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BARTHESIAN WRITING AGAINST OBLIVIONS (A VIEW FROM SPAIN)

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Article || Upon Request | Published: 01/2015

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Abstract || This article tries to clarify misunderstandings surrounding the reception of Barthes in Spanish literary and intellectual fields during the years of late Francoism and the transition to democracy. We will explain why the thesis of Barthes on the problems of language and the “death of the author” were perceived as an anti-historical and unengaged theoretical activity in Spain. The second part of this study analyzes Barthes’ testimonial literature which could ultimately reveal affinities with the literary needs of Spanish historical memory, still active nowadays.*

Keywords || Barthes | Memory | Francoism | Transition | Realism | Testimony

* This article was originally published in French by the Barthes team of the Institut des textes et Manuscrits modernes in *Revue Roland Barthes*, num. 1, June 2014. Thanks to the author for the authorization to publish it in this monograph and translate it to Spanish, Catalan, Basque and English. The original article is available at <http://www.roland-barthes.org/article_pino.html>.

1 | Concerning these usages of rhetoric in the communication of affect, see the article by Adrien Chassain "La rhétorique est la dimension amoureuse de l'écriture: communication ordinaire et conversion théorique chez Roland Barthes", published in edition number 1 of the *Revue Roland Barthes*: <http://www.roland-barthes.org/article_chassain.html> [18/7/2015].

0. Introduction

Beyond the desire to say (*dire*) and to say who one is (*se dire*), language appears to help us very little. As Barthes explains in his prologue to *Essais critiques*, only a few functions —“je désire, je souffre, je m'indigne, je conteste, j'aime, je veux être aimé, j'ai peur de mourir” (Barthes, 1964: 278), and a few techniques— such as rhetoric and irony, constitute the material with which we must fight in order for the message destined for the other to reach him, as if by magic, adapted as much as possible to the “truth” of our affects. For Barthes, this demand—unique to affective communication—has much in common with the stakes of writing.¹ The goal of the writer, Barthes states, is not to “exprimer l'inexprimable” but to “inexprimer l'exprimable” (Barthes, 1964: 279). It is the poverty of “la langue du monde” of the first speech (*parole*) “trop nommée”, that the writer can extract “une parole autre, une parole exacte”, by collecting from the day-to-day banality the four drops of the sublime capable of introducing into the work a bit of that *literariness* that the Russian formalists attempted to delimit.

This desire to name that which gives the unspeakable its power appears multiple times throughout Barthes' work through an allegory which compares the writer to Orpheus. The writer, like Orpheus, in this desire to claim who he is (*se dire*), encounters the same constitutive impossibility “L'interdiction de se retourner sur ce qu'ils aiment” (Barthes, 1964: 280). Looking at Eurydice—the source of inspiration of Orpheus—brings about the disappearance of her face in the desert/wasteland of the real. What remains for the writer is the possibility of saving the dryad—the unspeakable—by varying, or by destroying language, as in Mallarméan poetry. It is in this search for the impossible that Barthes situates the tragic dimension of the writer. As he states in *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*, the writer cannot create “sans perdre, tel Orphée se retournant, la stable signification de sa démarche et le geste essentiel de sa sociabilité” (Barthes, 1953: 177). The unique pact that connects the writer to society is precisely the destruction of this very pact: the moral responsibility, through writing, of creating the rupture in language that the world offers him at his birth.

The utopian language that Barthes anticipates [entrevoit] in modern writing, by investing in the wound that dissociates the relationship of words and things, appears distant from the responsibility that Spanish critique assigns to literature during the end of Francoism and the beginning of the transition to democracy. While Barthes confronts the realist discourse in order to affirm *a contrario* the prevalence of form

as moral, Spanish literary critique counters with a relentless desire for reality. Already the writer Juan Goytisolo, residing in Paris during the 1960s and a reader of French literary theory of the period—Barthes included²—attempted to clarify the causes of this gap between French and Spanish critique. In the article “Los escritores españoles frente al toro de la censura” (1967), Goytisolo explains:

Mientras los novelistas franceses [...] escriben sus libros independientemente de la panorámica social en que les ha tocado vivir [...], los novelistas españoles [...] responden a esta carencia de sus lectores trazando un cuadro lo más justo y equitativo posible de la realidad que contemplan. De este modo la novela cumple en España una función testimonial que en Francia y los demás países de Europa corresponde a la prensa, y el futuro historiador de la sociedad española deberá apelar a ella si quiere reconstituir la vida cotidiana del país a través de la espesa cortina de humo y silencio de nuestros diarios. (Goytisolo, 1967: 64)

