)

¹¹ “He soon saw the mistake he had made; he had doubted himself and his ability to transport himself to the sea through his imagination.” “Y no pasó mucho tiempo antes de que se diera cuenta del error que había cometido, al haber dudado de sí mismo, incluso de su capacidad para llevarla con su imaginación junto al mar.” (Javier Váscónez, “Café Concert”, *Estación de lluvia*, 182)

¹² “J. Váscónez, un hombre imposible y con pretensiones de convertirse en el nuevo cronista de la villa, había escrito en el diario esa mañana: “A esto altos puertos de la nada, los Andes, a la insondable cordillera jamás llegará el mar. No, nunca veremos entrar un barco en las dársenas del puerto a menos que empecemos a soñarlos...” Es posible que la idea hubiese venido por tierra, pero poco importaba si vino por mar: porque para Gutiérrez todo ocurrió como un relámpago. Esa ma-

Set free by imagination, the Bolivian singer at last achieves her dream and leaves the city for other climes. The main character can at last resume his daily reveries: “As he smoked in his studio, Felix could imagine the cities where [Gipsy] would stop to sing. Cities that he himself would never go to.”¹³

Ecuador's geography is thus disrupted and rearranged, and put at the disposal of an imagination that also enables the writer to dialogue with literature from other countries and world famous writers. Because if, in various interviews, Vásconez raises the problem of the relationship between the “space of writing” and “the space in which writing is done”,¹⁴ it is also because he seeks to break with Ecuador's literary tradition.

2. The Land of the Imaginary Line becomes a Space Welcoming Universal Literature

Indeed, Vásconez disrupts space for another purpose. By inventing new spaces and cities, he can break with a stifling national literary tradition, and, more importantly, engage a dialogue with a universal literature. His remarks about the genesis of his first novel shed light on his desire to make this break:

If I look back on the process of writing *The Traveler from Prague* I have the impression of having gone through a series of nightmares. That is probably due to the fact that I was not born in a country with a rich novel-writing tradition (I am talking about Ecuador), which gave me greater free-

drugada no pensó en nada, sólo en la mujer, era como una fotografía que ya hubiera sido tomada.” (*Ibid*)

¹³ “Félix podía imaginar, fumando en el estudio, las ciudades donde [Gipsy] se detendría a cantar. Ciudades a las que él nunca llegaría.” (*Ibid*, 187)

¹⁴ An analysis of what Dominique Maingueneau calls “paratopian places” enables us to see the conflict between the writer and the place where he produces his texts as a double tension between reality and fiction and between the universal and the local: “As we have said, even if the work claims to be universal, its emergence is a fundamentally local phenomenon, and it is constituted only through the norms and balance of power in the places in which it emerges. It is in these places that the relationships between the writer and society, the writer and his work, the work and society are really forged.” (Maingueneau, 2004, 74)

dom and guided my work. [...] I wrote *The Traveler from Prague* because, among other things, I was convinced – naive as I am! – that literature was elsewhere. And I suspected that the risk was elsewhere. I wanted to escape from the sordid “huasipungos” writing of our suffocating literary tradition, I wanted to explore the horizon and get away from this incoherent, muddled rambling, steeped in bad conscience, that is called “indigenism” or “the Andean world” invented by sociologists. [...] I was in search of other shores, other cities and literary affiliations. In short, I wanted to write a novel which would connect me unashamedly with the literature of other latitudes and would let me sit at the same table as Kafka, to smoke the night away with Onetti, to drink whisky with brilliant crime writers and play spy games with John Le Carré. I wanted to renew myself by interpreting other people’s texts.¹⁵

In a recent article presented as a retrospective analysis of Javier Vásconez’s work, an Ecuadorian critic, Mercedes Mafla, returns to a belief which seems to motivate all his literary production. It could even be the core of an aesthetic choice which is also moral, because writing is not only “an act of freedom”,¹⁶ but also a tool for escaping the asphyxia induced by the country’s characteristic topography and, consequently, a place of transgression:

