

On Adriana Díaz Enciso's *Ciudad doliente de Dios* (Doleful City of God, Alfaguara, 2018)

by Ana Elena González Treviño PhD

I would like to begin by saying what a great book this is. It is not for the fainthearted, but that is of course a good thing. If you have **a palate for myth creation**, if you are seriously willing to enter the realm of the **cosmic imagination**, this is a book for you. Also, if you have a **penchant for social justice**, for redressing wrongs and creating a better world, this is also a book for you. Such a duality marks the expanse of the fictional worlds within the novel, creating what might be described as the rhythm of hope, in which we breathe in within one world and breathe out in another, better one. Let me explain.

Ciudad doliente de Dios is a substantial novel that could only have been written by **a consummate writer** in the peak of her literary powers with an impeccable integrity of vision which is both aesthetic and ethical. It required an unwavering discipline and

dedication which manages to remain true to itself no matter what. It is **intellectually ambitious and artistically daring**. Its originality makes it difficult to describe with a single word, or to encapsulate it within a single genre. It may appear obscure or even insurmountable to the careless reader, but it is fully rewarding for the persevering and the connoisseur. Its ethical coherence may make some people uncomfortable by its uncompromising nature, but it is utterly true to itself.

One of its most striking characteristics is what could be described as the **prophetic mode of writing**. We shift from a seemingly conventional narration to an entirely different (shall I call it) vibration, a **prophetic or bardic tone** which submerges you into the depths of spiritual pursuits, both at the highest heights and abysmal landscapes. Though Blakean in origin, as Adriana admittedly confirms, the skill and richness with which these imaginative incursions are done is entirely her own, and in my opinion, one of the highest, one of the most striking and memorable aspects of the novel. These

"memorable fancies" are portentous, titanic, monumental, my personal favourite sections.

I would also like to propose that one of the underlying currents in the novel is the topic of **splendour**, an effulgence or brightness, the emanation of rays from an object like the sun or like a human face. There is, however, a sweet splendour which propagates smoothly, and a belligerent splendour which expands violently. In general, the former corresponds to the celestial city and the latter to the worldly city, but they both tend to integrate. The **solar imagery** heavily evoked by the wonderful cover illustration is recurrent throughout the novel, and it creates a variegated connotation for the different forms of splendour in the book. It is not, certainly, the light of bare reason [encapsulated in the novel's own Urizen, president Nazro], but the luminosity of artistic creation for the search of transcendence. The characters of Elías and Cristina incarnate artistic pursuit through different media: goldsmithing, drawing, printing, weaving in their wonderful workshops, sometimes infernal, sometimes

celestial. Elías is, of course, named after Elijah, one of Blake's favourite prophets from whom he borrowed his chariot of fire.

Cristina, the inexplicable daughter of Ahanía and Herat, is to me reminiscent of the Christiana of another celebrated non-conformist, John Bunyan, who, like Blake, is buried at Bunhill Fields. Cristina's oddly named parents are of course the Blakean Ahanía, who appears in several of Blake's prophetic books [*The Book of Ahanía, Vala, or the Four Zoas, Milton, a Poem and Jerusalem, The Emanation of the Giant Albion.*]. As far as I can tell, Herat is fully the creation of Adriana, or, as I believe one could say, *Adrania*. The relationship between Elías and Cristina is so complex, that it is better to leave you to find out for yourselves what it is like, but what I can say is that the descriptions of the material aspects of their craft are a veritable joy to read.

The book is peppered with allusions to the life and works of William Blake, but this is not the only reason why I would agree in calling it a Blakean novel. The reason, I hope, will become apparent. However, first and

foremost, I would like to offer it to you as an Adriana novel, or as an *Adrania* novel.

Cristina is the female protagonist, a young girl who is left to be raised by nuns first, and afterwards by the mysterious Elías, goldsmith, engraver, printer. Cristina's story has the appearance of a bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story. She is sometimes like the little girl lost, sometimes like the little girl found, and later on she takes on the dimensions of a cosmic woman. And that is what makes *Ciudad doliente de Dios* such a unique work: it plays with the concept of relative stature. In the spiritual dimension, the characters acquire mythical proportions, as in Blake's prophetic books and illustrations, the characters are sometimes too big for the page in which they appear.

The Blakean quality of the novel is undeniable given the palpable presence of William Blake's imprint on the work, the impact of the striking cover, etc. However, I would like to make this not so much about William Blake as about Adriana Díaz Enciso, about *Adrania*. That is not to say that the

book will not be particularly appealing to Blakeanists. In the light of the current Tate Britain exhibit and the projection of the *Ancient of Days* on the dome of St. Paul's cathedral, it feels like a Blakean celebration in many places; but even though Adriana is a devoted Blakean herself, that is not to say that she is not an outstanding artist in her own right.

What are the limits of what is real? Where does the world of the imagination begin and what is it for? *Ciudad doliente de Dios* is a committed, masterly and compassionate exploration of these topics in the shape of a novel which reveals the personal, artistic spiritual search of a lifetime. Incarnations [or shall I say Emanations?] of William Blake and his creations populate these pages without betraying themselves as such, except for connoisseurs, but they have their own breath and pulse, in their own intricate and extraordinary way.

"The hours of Folly can be measured by the clock, but [the hours] of Wisdom, no clock can measure." Jerusalem, *ir + vershalaim*, the city

of the two forms of peace: earthly peace and celestial peace.

Text read at the book launch of *Ciudad doliente de Dios* at the Mexican Embassy Residency in London on 5 December 2019.