Indeed, it was necessary to discover the reasons for this disagreement between these two modes of critique in the insurmountable distance that separates the political contexts of two countries. When in France literature could be detached from the social protests (*denunciation sociale*) of the moment, in the context of the dictatorship and in the years immediately following its end, the commitment of Spanish literature consisted of detailing the content of reality, in order to witness the daily events that Francoism and the press kept hidden. Nevertheless, after having explained the different contexts of the two literatures and having maintained that the French commitment could not establish itself in Spain for the moment, Goytisolo proclaims a future time where Spanish literature would have a Barthesian, utopian language as its horizon. Goytisolo references Barthes in this desire to incorporate the revolution of writing into the future of Spanish literature and cite, in a curious endnote, “La littérature aujourd’hui” (1961), maintaining:

Aunque, como dice acertadamente Roland Barthes, “la obra más realista no será aquella que pinta la realidad, sino aquella que sirviéndose del mundo como contenido [...] explorará lo más profundamente posible la realidad irreal del lenguaje”. Olvido que [...] determina que, independientemente de su estricto valor testimonial, un gran sector de la novela española de hoy se halle en un callejón sin salida: el del realismo “fotográfico”. (Goytisolo, 1967: 64)

Goytisolo deliberately highlights “l’oubli” that keeps Spanish literature in a state of “down time” and inscribes the Barthesian examination of the “réalité irrédelle du langage” as the future. For Goytisolo, one day this “oubli” must be repaired. Nevertheless, the refusal of Spanish criticism to face the problem of language posed by Barthes will later take on even greater dimensions, which in a way has prevented the reception of certain work to this day. Here it is a matter of considering

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2 | In his essay *El furgón de cola* (1967) the references and quotations from Barthes are multiple. If Goytisolo opposes to the reception of structuralism, he also feels solidarity with the responsibility of forms that Barthes introduces as a characteristic trait of modern writing.

the gap between the French and Spanish literary fields in order to understand the causes of Barthes' "oubli" and to imagine what its return could signify for Spanish literature. If Barthes' struggle against realist and historical discourses, or against the biographicalism of literary studies in his first works, managed to work towards a negative reception of his work in Spain, a reconsideration of the writing of "the personal" in his final works could, on the other hand, reveal affinities with the literary needs of historical memory which are still in the process of being realized today.³ In order to fill in this gap I will attempt to outline Barthes' reception in Spanish literary criticism during the Post-Franco period; then I will propose a reading of Barthes' perspective on historical discourse and narrative realism. Finally, I will attempt to retrace the incursion of Barthes into the literary domain of the private, between 1977 and 1980— a place where the more intimate writing of the present overflows with historical memory. This project of writing could definitively offer Spanish literature a groundbreaking voice, resolutely anchored in history.

1. Barthes forgotten: causes and consequences

1.1 The Spanish realist commitment facing the problem of language in Barthes (seventies)

In *Le degré zero de l'écriture*, Barthes states "l'écriture est précisément ce compromis entre une liberté et un souvenir" (Barthes, 1953: 181); in other words, that the moral responsibility of the writer is to insert into the tradition to which he belongs the formal task of a language which is detached from its norms. This concept of authorial commitment concludes by arriving in Spain twenty years later in a very unstable way. Despite the lack of Spanish translations,⁴ Barthes' work was read partially in French. But because of the difference in context as Luis Goytisolo highlights, Barthes' work did not cause a scandal (Soto, 2002: 180). The reaction to Barthesian theory, rather than scandalous, was skeptical. In fact, in the Spanish context, the new commitment proposed by Barthes in *Le degré zero de l'écriture* could have represented the heart of the dispute regarding committed art and what Spain was hoping to achieve. Barthes' affirmation according to which the convention of "écriture petite-bourgeoise"—that which draws attention to [?] reality without putting it into question—had been "reprise par les écrivains communistes" (Barthes, 1953: 213) had notably been rejected by Spanish critique, which followed a completely different path of political commitment. As Goytisolo explains in 1959 in international talks on the novel that took place in Formentor (Mallorca), Spanish writers fiercely defended realist art, facing the formalism of invited foreign writers. In a similar fashion in 1962 during a meeting of Spanish and Soviet writers

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3 | The work of historical memory in Spain concerning the events of the civil war and the dictatorship has always been the cause of polemics and especially silences. The Moncloa Pacts, signed in 1977 between the principal Spanish political parties to establish the constitutive bases of the democratic state, there was a consensus forbidding confrontation. Writer and journalist Manuel Vázquez Montalán repeats multiple times that the right as much as the left during the democratic transition decided to forget historical memory. Unfortunately the crimes committed during Francoism continue today to be the object numerous interrogations.