¹⁵ “Si examino retrospectivamente el proceso de escritura de *El viajero de Praga* me da la impresión de haber pasado por sucesivas pesadillas. Es quizás el hecho de no haber nacido en una tradición rica en novelas -me refiero a Ecuador-, lo que me permitió una mayor libertad y modeló el rumbo de mi trabajo. [...] Tal vez escribí *El viajero de Praga*, entre otras cosas, porque estaba convencido -ingenuo de mí, desesperado de mí- de que la literatura estaba en otra parte. Y sospechaba que el riesgo también estaba en otra parte. Deseaba escaparme de los sórdidos “huasipungos” literarios de nuestra sofocante república de las letras, quería explorar el horizonte y apartarme de toda esa palabrería incoherente, confusa, atestada de mala conciencia denominada indigenismo o mundo andino, esa fantasía de los sociólogos. [...] Buscaba otras estaciones donde apearme, otras ciudades y filiaciones literarias. En definitiva ambicionaba escribir una novela que me vinculase sin complejos con la literatura de otras latitudes y me permitiera sentarme a la misma mesa de Kafka, fumar durante la noche con Onetti, tomar whisky con algunos escritores de talento incomparable de la novela negra, jugar al juego de los espías con John Le Carré. Además aspiraba a renovarme interpretando los textos de otros.” (Castro Rodas, 2012, <http://22.otrolunes.com>)

¹⁶ “Writing is much more than storytelling, it is above all an exercise in freedom.” “Pero escribir es mucho más que contar bien una historia, es sobre todo un ejercicio de libertad.” Javier Vásconez, “Interrogatorio”, *Revista Común presencia*, n°16, Bogotá, undated,

<http://comunpresenciaensayos.blogspot.fr/2006/12/interrogatorio.html>.

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The novel [*The Traveler from Prague*] is the product of profound isolation and the liberating belief that literature has no temporal and spatial boundaries. Vásconez is an Ecuadorian who, just like the brilliant, tragic poet, Alfredo Gangotena, takes inspiration from desolation; and since they both washed up in the deepest Andes, they decide to play host to their spiritual mentors. It is that, or death. Vásconez, because he is desperate, therefore invites Kafka to join him on the imaginary line.¹⁷

Ecuador thus welcomes not only Dr Kronz, the Czech doctor who is the main character in the novel, *The Traveler from Prague*, but also world-class writers who have extraordinary adventures on Ecuadorian soil: that is the theme of a collection of short stories entitled “Guests of Honor” (Vásconez, 2004), whose main characters are Colette, William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, Vladimir Nabokov and the American film director, David Butler. A possibility offered by the country’s invisibility, which the writer exploits to the full. The absence of names for Ecuador and Quito contrasts strikingly with the explicit naming of certain countries and cities, such as Spain, Prague, and Barcelona. If we delve deeper into the writer’s ties to his native city and his country we find a complex idea: he does not name them, because he feels they lack cultural and literary relief. In his view, for the South American continent and the rest of the world, they do not exist. Ecuador’s literature and the country as a whole suffer from the “invisibility syndrome”. This idea is largely exploited by Javier Vásconez who insists on the invisibility of the country, in general, and of its cultural and artistic production, in particular. Of course, this insistence should be seen as a device to achieve the opposite effect: by drawing attention to their lack of visibility, he attempts to give them more relief and push them into the foreground. Vásconez cleverly describes this invisibility by using Ecuador’s many typical volcanoes as a metaphor. The invisibility he emphasizes (“In Ecuador, we live in a crater”) allows him to justify his use of intertextuality, to associate his native land with the homeland of world famous authors:

¹⁷ “La novela [*El viajero de Praga*] es, más bien, el producto de un profundo aislamiento y de la convicción, siempre liberadora de que la literatura no tiene fronteras ni temporales ni espaciales. Vásconez es un ecuatoriano que al igual que el brillante y trágico poeta Alfredo Gangotena parten del desamparo y en vista de que se han quedado varados en los Andes profundos deciden convertirse ellos mismos en anfitriones de sus maestros. Es eso o la muerte. Vásconez invita por desesperación a Kafka a visitar la línea imaginaria.” (Mafla, 2013, 3)

In Ecuador, we live in a crater. We are isolated, culturally speaking. That is why I have taken the liberty of inviting to my table, so to speak, a whole string of writers whom I admire, in whose footsteps I have followed and whose works I have read in depth. I am thinking of Nabokov, Conrad, Faulkner... On a whim, the author has taken the liberty of bringing them here and giving them a role to play in this city.¹⁸

