

ANTONIO GAMONEDA: THE CONSTRUCTION OF FORGETFULNESS

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Abstract || Our study attempts to analyse the concepts of memory and oblivion in the poetry of Antonio Gamoneda through works such as *Descripción de la mentira*, *Lápidas*, *Libro del frío* and *Arden las pérdidas*, in relation to the historical period in which the author lived.

Keywords || Oblivion | Writing | Franquism

0. The Poetry of Antonio Gamoneda

The poet Antonio Gamoneda (born in Oviedo, 1931) was long overlooked by literature handbooks and anthologies. However, in recent years his career has been relaunched and he has been placed alongside other authors of his generation, such as Ángel González, Claudio Rodríguez and José Ángel Valente. Winning the Cervantes Prize in 2006 was the culmination of a journey that began with a handful of poems published in journals, entitled *La tierra y los labios* ('*The Earth and the Lips*', 1949), and a book called *Sublevación inmóvil* ('*Immobile Uprising*'), runner-up for the prestigious Adonáis Prize in 1960. Despite this, many of his subsequent books either were censored, as with *Blues castellano* ('*Castilian Blues*', not published until twenty years after it was written), or enjoyed a certain academic prestige that did not translate into media success, such as one of his major collections of poetry, *Descripción de la mentira* ('*Description of the Lie*', 1977), which we will discuss at length in this article. His most important publications, *Libro del frío* ('*Book of Cold*') and *Arden las pérdidas* ('*Losses are Burning*'), are a breath of fresh air for a literary milieu often wedded to tired formulae, fashions, but not to true poets or prominent works.

Because of this Gamoneda, who was born in Oviedo but has spent much of his life in León, has often repeated his dissent from the generalised climate of conformism and resignation in the arts today, his distance from the complicated debates in discussions of poetry that lay down the boundaries between groups, genres and spaces dedicated to poetry. Gamoneda has proved inflexible on attending fairs and the trading of authors, prizes and media movements, the flows of power that build up and knock down modern legends, that commercial faction that moves poetry and requires its qualities and textures to be judged financially and quantitatively. The works of our author have never towered over certain skills of conciliation towards the public, sometimes displaying a baroque style little disposed to making business concessions. Although, in the words of Amaia Iturbide, "el barroco de Antonio Gamoneda, alejado de cualquier atisbo de retórica, es un barroco denso, exacto, un barroco soñado y siempre atento a la tensión limpia de la las palabras" (Iturbide, 2007: 96).

A baroque style which in a way will break some of the moulds and rules of representation will relegate language to its functional rather than representative dimension and so will break away from the principles that consolidate the basis of memory, the writing of memory. Our article will address this experience of language, this loss of frames of reference which moves Gamoneda's more mature works and makes his words an attempt at rewriting, at attempt to

“unauthorise” the powers and forces that have collaborated in writing history via various mechanisms of power.

1. The Types of Oblivion

Oblivion is a constant subject in Gamoneda’s works. Unquestionably, one of his main idiosyncrasies is that we are dealing with oblivion, a forgetting, of historical roots. In other words, this oblivion is not limited to the vicissitudes of life, traumatic experiences or the individual’s fantasies of escape, although these do have a voice in the poetic experience with which the author presents us, but rather the types of oblivion as the poet assumes them are a type of repulsion and rebellion, a kind of transgressive rewriting which aims only to destabilise powers and their products, i.e. Franco’s dictatorship and its version of events in its current expression:

El retorno de lo reprimido, la recuperación de los huecos del olvido que se tejen en el espacio de la memoria, que sustentan los pilares del recuerdo, no implica la suplantación de los acontecimientos que tejieron la Historia, por otros, sino el intento de subvertir el relato del pasado que se hace, y que es, en todo caso, un relato de poder. No hay posibilidad de volver a habitar los huecos del olvido, de reintegrar la ausencia y lo usurpado al tiempo en que se vivió, pero sí de transformar, mediante su evocación reflexiva y crítica, el relato del presente (Lanz, 2009: 340-341).