4 | The first works of Barthes published in Spain are a Spanish translation of *Essais critiques*, published in 1967 and Seix Barral, a Catalan translation of *Critique et vérité, suivi des Nouveaux essais critiques* in 1973 by Edicions 62. During the seventies, translations of Barthes into Spanish were reduced to *Elementos de semiología* in 1971 by Alberto Corazón; *Sistema de la moda* in 1978 by Gustavo Gili, and *Roland Barthes por Roland Barthes* in 1978 by Kairós. The rest of the Spanish translations of these years came from Latin America. The publications of Barthes' work in Spain did not begin until 1982, the year the Socialist party came to power and the end of the Democratic transition. In order to see a more detailed chronology of Barthes' work, see the article "Barthes en Espagne" by Luis G Soto, published in number 268 in *the Review des Sciences Humaines* dedicated to Barthes.

that took place at the *Congrès de la Communauté Européenne d'Écrivains* in Florence, while the Russians spoke about abstract art and lyric poetry, the Spaniards, referencing Brecht and Lukács, wanted to dismantle formalism. The most determined defenders of social protests, Spanish writers had as their goal the creation of a novel based on traditional realism involving working through a clear and direct language that could not be put in question. The formal commitment Barthes articulates that destroys any referential concept and brings the writer to a tragic perspective facing the world could not be translated in the literary context during these years, precisely because the “tragedy” was lived daily by Spanish citizens. “Para los escritores españoles, la realidad es nuestra única evasión” (Goytisolo, 1967: 64) such was the conclusion of Goytisolo. We can then understand how facing the absence of the freedom of expression and the *unreality* that Spaniards lived daily under Francoism the challenge to the sincerity of the autobiographical project of Leiris to which Goytisolo pays homage in his title, or the destruction of language in Mallarmé that Barthes adopts were considered to be secondary subjects or simply ignored. If Barthes understood history “comme l'avènement d'une option nécessaire entre plusieurs morales du langage” (Barthes, 1953: 171), in Spain anti-Francoist writers understood history as a double-edged sword— one could be with history or against history; with Franco or against Franco.

During the sixties, the epistemological shift that took place in France following the Lacanian concept of the unconscious structured as a language or the Foucauldian concept of the subject as effect of enunciation—that we can read in Barthes' intertext—remained distant from the Spanish perspective. Yet once French theory was received by Spanish writers, especially after the death of Franco, the reaction of the literary field was even more negative. Even if Barthes was read during the sixties, it was in the mid-seventies that some writers began to apply the Barthesian theories to the text and the responsibility of forms.⁵ Nevertheless, this literary practice was not valued by the criticism of these years.

1.2. Death of the disillusioned author (seventies)

In Catalonia, a group of writers and critics inspired by the impact of the theories of *Tel Quel* began to experiment with textualism. As Margalida Pons explains, during the seventies the reception of Barthes and Kristeva in Catalonia is essential: “Interessa especialment el vessant postestructuralista de l'obra de Barthes, representat en el seu assaig *Le plaisir du texte*; interessa la teoria de la intertextualitat de Julia Kristeva...” (Pons, 2007: 37). If the elements of semiology and narrative analysis were the most studied aspects of Barthes in Spanish universities, as the technical vocabulary escaped censorship, in contrast: “els joves narradors veuen en Barthes no l'analista

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5 | This literary work coincides precisely with the first Spanish translation of *Degré zéro de l'écriture* that arrived in Spain in 1973 thanks to a translation done by Nicolás Rosa in Argentina.

estructural de la literatura, sino el teòric del llenguatge com a lloc de desig, jouissance i diferència” (Pons, 2007: 38). The influence of *Plaisir du texte*, the article on the death of the author, and the concept of intertextuality, which engage a critique of discourse of the real and that considers the text as a moment outside of literature was incredibly popular amongst writers such as Biel Mesquida—in his poems as well as the homage to French theory entitled *L’Adolescent de sal* (1975), a sort of homoerotic autobiography saturated with citations of Barthes and Kristeva—and other Spanish language authors, such as Juan Goytisolo and Enrique Tierno Galván, introduced desire and sexuality as literary subjects during these years. The Kristevian theory of the genotext and the Barthes’ concepts of *plaisir* and of *jouissance* were also integrated into writing the body which became a means for confronting the repressive morality of the period. The text, as they understood it, is defined by Mesquida as “un situarse en la frontera misma entre lo simbólico y lo pulsional” (Mesquida, 1977: 48); or said in another way, as the liberation of the “I” and a transgression of the discourse of power.