The Ecuadorian writer intends to break with a weighty national literary tradition, the *indigenism* of Jorge Icaza, the social realism and the “terrigenism”¹⁹ of authors writing in 1930-1970. He wants to disentangle himself from literature obsessed by certain national characteristics: the country’s ethnic mix, social issues, and regionalism. He does not seek to destroy the themes and clichés traditionally exploited by the writers before him; on the contrary, he approaches the country from another angle. The way foreigners see the country opens up new perspectives, literary as well as geographical. Ecuador extends its hospitality to stateless people like Dr Kronz, in *The Traveler from Prague*, and to famous authors whose renown revives and nourishes Ecuadorian literature: Kafka, Faulkner, Colette, and to all the other “guests of honor” that the writer invites to his native land. This rediscovery of the country through literature enables the writer to help efface the invisibility from which the nation and its literature suffer. Its heavy literary tradition and geographical isolation are two of the key factors in the opacity that he feels is characteristic of Ecuador. Another comment by Vásconez reveals his strategy based on ambiguity and his deliberate refusal to name the country and its capital city:

I see Quito in various ways. It is a different city in each book. If you compare the city in *The Traveler from Prague* with the one in *The Gambler’s Shadow* or in the short story *The Secret*, you realize that there are several Quitos. And that is logical: it is a city with several spaces and several possibilities and it can be seen in several ways. In any case, I did not want to name it. I preferred to leave it ambiguous, as if seen through a rainy land-

¹⁸ “En Ecuador vivimos en un cráter. Vivimos aislados culturalmente Por eso me he tomado la libertad de invitar a mi mesa, por así decirlo, a una serie de escritores a quienes admiro, a los cuales he seguido sus pasos y los he leído profundamente. Me refiero a Nabokov, Conrad, Faulkner... Ha sido una libertad y también un capricho por parte del autor de traerlos hasta aquí y hacer que actúen en esta ciudad.” José HERNÁNDEZ, “Mientras más se nombra una ciudad, o cualquier lugar, más lejos estamos de él”, *OtroLunes, op. cit.*

¹⁹ Erika Silva calls “terrigenism”, thinking which anchors people in their native land, with their myths, legends and languages. “Terrigenism” is opposed to intellectual “metropolitanism”. (Silva, in Tinajero (Compilador), *Teoría de la cultura nacional*, 1986, 419-493)

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scape. I have always had a conflicting relationship with Quito, but it is my city, I was born there and I love it. [...]

- And how do you see Ecuador? In the same way?

- Ecuador is increasingly blurred, in many respects.²⁰

The writer filters his knowledge of Ecuador and Quito through the prism of “ambiguity”. This avoids having to anchor his stories in a specific geographical context. On the contrary, it opens up to universality. By keeping all possibilities open – “it is a city with several spaces and several possibilities and it can be seen in several ways” – he sets his writing in a context which exceeds the geographical and temporal boundaries of Ecuador in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He creates a “literary geography”, as discussed by Horacio Vázquez-Rial.²¹ He develops an urban and national space which becomes a *paratopic place*, a “paradoxical place, or *paratopia*, which is not the absence of place, but a complicated negotiation between place and non-place, a parasitic localization which lives on the very impossibility of stabilization.” (Maingueneau, 2004, 53). That means that the “narrative arises in a place on the fringe of the ordinary world,” (*ibid*) in a marginal space in a country and a city that are geographically isolated by their location, because Quito is in the middle of the

²⁰ “- A Quito la veo de distintas formas. En cada uno de mis libros es otra ciudad. Si se compara la ciudad de Quito de El viajero de Praga, con la de La sombra del apostador o con la del libro El secreto, nos damos cuenta de que hay muchas ciudades de Quito. Y es lógico: Quito es una ciudad que posee muchas miradas, muchos espacios, muchas posibilidades. En varios casos no he querido nombrarla, y escribir sobre la ciudad desde la ambigüedad, un poco como debajo de la lluvia. Mi relación con la ciudad de Quito siempre ha sido y será conflictiva, pero es mi ciudad, en la que nací y a la que amo. Espero seguir escribiendo sobre ella.

- Y en esa misma perspectiva, ¿cómo ve al Ecuador?

