THE TRAGIC BATMAN MYTH

Saúl Lázaro Altamirano
PhD Candidate in literary theory and comparative literature
Universidad de Guadalajara

Abstract || *Sábado en ciudad gótica* (Saturday in Gotham City) is a poem by the Mexican writer Daniel Chávez. It uses the Batman figure as intertextual substrate. The poem creates meanings through extracts from scenes, states and atmospheres of Batman. The poetic text has a meaning that is completed with the symbolic world of the character. Thus, the image becomes an intertextual element of the poem. The result is a poetic text governed by a character of popular culture, whose image works as the anchor between the meanings of the two texts. Finally the scenes create the tragic myth of Batman.

Key-words || intertextual | myth | image| popular culture | poem | tragedy.

0. Introduction: Cultural Fusion

Popular culture has been able to permeate several types of artistic expression. Take for example the works of the artist Andy Wharhol who uses forms from articles of the «masses» to create his paintings. It does not really matter if his art is categorized as high or low culture; it speaks about society, it is linked to it and it has aspects and meanings that are more complex than one simple category. «El arte de masas puede reflejar las convicciones, ser una respuesta a las necesidades de cambio e innovación, ser catalizador o represor de deseos o miedos informes, poner en escena en un nivel –de ordinario inconsciente– algunas de las disputas de la sociedad consigo misma» (Hoggart, 1970: 197). It engages in a relationship with the public, bonding with social practices and helping to build personal histories.

Comic books characters are part of daily life in many societies. It is easy to find their images on television and the internet, in movies and video games, etc. As a result of having a constant presence in culture that is almost «natural», they become carriers of meaning. During the 1950´s, the comics unleashed controversy on the radio when mothers and fathers, and leaders of the American moral right stressed the danger that they represented for the youth of that period. After the great success from the introduction of superheroes, comic books sales decreased considerably for a period. Following this event, comics had to pass a content and image review process in order to achieve the seal of guarantee needed for distribution.

Nevertheless, comics have been able to survive, breaking barriers and infiltrating different media. *Hasta nuevo aviso* [Until Further Notice] by Daniel Chávez includes a collection of poems that are dedicated to comic books characters from DC and Marvel. In the first part, Batman's voice can be heard in *Evocación a Gatúbela* [Summoning Catwoman] and *Sábado en Ciudad Gótica* [Saturday in Gotham City], *Nocturno al joven maravilla* [Nocturne for a Young Wonder], *Los sueños de Peter Parker* [Peter Parker's Dreams]*, Regreso de Aquaman* [The Return of Aquaman], *Los trabajos de Superman* [The Labours of Superman] and *Balada del Guasón* [The Joker's Ballad]. These poems are interesting as they include characters from popular culture[1] as part of the literary text.

The presence of comic books characters, such as Batman, Superman, Aquaman and the Joker, serves as a cultural foundation that helps to establish the poem's meaning. This analysis will look at the poem *Sábado en Ciudad Gótica* and the intertextual relationship between myth and image that forms the tragic Batman myth. The poem refers to Batman's symbolic world, presenting images and scenes that are

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1 | «Las cosas que se califican de populares porque masas de personas las escuchan, las compran, las leen, las consumen y parecen disfrutarlas al máximo». Ésta es la definición <de mercado> o comercial del término: ésta es la definición que pone malos a los socialistas. Se la asocia acertadamente con la manipulación y el envilecimiento de la cultura del pueblo» (Hall, 1984).

typical of the Batman character. As a result of its intertextual nature, elements of popular culture become motifs for literary text and part of the poem's meaning process.

1. Postmodern Intertextuality

Intertextuality can be understood as the reference in a text to another text. It generates the reader's participation depending on the information that s/he has on the topic. The intertextual phenomena suggests that the object of analysis is not simply the text nor it is limited to the field of public knowledge that the text is related to. It is something more complex that has a lot to do with the reader's personal history and social environment. Intertextuality produces a space that is erected in relation to the reader, his/her social environment and knowledge thereof.