This influence of textualism is accompanied by a belated reading of Barthes’ early [premiere] work. Some/certain critics reacted along with the idea that Barthes highlights in *Critique et vérité*, according to which all critique is ideological, or with the proposition already mentioned [déjà annoncé] in *Le degré zero de l’écriture*, according to which all instances of speech [prise de parole] possess moral responsibility. The reception of Barthesian ideas is at the heart of a roundtable on textualism (“El text(isme) : una literatura diferent”) organized and directed by Alex Broch in 1977, at which the most innovative Catalan writers of the period participated. One year later, in the first edition of the review *Diwan*, Biel Mesquida writes:

En l’escriptura no hi ha atzar. Si l’escriptor no fa una tria –lligada sempre a una teoria– en fer les seves línies, l’inconscient triarà per ell: la teoria dels sistemes de representació que a Occident dominen des de fa 2 segles i que anomenen ideologia burgesa. (Mesquida, 1978: 44)

In this quote we can easily recognize the Barthesian “responsibility” of the choice of language of the writer facing the lure of objectivity. This necessity of linguistic choice gives rise to diverse and experimental texts full of conceptual games that rupture syntax and crown the reign of the signifier. Unfortunately however the work of these young writers was not well received by critics and readers. In the first place, critics considered these textual experiments ridiculous to the point of making them an object of parody⁶; on the other hand, the more traditional literary critics considered these experiments simply exercises without social consequence nor did they participate in the communal project of Catalan literature proposed: to reestablish Catalan literature after forty years of censorship. In 1977 in order to

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6 | As Pons explains, “la recepció d’aquestes idees és diferent en funció dels escriptors que se’n fan ressò; si uns mostren la seva fascinació envers l’escriptura antireferencial, d’altres la veuen amb escepticisme rialler” (Pons, 2007: 42).

defend the young writers of this school the professor Jordi Llovet, one of the first to introduce French literary theory to Spanish universities, reflected on the difficult reception of avant-garde theory. In a report regarding an anthology of experimental narrative titled “Self-service” he maintains:

Quién sabe si al vanguardismo catalán le ha tocado en suerte avanzar al tiempo [...]. Atentar contra las Bellas Letras [...] es, en Cataluña, sinónimo de antipatriotismo. Craso error o verdad dolorosa para el hijo encantado. (Llovet, 1977: 48)

Indeed the new sons of Catalan literature found it difficult to connect the avant-garde with patriotism and subversion of tradition. But outside of the problem of national identity, Llovet’s reflection is evidence of the fact that the year 1977 was too premature for the supporters of textualism and the death of the author. Alongside this parodic critique of experimentation and the problem of language, a third critique is born, more destructive and more aggressive, stretching across Spain, which becomes the largest obstacle to the reception of Barthes. It is in Catalonia, as Pons explains, that there appears a traditional group that demonstrated “una resistència a acceptar que la denúncia de la realitat [...] es vehiculi purament a través del llenguatge” (Pons, 2007: 22). These new textual exercises were also perceived as distant from the social needs of a country in post-Franco reconstruction, while the concept of literature as text and the progressive disappearance of the author were read by Spanish criticism as ahistorical and lacking in political commitment. The literary production of these authors was critiqued for its elitism and its obscurantism, for its statutory problematization of the relationship between author and reader and, finally, for having dissociated literature from its social task. This position was defended, for example, by the collective of writers *Trencavel*, who referred to the members of *Tel Quel* as the “les Christian Dior de la littérature catalane” (Trencavel, 1975: 23). Other reputed writers also regarded anti-referential literature with skepticism, judging it to be the end of the novel. Maria Aurèlia Capmany, one of the most prominent realist novelists of the time, writes:

Si us n’aneu a París de la França, ciutat especialment sensible a la moda i creadora de modes, descobrireu que això de la novel·la ja no es porta i que avui l’escriptor que es vol al dia escriu un *text*. [...] Queda ben clar que allò que li ofereixen és un text, és a dir, és el producte d’una nova tècnica que no ens podem atrevir a anomenar narrativa perquè la seva finalitat no és narrar res. (Capmany, 1978: 22)