- Al Ecuador le veo cada vez más desdibujado en muchos aspectos.” (Peñafiel, <http://22.otrolunes.com>)

²¹ “I like to think that the world I have invented is rather like a cornerstone of the universe.’ This elegant remark by Vásconez refers to the process of writing he uses. Neither he nor Faulkner started by looking at the map of Yoknapatawpha, or the map of the Andean city; they were drawn in the process of writing and that is how literary geographies are written.” “‘Me gusta pensar que el mundo que inventé es una especie de piedra angular en el universo.’ Es una formulación elegante del proceso del propio Vásconez, que algo tiene que decir cuando la obra ya está allí. Por supuesto que ni Faulkner ni él empezaron por el plano de Yoknapatawpha, ni por el de la ciudad andina, sino que éste se fue dibujando solo a través de la experiencia de la escritura, que es como se dibujan las geografías literarias.” (Vásquez-Rial, 8-9)

Andes and Ecuador spreads out on either side of an imaginary line. This space “materializes the constitutive gap between the author and society.” (Maingueneau, 2004, p. 184). This gap is also assumed by most of the characters in Vasconez’s stories, including Dr Kronz in *The Traveler from Prague*: they are outsiders, in a perpetual state of emotional and territorial instability, going from one country to another, one continent to another, from one part of the city to another. The city and the country sketched by the writer therefore belong to the world without belonging to it; they are like an island,²² a quintessentially *paratopic* place, with indefinable boundaries.

Conclusions

Javier Vásconez often talks about his search for new geographical and literary horizons which will bring him a few answers to his questions about Ecuador. He is a writer whose experience as an ordinary citizen, coupled with that of a hardened, curious traveler, allows him to wonder about his country in these terms:

I realized that the history of Ecuador and the way it was interpreted was full of commonplaces, ready-made comments repeated over and over. I looked for new horizons, new answers to literary problems. It was a trying, lonely process, because I had to read and interpret the country in a new way. From a personal point of view, I discovered a secret country and I decided to poke my nose into that secret. After that experience I wrote *The Distant City, The Traveler from Prague*, etc.²³

²²This image refers us to a definition of geocriticism given by Bertrand Westphal: “La géocritique correspondrait bel et bien à une poétique de l’archipel, espace dont la totalité est constituée par l’articulation raisonnée de tous les îlots - mobiles - qui le composent. [...] Là où l’espace est archipel, les identités culturelles se compliquent au point de rester à tout jamais définissables, et donc indéfinies.” (Westphal, 2000) 11.

²³ “Una de las cosas de que me di cuenta es que la historia del Ecuador y sus interpretaciones están plagadas de lugares comunes, de frases hechas: muchas se repiten. He buscado nuevos horizontes, nuevas respuestas a una serie de inquietudes que el país me planteaba como, por ejemplo, las literarias. Fue un proceso arduo y solitario a la vez, pues había que releer e interpretar de nuevo el país. Desde un punto de vista personal descubrí un país secreto y decidí internarme en ese secreto. A partir de esa experiencia escribí *Ciudad lejana, El viajero de Praga*, etc.” (Aveiga, 118).

Describing Space in the “Land of the Imaginary Line”. How the Novelist Javier Vásconez depicts Ecuador in his Novels

His writing is a way of redrawing the space of the nation, and in our view this act sits well in a discourse on Ecuadorianness by reconstructing the national geography. In a sense, Javier Vásconez shakes up the clichés about his country. He does not redraw the borders of the nation, which continue to be “landmarks” for the collective imagination and the Ecuadorian reader, but he blurs the outline of the country by talking about the famous line of the Equator. Taking the ingenuous, simplistic view that other nationalities have of Ecuador, he asks questions and awakens curiosity that the locals sometimes struggle to formulate about their own country. Here we touch on the question of redefining a national identity bound up with a cultural identity, formulated in other terms by the supporters of geocriticism, which Javier Vásconez was one of the first to practice. Like the writer himself, most of his characters are stateless, wandering travelers, rootless individuals briefly anchored in a space that they explore and shape according to their own perception of it. This analysis therefore serves the definition of Ecuadorianness which emerges by default in Javier Vásconez’s work through the reconstruction of a national geography:

It is exhausting to explain my conception of the country in literary terms, whenever I talk about my books. [...] So I prefer to talk of the only tradition that I feel comfortable with: language. And certain geographical areas as well. But to return to the “imaginary line”, to the literally “invisible” country called Ecuador. [...] Let us say that my work is based on the literary maps of other writers. I have constructed it as a visible tribute to Kafka, Nabokov, Onetti, Faulkner, Céline and Le Carré, among others. I have also built a poetics of opacity, based on voluntary incursions, associations, layers and re-creations, using various literary genres very freely. I have stubbornly burrowed like a mole into the works of these writers, hoping that the experience would transform me; this complex and fascinating process is not without limits or danger, because often I can no longer say where I am.²⁴