> El concepto de intertextualidad presupone que todo texto está relacionado con otros textos, como producto de una red de significación. A esa red la llamamos intertexto. El intertexto, entonces, es el conjunto de textos con los que un texto cualquiera está relacionado. La asociación intertextual que existe entre un texto y su intertexto depende de la persona (o personas) que observan el texto o que lo utilizan para un fin determinado. […] la intertextualidad es, en gran medida, el producto de la mirada que la descubre. O más exactamente, la intertextualidad es resultado de la mirada que la construye (Zavala, 2004: 10).

Many theorists have pointed out that intertextuality is one of the main characteristics of modern culture. In that case, a cultural construction can be studied in terms of its network of meanings. On the other hand, the use of referents from popular culture as elements of literary text suggests «un gozo consciente de la intertextualidad […] no usada como un procedimiento entre otros, sino que es puesta en primer plano, exhibida, tematizada y teorizada como un principio constructivo central» (Chaverri, 1997: 196). Therefore, consciously assumed intertextuality forms the creative process and indentifies the text with the reader.

> Los escritores crean textos o utilizan palabras sobre la base de todos los otros textos y palabras a los que han tenido acceso, mientras que los lectores actúan de la misma manera. Por consiguiente, la vida cultural es vista como una serie de textos que se cruzan con otros textos, produciendo más textos (incluso aquel que pertenece al crítico literario, que se propone producir una literatura en la que los textos en consideración se cruzan libremente con otros textos que a su vez han influido en su pensamiento). Este entramado intertextual tiene su vida propia. […] Cada elemento citado, dice Derrida, «rompe la continuidad o la linealidad del discurso y lleva necesariamente a una doble lectura: la del fragmento concebido en relación con su texto de origen; y la del fragmento incorporado a un nuevo conjunto, a una totalidad diferente» (Harvey, 2004: 68-69).

Thus, a text is created on the base of another text. If the reader has information on the Batman reference, s/he establishes a referent or recognition of the character's history and links it to the new information. This is how the signs that shape Batman are introduced and the atmosphere, setting, locations, images and contexts that complete the poem's meanings are established.

Comic books characters are a part of popular culture that are recognized by a large number of social groups and generations across time. The different media used to project Batman, like comics, television, movies and toys, make him a far-reaching character, an icon of popular culture, and they are part of this period's new mythical heroes as well. Therefore, a postmodern intertextuality is found in writers from the audiovisual era[2] who choose elements from popular culture as their themes.

> Hemos visto ya cuán enfáticamente abogaba Roland Barthes por la igualdad de derechos intertextuales del ruido de los medios masivos y en el canto de las musas. La Postmodernidad […] da un paso más allá y hasta les da prioridad a los mitos y clichés de la cultura pop sobre las obras de la Alta Cultura, respetadas por su antigüedad. La basura verbal y la inundación de imágenes producidas por una industria siempre creciente, establecida para entretener a nuestra sociedad de consumo, devienen así los pretextos privilegiados del arte postmodernista (Pfister, 2001: 211).

If the ancients in their day used the gods and heroes from their time period for inspiration, modern writers are now using contemporary heroes. The image from popular culture becomes a direct intertextual reference, even more so since comics are linked to an image, though some approaches aim for an intertextuality with nostalgic references.

2. The Image

The image has always been a direct reference in poetry. Like Surrealism or Dadaism, the literary avant-guarde is distinguished for being closely connected to painting and film. From there, we can see how the visual image, through painting, television, movies or comics, becomes a direct influence and reference in literary creation. The Batman character has left the page to become part of television and the movies[3]. His image is a language[4] that serves as a platform for the poem's meaning.

Since Batman is the reflection of his own history, his image has narrative structures. In this sense, Batman's history, his vehicles, weapons, tools, suit and enemies as well as the Gotham City space are elements that form a semantic field: «Vapor de chimeneas/

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2 | Giovani Sartori exposes the means by which the image and television impact upon the subject: «Nos encontramos en plena y rapidísima revolución multimedia [que] se caracteriza por un común denominador: tele-ver y, como consecuencia, nuestro vídeo-vivir» (Sartori, 1997: 11). In Homo videns, Sartori notes that television is becoming society's teacher, and so part of our lives.

3 | See (Lotman, 1999: 22).