Capmany, like the majority of leftist writers of Marxist orientation, considers these textual experiments banal, aristocratic products, which lack political commitment. According to this perspective, the idea of the death of the author and the concept of literature as

deadly cannot find a field of favorable reception. The “deaths” of the author proclaimed by Barthes and Foucault, the idea according to which the author is a construction of the text where it possesses a function of classification, influenced a group of Spanish writers who desired to understand the text as a phenomenon which exceeds the limits of literature and which escapes the arrogance of signification. Meanwhile, the death of the author, in place of realizing itself in the textual domain during the transition in Spain, took a different artistic path, dissociating more criticism from literary praxis of the period. Poets who heartbreakingly bemoaned lamented the day “quan els cucs faran un sopar fred amb el meu cos” (Ferrater, 1968: 62), such as Gabriel Ferrater, or Jaime Gil de Biedma, who entitled his memoirs *Diario de un artista seriamente enfermo* (1974)—“diary of a seriously ill writer”. Furthermore there are the novels in which authors die, as in *Contraataquen* (1977) by Carles Reig or *Esquinçalls d’una bandera* (1977), d’Oriol Pi de Cabanyes, or the films such as *Arrebato* (1979) by Iván Zulueta, where in the end the director is devoured by his work, are a few examples of the death of the author applied to literature of the transition. Nevertheless this death of the author, rather than being understood as a refusal of the biographism which animated some areas of literary studies, appeared in Spanish literature as an example of the pessimistic attitude and disillusion which characterized the daily life of young Spaniards during the democratic transition. It is during this period known as the disenchantment, after the death of Franco, which a large number of Spanish artists and intellectuals lived through, that the death of the author could have been considered a symptom of the disillusionment.

It is because of these textual games, and the death of the author taken as a metaphor of the idleness of writers, that a good part of Spanish critique, during a time of disruption of national linguistic codes on the right and on the left, responded with virulent denunciation of textualism as an apolitical, even conservative, movement. The commitment of intellectuals like Barthes or Foucault whose works had as their goal the description of the processes of the formation of the signified and the dismantling of the processes of the naturalization of discourse, were perceived as an elitist and politically uncommitted theoretical activity. Writer Félix de Azúa, during these years, went as far as to say that the new critics and Spanish writers only had in common their academicism, and that they merely repeated the same themes dating back to the sixties and seventies: “Para nosotros, Tel Quel y derivados, Lacan y derivados son pura academia, no es vanguardia, sino todo lo contrario, conservadurismo extremo” (Azúa, 1978: 45).⁷

1.3. Barthes: Anti-historical?

The gap between the objectives of “*telquelism*” in its context and Spanish reception took a more violent nature with time, to the point of

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7 | Still today, Azúa continues to resist the French theory of these years. In 2005 he published an article in the newspaper *El País* entitled “Borrón y cuenta nueva” where he blames the lack of political responsibility of contemporary Spain on the influence of Barthes and *Le Plaisir du texte*. Azúa argues [dit]: “Barthes, como muchos de sus amigos o discípulos de la época, Althusser, Deleuze, Kristeva, Sollers, Pleyner, Sarduy, ¡tantos otros ya desaparecidos!, influyeron decisivamente sobre mi generación y acentuaron la tendencia a la irresponsabilidad secular en nuestro país. Hoy, desde el poder (y no me refiero a Zapatero y su equipo, como es lógico, pues son más jóvenes), la vieja generación se encuentra inerme frente a la crítica. No han sido nunca criticados en serio, y si alguien lo intentó, fue lapidado. He aquí su mayor debilidad, justo antes del retiro. Y ésa es también la razón por la que a cualquier reserva o desacuerdo sobre su trabajo responden con esa estupidez en forma de insulto: ‘¡Facha!’” (Azúa, 2005).

leading to a false conception of the French theoretical avant-garde. At the end of the 1970s, the idea even circulated that the loss of value in the Spanish intellectual field found its origin in the theories of Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault. Because of this disdain, their theories were confused with those of historical relativism that lead to the absence of all truth, including the victims of history. Lacan and Foucault had killed the subject, Franco was at death's door and the Marxist Spanish intellectual found himself without a voice due to the void left by the desertion of the "subject". As Augenia Afinoguénova explains in *El idiota superviviente. Artes y letras españolas frente a la muerte del hombre, 1969-1990*, between the end of sixties and the middle of the seventies, there was "un consenso común, que tachaba de oportunistas las ideas de Foucault, el cual había depositado el pensamiento de Marx en el archivo de los filósofos del siglo XIX" (Afinoguénova, 2002: 38). In the view of Spaniards, the death of man had left a "bête survivante" and had destroyed all Marxist values. In order to give an example, it is necessary to consider the question posed to us by the writer Manuel Vázquez Montalbán in his *Manifiesto subnormal*, published in 1970: "Quel homme est mort?". Behind the reference to Foucault, his response is incredibly critical: the man who died in 1970 is the victim of history, because of "la fácil victoria del cinismo relativizador, paradójicamente dogmático"⁸ of the European intelligentsia, Montalbán concludes, who thinks that this intelligentsia helped leave behind a dehumanized man, predisposed to consumption and in line with the neoliberal system. Montalbán's reading of Foucault travels fifteen years later to Barthes. In his *Crónica sentimental de la Transición española* (1985), Montalbán makes a reference to the death of Barthes, a death he sees as symptomatic of the state in which he left history:

Se deja atropellar por un automóvil Roland Barthes, cansado quizá de que sus teorías sobre la Literatura no hubieran hecho ni peor ni mejor la Literatura. Tal vez Barthes quisiera simplemente penetrar en la fuerza vital del olvido mediante la estructura de la muerte: "Si quiero vivir debo olvidar que mi cuerpo es histórico, debo lanzarme hacia la ilusión de que soy un contemporáneo de los jóvenes cuerpos presentes y no de mi propio cuerpo pasado. O sea, periódicamente debo renacer, hacerme más joven de lo que soy [...]. Voy a intentar dejarme llevar por la fuerza de toda vida viviente : el olvido". [...] Legaba Barthes a la posmodernidad su morbosa denuncia de la historicidad, pero la muerte le unió en un destino común con historicistas a la manera de Erich Fromm o Sartre. (Montalbán, 1985: 221-222).

In this quote, besides the irony in this quote concerning critical *failure* and the physical death of Barthes, it is important to note how Montalbán desacralizes Barthesian theory using metaphorical games between the present and the death of the author. Barthes' desire for contemporaneity— linked to his project of *vita nuova*, from which the quotation is taken,⁹ is transferred by Montalbán to the forgetting not of meanings, as Barthes attempts to explain, but the forgetting of

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8 | "Ha sido una burda trampa hacia la propia conciencia realista, la que se ha hecho la inteligencia europea. Vencida en la II Guerra Mundial, aterrada por el mánager y el burócrata, ha recurrido a la fácil victoria del cinismo relativizador, paradójicamente dogmático y apostólico" (Montalbán, 1970: 25).

9 | Barthes' complete quote taken from *Leçon* is as follows: "À cinquante et un ans, Michelet commençait sa *vita nuova*: nouvelle œuvre, nouvel amour. Plus âgé que lui (on comprend que ce parallèle est d'affection), j'entre moi aussi dans une *vita nuova*, marquée aujourd'hui par ce lieu nouveau, cette hospitalité nouvelle [...]. Vient peut-être maintenant l'âge d'une autre expérience: celle de désapprendre, de laisser travailler le remaniement imprévisible que l'oubli impose à la sédimentation des savoirs, des cultures, des croyances que l'on a traversés..." (Barthes, 1978: 446).

the past. In the same way, the reference to the death of the author is displaced from the side of the death of history—“démonciation morbide de l’histoire”. Additionally, this necrological portrait, by opposing the figure of Sartre, positions the figure of Barthes in the realm of anti-historicism. In short, Montalbán, one of the most politically committed writers and journalists in the revitalization of historical memory during the democratic transition, and whose articles were read each week by the readers of *El País*, leaves Barthes on the other side of history and therefore the work of testimony that Spain must realize.

But to categorize Barthes as antihistorical, one must have read him either very poorly or very little. In *Le degré zero de l’écriture*, as well as in previous articles such as “Le discours de l’histoire” (1967) and “L’effet du réel” (1968), Barthes’ analysis of historical discourse and the realist narrative demonstrates that his intention is not to distance himself from social reality, but to draw attention to the mechanisms across which science and history establish a univocal and naturalized relationship to truth facilitated by language and power. In Barthes, positivist historiography, just as the realist novel or photography contemporaneous with him, has as its principal trait to propose the “effect of the real”, to construct the reference as an effect of language. If in historical discourse this effect of the real instantiates the description of the historian as absolute authority, in the realist narrative, by the description of small insignificant details the writer “évite de se laisser entraîner dans une activité fantasmatique” (Barthes, 1968: 87). In other words, the historian just as the realist writer, understanding the reference as outside of language—and not as an effect of—does not run the risk of losing himself in language which only reflects on itself. Starting from the problem of discourse, Barthes quite simply denounces the confusion brought about by historicism and realism between signifier and referent, confusion that gets in the way of meaning in order to have the last word. Barthes, in his fight against the arrogance of asserted meaning (of which historical and realist discourses are exemplary) does not then adopt an antihistorical position, but rather anti-genetic. Through his critique, Barthes invites the writer to inscribe himself in history and to make an effort to implement a language that overturns ancient predicates. Finally, with rupture brought about between signified and referent, Barthes reinvests history by protecting it from its positivist heritage.