In his memoirs, Gamoneda made explicit this need to “penetrar en el olvido y hacer intelectual y sentimentalmente presente lo que parecía no estar ya en mí ni en nadie, reunirme, desnudo y único, con un yo mismo que, a la vez, es extraño” (Gamoneda, 2009: 236). His poetry would represent an effort to capture memory, to penetrate oblivion and to discover in this absence a method of knowing or learning: “Quizá soy transparente y ya estoy solo sin saberlo. En cualquier caso ya la única sabiduría es el olvido” (2004: 475). In that case, what kind of knowledge would access to oblivion entail? What type of learning can be associated with what from any angle looks like a lack of knowledge or learning, a kind of blankness or emptiness containing nothing at all? In a way, oblivion seems to wipe from the memory the falsehoods peddled by authority, the fallacies of all knowledge, a deconstructive force which would act to unbalance and erase what has been learned. Gamoneda’s writing would therefore be a writing of oblivion, a poetry of unremembering, beyond knowledge or intercepting it as it is composed, in its falsified categories and dimensions, to present us with the machinery of knowledge without bringing it together or composing it, its threads uprooted from their context, the shreds of memory, knowledge, sense, in a separation that pays no heed to relationships of any kind.

His poetry therefore provides an implicit criticism of memory:

Mi memoria es maldita y amarilla como un río sumido desde hace muchos años.
 Mi memoria es maldita. Más allá, antes de la memoria, un país sin retorno, acaso sin existencia:
 hierba muy alta y dulce, siesta en la densidad: aquella miel sobre los párpados.
 Era la exudación y se penetraba el tiempo. Los insectos se fecundaban sin cesar y la serenidad nos poseía. Pero aquel tiempo no existió: sucedió en la inmovilidad como la música antes de su división.
 Mi memoria es maldita y amarilla como el residuo indestructible de la hiel. (2004: 182-183)

The curse of Gamoneda's memory will correspond to the hardships of Franco's regime. Like Foucault, Gamoneda knows that power has a dominating effect in all fields, especially what we say and write: memory acts as a discourse, a narrative, which has been cursed since its beginnings by its connections with power, its direct relationship with pro-Franco influences and the aggression of its oppressive structures, structures which are not only institutional or direct (persecution, a repressive police state, schools and universities in Franco's ideological mould) but also *discursive*. A series of discourses which affect all areas of knowledge, which have built and shaped our knowledge, our memory, and which Gamoneda's poetry, like an "innominada figuración espectral de lo histórico" (Rodríguez de la Flor, 2008: 8), must overcome by means of a pact with oblivion: "Está bien juventud, ¿por qué voy a olvidarte inútilmente? / Voy a pactar con tu desaparición y tú me serás dócil como manteca puesta sobre la garganta" (2004: 191).

What does oblivion mean for Antonio Gamoneda? Oblivion operates on many different levels, from a break with memory itself or from historical events to an abandonment of *identity itself*.

Quizá me sucedo a mí mismo. No sé quien pero alguien ha muerto en mí. También olía la desaparición y estaba amenazado por la luz, pero hoy es otro el cuchillo delante de mis ojos.
 No quiero ser mi propio extraño, estoy entorpecido por las visiones. Es difícil poner luz todos los días en las venas y trabajar en la retracción de rostros desconocidos hasta que se convierten en rostros amados y después llorar porque voy a abandonarlos o porque ellos van a abandonarme.
 Qué
 estupidez tener miedo al borde de la falsedad y qué cansancio abandonar la inexistencia y morir después todos los días. (Gamoneda, 2004: 465)

Nietzsche criticised this aspect of human nature which is linked to memory; for him, memory was a machine whose purpose was to unite all subjectivity decisively, a kind of tool for survival built by manipulating sensory information. This deception, this false

structuring of information received by the senses would be stratified and would eventually mould all levels of experience, from language to higher institutions, from literary tales to other types of narrative such as science, philosophy and history, all constructions based on the errors of metaphysics. Thought and memory would also be part of this diegesis, of narrative and its aims and chains of events, and therefore also of its errors and lapses. Thus Gamoneda's word aims to disrupt or deconstruct this historical fiction of subjectivity as well as of history.