4 | «La capacidad simbólica de los seres humanos se despliega en el lenguaje. Actualmente, hablamos de lenguajes en plural, por tanto, de lenguajes cuyo significante no es la palabra: lenguaje del cine, de las artes figurativas, etc.». (Sartori, 1997: 28)

huella dactilar de la calle ahí/ está la señal abierta/ llamando desde la esquina/ y entre edificios el amarillo cede/ al rojo neón del sexo/ por entregas» (Chávez, 2006: 11). The beginning of the poem sketches scenes with images that are typical of the Batman character: chimney, signal, buildings, etc. Batman is a comic book character therefore his image and space are controlled by a previously established form, and dispersed through different media. As a result, Batman is a fixed, identifiable stereotype[5]. The image functions as an anchor with his symbolic world and it is tied to the text's meaning. The poem thus displays the «visualization of verbal metaphor» (Eco, 2001: 77) that is typical of comics.

3. The Masked Name

The title *Sábado en Ciudad Gótica* [Saturday in Gotham City] reveals Batman as the poem's subject. It does so with signs and references to Batman's semantic field. As such, the title has significant elements: first, the character is identified through the spatial reference to Gotham City; second, once the character is recognized, he has a form and indentity. The image is part of his existence and it is tied to the Batman name, Batman: hero. Thus, the hidden and revealed name in the title combines with the image and its additional significance.

The text's meaning begins in the title where the name is emphasized through its absence. «El nombre es un excelente modelo estructural puesto que a veces puede ser considerado (míticamente) como una sustancia, a veces (formalmente) como una diferencia; la obsesión con el nombre refiere simultáneamente a un sueño de identidad y a un sueño de otredad» (Barthes, 2003: 20). The name provides an identity for the poem's subject and introduces Batman's semantic field, situating it in time and space. The character-space relationship becomes intimate and helps shape the atmosphere and images. The title provides a setting for the space and becomes the device by which we will see Batman. The poem in turn paints the city.

4. The Tragic Batman Myth

The Batman tragedy rests in eternal, continuous repetition. As such, the foundations for his myth can be found in Sisyphus or Prometheus. Nevertheless, the poem peeks inside the character to where the tragedy of being a superhero lies. The poem's subject, identified as Batman, expresses fatigue, boredom and the futility of his mandate. His tragedy lies in the fulfillment of the oath that he made after the murder of his parents. In this case, it is a destiny that is chosen and constructed by Batman himself and as such, he controls it.

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5 | The cape, the dark colour, the pointy-eared mask are all aspects of the Batman image: «In certain comistrips intended for 'quick' reading the diegesis is confided above all to the text, the image gathering the attributive informations of a paradigmatic order (the stereotyped status of the characters)» (Barthes, 2010: 8).

The Batman story holds the origin of his tragedy: «A well-constructed plot should, therefore, be single in its issue, rather than double [...] the change of fortune should be not from bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad. It should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error, []..» (Aristotle, 2010: 17-18). The poem explores the tragedy implied in being a hero. In this case, Batman's origin as a hero is his misfortune: the murder of his parents.

Batman is one of the «mythical heroes of the comics». As such, he has the essence and identity of the tragic myth of Dionysus. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche explains that Dionysus can be found behind tragic heroes like Prometheus or Oedipus. «[...] the one truly real Dionysus appears in a multiplicity of shapes, in the mask of a struggling hero and, as it were, bound up in the net of the individual will. So now the god made manifest talks and acts in such a way that he looks like an erring, striving, suffering individual […]» (Nietzsche, 2010: Section 10). In the Batman story, tragedy becomes ontological as it is seen as another one of this god's masks.

The hero who saves the world is overcome by boredom: «Acudir a la plaza/ intuir la pólvora/ prescrita para el susto/ y la navaja contra la luna/ de la botella empuñada» (Chávez, 2006:11), and fatigue from eternal repetition[6]: «¿Quién puede desarmar/ la furia y la aguja del odio?/ a veces me canso/ de no faltar a mi promesa/ y la señal no deja de brillar» (Chávez, 2006:11). These elements display a Dionysian state.