It is true then that the Barthesian lineage in the Spanish intellectual field gave rise to an unjustified reading of the theory of Barthes; whether this is due to various critical needs according to the situation, or the fact that this biased reading of his work paralleled that of his contemporaries. On the other side of the Pyrenees, Barthes’ attack against realism or even his theories on the death of the author were therefore displaced from their context and found denounced because of the silence of the intellectual and pushed deep into the obscurity

of historical memory during the democratic transition. But if Barthes positioned the death of the author to the center of literary studies, he also promised, after the publication of *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* in 1971, a “retour amical” of the author, a return to the stage in his last three works. In the final days of this singular autobiography, the question of witness emerges, in our view, as a major concern.

2. From the death of the author to the witnessing of life

2.1 Sheltering of the I

In the piece “Nouveau sujet, nouvelle science” in Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes, the author addresses the following question: “Ne sais-je pas que, *dans le champ du sujet, il n’y a pas de référent?*”, a question to which he replies in the following way: “Le fait (biographique, textuel) s’abolit dans le signifiant, parce qu’il *coïncide* immédiatement avec lui” (Barthes, 1975: 637). Barthes, then, in the first place, takes seriously the Foucauldian analysis of the enunciation “I speak” (*parle*) and rejects discourse as a communication of truth on the part of the subject who would be the holder and guarantor. In this way Barthes affirms that “le sujet n’est qu’un effet de langage”.

But then, taking seriously this postulate, does this death of the author condemn the latter to disappear entirely? Or still, as Montalbán says, how can one witness existence, if man is dead?

In Barthes, it is through this new life of the author who crossed the wasteland of death, that of his mother in October of 1977, that testimony is likely to take form and to be transmitted. In this way, Barthes comes to doubt the supposed anti-referentiality that his self-portrait of 1975 claims more strongly. The author, once he has been reborn as a sovereign figure, will reappear in the text as a fictional character through an average voice, constitutive of modern writing, as Barthes declares in his article “Écrire, verbe intransitif?” (1966). In his self-portrait, if Barthes falls into the void of the subject—writing is simple “comme une idée de suicide”—, he recreates himself through the figuration¹⁰ of language. When he designates himself by the pronoun “I”, the author does not cease to state the inconsistency of his ego (*moi*) and mirages of his imaginary. However, in attempting the impossibility of claiming to be (*se dire*), Barthes will take a new path and, following 1975, offers the author a renewed voice that, far from being assignable to one stable and reassuring identity, disperses his existence throughout writing. If the anti-referentialism revolution in Spain appears to give way to silence of the “bete survivante”, in Barthes, the self-immolation of the author becomes finally the cause of his writing, capable of taking from rescuing biographical literature

NOTES

10 | As Paul de Man explains in his article “Autobiography as De-facement” (1979), autobiography is a rhetorical figure of language—*prosopon poien* (mask and person)—through which, in classical tragedy, we give voice to the dead and the absent. In autobiography, this figure confers a language that allows us to give figuration to ourselves, at the same time it strips one of any attributable identity.

from its parasitic direction for returning there in another manner.

In the preface to *Essais critiques*, Barthes maintains that the problem that connects the writer to the world does not have as its goal/answer “d’exprimer ni de masquer son je [...] mais de l’arbitrer” (Barthes, 1964: 280). Between 1977 and 1980 the author assumes the role of writer and brings his findings concerning the problem of language towards the sheltering of his *I*. It is in this thorny terrain of subjectivity in which Barthes will interfere in order to bring to light what he calls “l’intraitable réalité”. The unsayable of the self (*moi*) (“moi” means me as well as “ego” but I think the meaning here is closer to “self”) becomes henceforth a veritable weapon against the processes of the naturalization of meaning. In a parenthetical commentary in *La chambre claire*, Barthes affirms the following: “(La ‘vie privée’ n’est rien d’autre que cette zone d’espace, de temps, où je ne suis pas une image, un objet. C’est mon droit *politique* d’être un sujet qu’il me faut défendre)” (Barthes, 1980: 800). By claiming the mystery of the intimate, Barthes will establish himself as a subject through writing, in order to preserve a place shielded from the violence of language. It is with this Orphean gesture, which carries desire to irreducibility, the uncompromising subject, that Barthes will evoke in his writing, as Eric Marty writes “des expériences profanes, quotidiennes, communes des homes” (Marty, 2002: 18). In this way Barthes will define a terrain where the singularity of the defended individual facing generality ends by appealing to and rendering possible in turn, the inscription of the other in the text.