²⁴“Resulta agotador explicar literariamente mi país cada vez que hablo de mis libros. [...] Por eso prefiero hablar de la única tradición en la que me siento cómodo: la lengua. Y también con ciertas zonas geográficas. Pero regresemos a “la línea imaginaria”, al país literariamente “invisible” llamado Ecuador. [...] Digamos que mi obra está levantada sobre los mapas literarios de otros escritores. La he ido construyendo como un homenaje visible a Kafka, Nabokov, Onetti, Faulkner, Céline y Le Carré, entre otros. Pero también he construido una poética del ocultamiento a partir de invasiones voluntarias, de asociaciones, superposiciones y recreaciones, utilizando con plena libertad distintos géneros. Y he cavado obstinadamente como un topo en los parajes de estos escritores, con la ilusión de salir

This dialectic between invisibility and visibility involves taking risks, because it leads to a dangerous loss of references both for the reader and for the writer himself. It is vertiginous, part of an innovative artistic process and characteristic of Javier Vásconez's writing. He calls on the power of imagination and the freedom conquered by the pen, which offer an escape from the discomfort of living in a country where literature struggles to exist. That is the crux of the matter: he does not deny the reality of his country's geographical existence, far from it, but he constantly denounces its lack of relief in famous literary works and the production and circulation of works of fiction. He denounces the impoverished literary tradition of his native land. However, through the "absolute power of the imagination" as he calls it here, Javier Vásconez can escape from a reality in which he cannot find his place either as a creator or as a publisher:

I do not try to turn my back on a reality; on the contrary, I believe in the legitimate desire of any writer to invent and dream up lives, like that of this insolent traveler, Dr Kronz [...] And better still: I support the desire to invent a port in the heart of an Andean city, starting from the vision of a character holed up in his little studio. I must say that the task has been fascinating. No doubt because I had to construct a country which was at once ambiguous and personal, starting from literature, a country where everything is possible, because the longer I live in Quito, the less this city fascinates me. [...] Whether or not a country called Ecuador exists is of no importance whatsoever.²⁵

This painful realization further refines the links between geography and literature, and deepens the delicate notion of borders and limits:

transformado en esta aventura. Este proceso tan complejo y apasionante no deja de tener sus limitaciones, sus peligros, ya que muchas veces yo mismo no soy capaz de saber dónde estoy ubicado." (Balmaceda, 2010, 135-136).

²⁵ "No intento volver la espalda a ninguna realidad, al contrario, creo en el afán legítimo de todo escritor de inventar y soñar vidas como la de ese viajero osado, el doctor Kronz, [...]. O más aún: mantengo vivo el deseo de inventar un puerto en una ciudad andina, gracias a la visión de un hombre recluso en el estudio de una casa. Tengo que decir que mi tarea ha sido fascinante. Quizá por eso he debido construir un país tan ambiguo y personal a partir de la literatura, un país donde cualquier cosa es posible, porque cuanto más tiempo vivo en Quito menos me cautiva esa ciudad. [...] Que haya o no un país llamado Ecuador no tiene ninguna importancia." Javier Vásconez, "Divagaciones acerca de una línea imaginaria," (Varios, *El exilio interminable, Vásconez ante la crítica*, 196)

“Where can I stand on this line which smashes limits and borders, that will now have to be abolished?”²⁶ asks Javier Vásconez further on in the same article. The answer seems obvious for anyone who knows the man and the writer: on the fringe of clearly delimited “territories”, those literary “free-ways” marked out by their inscription in the constraints of a nationality, he claims a writing space without borders, in which his writing of space and his fiction could be freely expressed. He maps out a sort of literary *no man's land* enabling him to hold the reality of his country at arm's length while drawing closer to universality which, by definition, brooks no limits: “That is probably why I have had to construct such an ambiguous and personal country, based on literature, a country where anything is possible.”²⁷

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²⁶ “¿Dónde encajo yo en esta línea que rompe los límites y las fronteras que hoy es tan necesario abolir?”, *ibid.* 197.

²⁷ “Quizá por eso he debido construir un país tan ambiguo y personal a partir de la literatura, un país donde cualquier cosa es posible [...]” *Ibid.*

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