> The ecstasy of the Dionysian state, with its obliteration of the customary manacles and boundaries of existence, contains, of course, for as long as it lasts a *lethargic* element, in which everything personally experienced in the past is immersed. Because of this gulf of oblivion, the world of everyday reality and the world of Dionysian reality separate from each other. But as soon as that daily reality comes back again into consciousness, one feels it as something disgusting. The fruit of that state is an ascetic condition, in which one denies the power of the will. In this sense the Dionysian man has similarities to Hamlet: both have had a real glimpse into the essence of things. They have *understood*, and it disgusts them to act, for their action can change nothing in the eternal nature of things. They perceive as ridiculous or humiliating the fact that they are expected to set right again a world which is out of joint. The knowledge kills action […] (Nietzsche, 2010: Section 7).

In this sense, repetition and boredom make Batman «understand», and he becomes conscious of his tragedy. The poem presents the foundation of the Batman myth as tragic «because its hero is conscious» (Camus, 2010). It is tragic only when Batman becomes conscious. The poem is the tragedy itself as it is the character's state of consciousness. It describes his tired look as he faces the

punishment of futile and hopeless work (Camus, 2010).

Thus Batman is the absurd hero that Camus finds in Sisyphus, since his dedication and torment have the same origin. «His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth […]. The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing» (Camus, 2010). Crime will always exist, so the misfortune is in the infinite fulfillment of a constructed and accepted oath. But at the same time, it makes Batman the master of his time and fate. «For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days. At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that silent pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory's eye[...]» (Camus, 2002). The poem paints fatigue and repetition: «A veces el hambre/ papel abanicado por el metro/ a veces la gangrena de la pérdida/ se vuelven puño/ cayendo sobre la quijada/ y se hace gancho una rosa/ y puede afilarse hasta ser disparo/ y por eso me canso» (Chávez, 2006:11). Batman looks back over the events of his life and relives his torture. He constructs a dark destiny where he «knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling» (Camus, 2002). And with it, eternity.

4.1 The Bat Signal: The Semantics of Misfortune

The signal used to call Batman, called the Bat Signal, is the symbol that ties him to his destiny. The signal is primary: «Huella dactilar de la calle ahí/ está la señal abierta/ llamando desde la esquina» (Chávez, 2006: 11). It represents the boredom, fatigue and repetion that tie him down: «La señal no deja de brillar» (Chávez, 2006: 11). It also symbolizes the Batman character and his oath, and serves as one of the classic final scenes from Batman. «La señal es un relámpago/ que vuelve» (Chávez, 2006: 12). The signal is the cyclical device that the poem cites as Batman's continuous fate.

In fact the animated film *Batman: Gotham Knight* (2008) made up of six short stories, in its last tale called *Deadshot*, shows a Batman who questions continuing his fate as a hero. But then the signal reappears, tying him to it again. In this way, «La señal es un relámpago/ que vuelve» [The signal is a lightning bolt/ that returns] becomes a «reference» to the classic final scenes from Batman.

4.2 The Tragedy Mask

The tragedy's Dionysian aspect accentuates the vacuous. Like many other heroes who maintain a double identity, Batman finds that part of his tragedy is that he does not lead a normal life. Instead, his life is absorbed by his identity as a hero where the hero's duty is impossed before that of the subject[7]. «Discernir entre buenos y encerrar/ a los malos que hieren menos/ que algunos buenos a veces punza/ ¿cómo marcar el número de la esperanza/ si suena siempre ocupado?» (Chávez, 2006: 12). In this sense, another side to the tragedy is the one Batman experiences when he looks in the mirror. Like Garrik[8] in *Reír llorando* [To Laugh Crying] by Juan de Dios Peza, Batman is not saved from being a hero because only Batman can save him and he is Batman, and the «número de la esperanza» [number for hope]. It becomes impossible therefore to exit from this circularity.

4.3 The Eternal Hero

Comic books heroes are made to last forever. Despite the fact that he is not immortal in the Batman story, as a hero of popular culture, Batman is destined to relive his tragedy through time and in different ways. This enables a reading where the character talks about being a character, as in Pirandello's *Seis personajes en busca de autor*. Batman's mortality as a character does not help him in his nightmare of repetition since he cannot die as long as culture continues to reproduce him. The subjectivity that is typical of poetry and cultural intertext offers a peek inside the character (the subject in the subject), where Batman becomes pessimistic when he recognizes himself as a product[9]. It is precisely popular culture's intertext that completes the tragedy's meaning. «Myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them» (Camus, 2002). Therefore, the text becomes polysemous from the moment that readings begin, and there are as many readings as there are existing representations of Batman.