This is the subject addressed by *Descripción de la mentira*. Oblivion, the writing of oblivion, is linked to this description/deconstruction of memory (the "lie") and of the forces which bind subjectivity together. As a result, in many parts of this collection of poetry a pivotal expository structure has been chosen which moves between the I, the you and the he, an other which is always an I, but an I made manifest by a division, a dodging of subjectivity, an I with no narrative, no diegesis, like a gap or track for a subjectivity that does not come, that is never fully constructed.

Despite this, Gamoneda's poetry does feature many narratives. Narratives on life, on his childhood, on the experience of death and on his childhood memories of the hardships of Franco's regime:

Todos los gestos anteriores a la deserción están perdidos en el interior de la edad.
Imaginad un viajero alto en su lucidez y que los caminos se deshiciesen delante de sus pasos y que las ciudades cambiasen de lugar: el extravío no está en él mas sí el furor y la inutilidad del viaje.
Así fue nuestra edad: atravesábamos las creencias.
Los que sabían gemir fueron amordazados por los que resistían la verdad, pero la verdad conduje a la traición.
Algunos aprendieron a viajar con su mordaza y éstos fueron más hábiles y adivinaron un país donde la traición no es necesaria: un país sin verdad.
Era un país cerrado; la opacidad era la única existencia. (2004: 178)

To the author, oblivion is a power that "unwrites" the power of Franco's regime, its learnt constructions, because writing oblivion will act as counterwriting, non-writing, without the syntax of narrative and without the stigmas of chronological order, cause and effect or narrative structure. Oblivion will be written in this chink, this intermediate space between what is remembered and what is not remembered, this junction where things are transparent: "¿Qué harías si tu memoria estuviera llena de olvido? Todas las cosas son transparentes: cesan las escrituras y cae lluvia dentro de los ojos" (2004: 202). The writer Guadalupe Grande wrote the following about these lines and other verses by Gamoneda:

El poeta como testigo de la memoria, de la memoria de lo que no tiene voz, como el testigo del olvido, de lo perdido que sigue ardiendo dentro

de la visión, de lo extraviado en la luz y que, paradójicamente, sólo se puede recuperar en el reverso de esa luz, en el otro lado del párpado. Ha de llover sobre nuestros párpados, han de llover palabras sobre nuestros párpados para que podamos acercarnos a la visión del mundo, ha de llover sobre nuestros párpados, como sobre los juicios sumarísimos, para que la memoria no se llene de olvido. Y mientras esperamos esa lluvia, mientras esa lluvia de vocablos comienza a caer, el alto testigo que es la poesía de Antonio Gamoneda nos empuja suavemente hacia esa inminencia, le restituye a la palabra poética su carácter de testigo (Grande, 2009: 149-150).

However, here Grande makes the mistake of overlooking the positive function of oblivion in Gamoneda's works, its ability to unwrite the history which has been imposed upon us and break with the tangle of narratives that make up what we have learnt. As a result the aim is not to compose poetry in order to *bear witness*, although in the book *Lápidas* ('*Tombstones*') we can find tales along these lines (but under the fearsome tombstone itself): it is to break with the flows of power that determine our history, the tangles of tales which do not belong to us and which we cannot control, the plots that configure the narrative of our own lives. In the author's paragraph, the rain would act as a force that erases the signs of memory, like a break with the diegesis of memory, not like writing or a "rain of words". In any case, the poetic word should be seen as a *rain of tracks*, a force that pierces discourses or inverts them. In a way, oblivion would be a return to the country of childhood, the country that was not built on a lie, from the glazes of words and the discourses of victors. The poet will be pushed to "atravesar el olvido" until he arrives at "los desvanes de la infancia", a remote spot in memory, the seed of that *blank memory* (2004: 338), with no memories, which would consist of childhood and would not yet have had to portray the horrors of Franco's regime on its pages:

En los desvanes habitados por palomas cuyas alas tiemblan entre
tinieblas y cristales
veo la pureza de rostros que se forman en la lluvia y
lágrimas sobre úlceras amarillas.
Son los desvanes de la infancia. Voy
atravesando olvido. (2004: 417)

The poet will describe this oblivion as a territory, a place or home country, the place before betrayal: betrayal of the feelings and the narratives of memory, and betrayal by the pro-Franco victors of the vanquished: "El olvido es mi patria vigilada y aún tuve un país más grande y desconocido" (2004: 221). The critic and poet Miguel Casado highlighted Antonio Gamoneda's ability to write poems without narrative structure: facts appear fragmented into feelings, details emerge which do not allow us to compose a scene, do not refer to a comprehensive context, thanks to which "ecos de tiempos anteriores" are transported: an obsessive core absorbs all the cores

of narration to “internalise” the whole (Casado, 2004: 580)

The following fragment provides an example of a non-narrative:

Las hortensias extendidas en otro tiempo decoran la estancia más arriba
de mi cuerpo.
He sentido el grito de los faisanes acorralados en las ramas de agosto.
Un animal invisible roe las maderas que también están más allá de mis
ojos
y así se aumenta la serenidad y prevalece el olor de la mostaza que fue
derramada por mi madre. (2004: 195)

The poet seems to have brought various scenes together in order to (de)compose his life story: hydrangeas, the cry of pheasants, mustard spilt by his mother, and so on. It is not really important which fragments belong to the poet’s real life and which do not; in fact, it is this uncertainty as to what he confirms to us and what is part of his imagination, or has been heightened by his imagination, that drives us to keep reading. Holes, unresolved periods of time, open up and break with the narrative; they separate the verses like unconnected islands. “Se construye el olvido” through this access to memory which finally does not complete it but highlights still further the blank spaces that remain between memories. Words become metaphors in a gap, presences to indicate this nothing that breaks with our memory. Words “señalan” oblivion.

The dictatorship in which our author lived would have made use of oblivion in order to suspend historical memory and rewrite the recent past of those who survived the disastrous Spanish Civil War. The new tale of the pro-Franco myth would be reflected to its full ostentatious, falsified extent in the book *Descripción de la mentira*, the title of which is particularly eloquent: subtly removed from complaint or simpler rebellion, to give us via this detour of the “olvido del olvido” a certainty that to some extent is the absence of a falsified truth, a rhetoric of disappearance which attacks the discourses of power of earlier times. For it is exactly this distance (the book dates from 1977) that makes it possible to write for the sake of counterwriting; this is the power of oblivion: not writing history but “unwriting” it:

Sólo el silencio, el cese de toda escritura puede plasmar el lenguaje del olvido; sólo el silencio puede constatar la presencia del hueco, del vaciado, de la destrucción, de la verdad elidida y usurpada sin construir una nueva falsedad, sin rellenar esa ausencia con una nueva mentira. «Cesan las escrituras» y las palabras se tornan «palabras incomprensibles». El silencio se convierte entonces en la palabra del olvido, que dice la ausencia sin falsearla, que hace presente lo elidido en su propia ausencia (Lanz, 2009: 350).

A great deal of Gamoneda’s poetry will be built against this space in reality which is always a falsified legacy, a tale that has been learnt,

and plays at contorting its own words in the empty space on the page, alluding to the invisible, the unreal as a power which unwrites the fictional tale which has been falsely imposed upon us:

Esta hora no existe, esta ciudad no existe, yo no veo estos álamos, su geometría en el rocío.

Sin embargo, éstos son los álamos extinguidos, vértigo de mi infancia.

Ah jardines, ah números. (2004: 341)

The abyss between adulthood and childhood will be a major subject as the poet confronts the webs of his own memory. However, as Casado states again (2009: 241), the poet has moved from “ver” to “visión”, a vision which he internalises at the same time as it “intensifica” (“hace arder”, in the terminology of his symbolic thought) life as loss. Once again we are taking a detour in order to include Gamoneda’s work *Arden las pérdidas* in our discourse. Imagination brings the past to life, but on the assumption that it *burns*, the assumption of its writing emphasised, giving complete presence to the words, to their semantic and imaginative attraction. Memory can only be borne by the oblivion that is poetry, by its flirtatious compliments and fabrications, by its legendary dimension that makes memory a fiction destined for the oblivion of the poem.