5. The Subject in a Subject

The hero tragedy serves as a mirror for transformed appearances (Nietzsche, 2010: Section 3). It is the undeniable negation of the world that Batman lives in yet is not exiled from. Through the poem, Batman shows that individualization is the ultimate foundation and primordial origin of all evil (Nietzsche, 2010: Section 10). In this sense, the subjectivity that is typical of poetry helps the character return to his status as an individual.

A subjectivation process «es la formación de un uno que no es un yo o uno mismo sino que es la relación de un yo o de uno mismo

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7 | Like Peter Parker who, because of his Spiderman commitments, arrives at his appointments late, or not at all.

8 | Garrik is a character in the poem *Reír llorando* [To Laugh Crying]. His tragedy consists in being a grief-stricken comic who cannot cure his sadness because he only can cure himself.

9 | This sets up boundaries that are crossed in superimposed worlds. For example in the film *The Last Action Hero* (1993), the characters erase the boundaries between the real world and fiction. The character in the movie discovers himself as an other, that is to say, as a character. Comic books heroes also explore the idea of alternate realities.

con otro […]. Un proceso de subjetivación es así un proceso de desidentificación o de desclasificación» (Ranciere, 2010). Thus, it is a subjectivity that is not linked to indentity as it denies the identity that gives it a name and occupation. The subject is found in between. «En otras palabras, un sujeto es un *in between*, un entre dos […]. Es un entrecruzamiento de identidades que reposa sobre un entrecruzamiento de nombres: nombres que conectan el nombre de un grupo o una clase al nombre de lo que está afuera de la cuenta, que conectan un ser a un no ser o a un ser-por-venir» (Ranciere, 2010). The poem's subject swings from Batman's hero identity to subjectivity, and from the Batman collective to the individual who renounces his imposed identity. «Atrapar por la pulsera al último/ homicida, si quedara de pie el puerto/ descolgar el teléfono e irse/ a pescar un domingo, lejos del insomnio, combatiendo/ a los mosquitos/ hasta despertar de mi pesadilla/ entre las calles y chimeneas/ la señal es un relámpago/ que vuelve» (Chávez, 2006: 12).

The subject dreams of living in an alternate reality where he fights mosquitoes instead of crime. He is no longer Batman as he renounces his identity and leaves the city, his usual area, to go elsewhere. He connects with the idea of the subject and the levels of freedom a subject can have. Though Batman experiences this brief subjectivity, the signal at the end of the poem brings him back to his eternal return journey.

6. Conclusion

Finally, we see that comic book characters are constructed and related to a network of meanings. «El personaje mitológico de los cómics se halla actualmente en la situación de ser un arquetipo, la suma y compendio de determinadas aspiraciones colectivas, y por lo tanto debe inmovilizarse en una fijeza emblemática que lo haga fácilmente reconocible» (Eco, 2001: 229). It is precisely the emblem of justice used by heroes like Batman that locks them to their misfortune.

The tragic myth exists because the archetype that it was created with is maintained. The complexity of cultural studies comes from all of these networks weaving around it. The intertextual is a reminder of the focus needed when reading. The intertextuality of television, with references in programs to other series or cultural icons external to televison, is another context that is receiving a lot of attention. Thus, the image takes part in daily life as a reference to something more.

Sábado en Ciudad Gótica [Saturday in Gotham City] is a text that uses the Batman story as its base. As such, it is an example of

how popular culture serves as an intertext in artistic creation. Since Batman's symbolic field fills out the poem's meanings, the image serves as a visual reference that completes the significance of the tragic Batman myth. In other words, it draws out «the symbolic» in Batman. Thus, «ancient wisdom confirms modern heroism» (Camus, 2010).

The tragic Batman myth is a symbolic representation of Dionysian knowledge and Apollonian media (Nietzsche, 2009). As with Sisyphus, Batman is the master of his fate and the beauty rests in his torment. The poem breaks into a variety of discourses and references as well as images that can be seen briefly within the city's darkness. Locations recur but the feelings expressed do not appear to be Batman's. Nevertheless, it seems to tell us what poetry has always said but in a different way. The signal and the suit imprison the destiny of the masked solitude.

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