Poetry cannot salvage memory, it cannot encode the true facts of the past or the present itself, it will never be able to tell those childhood experiences that now seem a product of the labyrinthine twists and turns of memory. In contrast, it is precisely poetry that makes it possible to drive back oblivion, to activate the gaps, the spaces offered to us by the historical constitution of our identity, to give voice to the countless gaps in perception, to the indescribable instances of remembering and seeing: “He oído la campana de la nieve, he visto el hongo de la pureza, he creado el olvido” (2004: 308). Thus we trade the reality of words on paper, their symbols, for the unreality of the space in which we live; that tendency poetry has to take shape and appear between things, in a world of things like poplars or stones, betrays the idea that perhaps reality is not what we thought, that we will not be able to salvage the event but will be able to encode that distance that separates us from the phenomenon using the signs that take its place. Oblivion is bound to impossibility: it truly is impossible to forget to the extent to which oblivion separates us from what we have forgotten by a deletion, by a track of tracks, a distance from what had had already been moved away between the seams of memory; a type of pulling back, Casado would say:

memoria y *olvido* siguen siendo opuestos; pero no lo son en el sentido normal, excluyente, en que lo recordado no puede estar también olvidado, pues esta memoria *está llena de olvido*. Mientras la *memoria* se encuentra gobernada por la conciencia, es el recinto que guarda sus verdades y la crudeza de sus discursos, el *olvido* parece ser en

Gamoneda un hálito de huellas –«siento la suavidad de las palabras olvidadas»–, un depósito sentimental y sensitivo que permite vivir. Tejiéndose como en una red con los demás términos, el *olvido* tiene mucho como de elección voluntaria que se acerca al campo de otra palabra básica, la *retracción* (Casado, 2009: 104, cursiva en el original).

Gamoneda writes his oblivion. Poetry opens the channel of difference, leaves us the sediment of the unstructured, a non-discourse that floats in the waters of memory without becoming submerged in them: to write is to forget, it is to build our oblivion, it is to tack together a fiction, the fiction of gaps which from that point onwards all interpretations will try to delimit, to fill with the power of their words. Thus we are dealing with a series of texts that develop against history, offering us not another version but the absence of a version, the broken mirror of this period of time and the unbearable machine of subjectivity. Poetry, therefore, to strip away the thick layer of dust that covers discourses, in order to reach not purity (which the author insists is no less pestilent) but the disappearance of all discourse, all rote imposition of the truth, of the *I*, of others, of so many narratives which people decided to write at a cost of power, at a cost of blood and the hardships of those for whom they were intended.

2. Conclusions

Antonio Gamoneda's poetry is a direct confrontation with the historical events of Franco's dictatorship. Throughout his works, we see how subjects are modulated, how memory salvages or hides, restores or dismantles memories, rewrites them using the tools of lyrical resources of its verses or bares its voice to declare directly that "Cuanto ha sucedido no es más que destrucción" (2004: 192). Thus we may say that the works of our author are balanced between the construction of memory and the construction of oblivion, which at times prompts him to equip the tale with the devices of the most conventional narrative ("Mi cuerpo pesa en la serenidad y mi fortaleza está en recordar", 2004: 179), or to deconstruct the twists and turns of his own memory and develop a display of oblivion ("Me he extenuado inútilmente / en los recuerdos y las sombras", 2004: 455). The poetic word condemns how severely our version of real events is damaged by a series of mechanisms that take possession of the events around us which construct our identity. Existence is an intertext, a tangle of discourses, a biographical experience, life broken down into pen strokes, writing; however, Gamoneda's poetry will try to break with the power of the narrative, the word and memory, in what Gamoneda calls a "construcción del olvido".

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