2.2 Barthes, witness of existence

In the last stage of the Barthesian *œuvre*, the diverse attempts aimed at the performance of the “intractability” of affects—love and mourning/grief, essentially—give way to an autobiographical corpus where Barthes chooses a literature of witnessing. We can distinguish three different styles in Barthes the witness: in the first place, writing the intimate diary, which includes all posthumous diaries *Incidents* and *Soirées de Paris* along with the article “Délibération”; in the second place, Romanesque writing, understood as a project of *vita nuova* in the course at the Collège de France on *La préparation du roman* and articles such as “Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure” and finally in confessional writing, that we find publically in *Journal de deuil* and finally/ending in *La chambre claire*.

In “Délibération”, Barthes first views the personal diary as participating in writing of the imaginary, finally conceding that its status escapes itself: any encounter with the truth manifests itself as impossible. The personal diary comes to signify the inconsistency of the “effet du réel”, becoming in this way a privileged terrain for expressing “le monde comme inessential” (Barthes, 1979: 679). In fragments

from a diary written in Urt in July of 1977—which are reassembled in “Délibération”—as those which he wrote in Morocco in *Incidents*, or still those of *Soirées de Paris*, Barthes appears subjected to the judgment of time during his periods of vacation or imprisoned by the melancholy during his walks. There, Barthes experiences moments of suspension, where the relationship between language and the world appears to break. Under the weight of existence, Barthes thus adopts the position/role of the *flâneur*, simply collecting short anecdotes of the countryside and its inhabitants, conversations heard in passing, or lastly the banality of the weather and the emptiness of moments. In one of the fragments in *Délibération* Barthes writes “Sombres pensées, peurs, angoisses: je vois la mort de l’être cher” (Barthes, 1979: 671). Indeed the gaze of the *flâneur* carries with it existential reflection, but the world’s presence remains suspended—following the desire of the “*neutre*”—throughout the writing of the piece. In the same way, the moments that Barthes collects from the daily life of his mother and his friends, just as the experiences of the people he encounters, are inscribed in the text thanks to a very subtle note, a kind of tremor of feeling to the vanishing point. If we recall one of the fragments from *Incidents*: “L’enfant découvert dans le couloir dormait dans un carton, sa tête émergeait comme coupée” (Barthes, 1987: 956). This note, so close to a haiku, which escapes the closure/foreclosure of the narrative, also leaves an open trace, in dispersing the life of others—in this case, the Moroccan child—in the text. Throughout the collection of these little stories, Barthes achieves the task of witnessing, which at the same time dissipates [?] meaning and realizes [render compte] the existence of his contemporaries. In Barthesian writing of anamnesis—marked by la “ténuité du souvenir” (Barthes, 1975: 685)—we also encounter the captured memory “tel qu’il surgit à l’instant du danger” (Benjamin, 1940: 431) following in a manner comparable to that which Benjamin assigns as the task of the materialist historian. “La mort, la vraie mort, c’est quand meurt le témoin lui-même” (Barthes, 1979: 671) states Barthes. Everything from the intimacy of wandering, to consciousness of the passage of time Barthes stages a diverse and fragile history of the quotidian, by the astute mediation of a diary that transcends the distance of the traditional narrative.

In line with the work of the “intraitable réalité” introduced in the writing of the personal diary, the 1978 lecture “Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure” affirms the desire to re-appropriate the powers of the Proustian novel in order to break with the accepted essayistic method and to initiate a new form of writing. The novel, more than allowing for the representation of an affective order (pathos) offers the opportunity to not put pressure on the other, is also for Barthes a means to

dire ceux que j’aime (Sade, oui, Sade disait que le roman consiste à

peindre ceux qu'on aime), et non pas de leur dire que je les aime (ce qui serait un projet proprement lyrique); j'espère du Roman une sorte de transcendance de l'égotisme, dans la mesure où dire ceux qu'on aime, c'est témoigner qu'ils n'ont pas vécu (et bien souvent souffert) "pour rien". (Barthes, 1978-80: 469)

Barthes presents himself clearly here as a witness to the author, with some particularities that he must emphasize for us: in the first place, Barthes bears witness starting from love, and it is in this way he introduces affect into the objectivity of the biographical discourse. In the second place, Barthes proposes to rescue the lives he loves from the silence of time, so that they do not fall into the shadow/obscurity of history. In the same way that Proust, Tolstoy or Gide spoke of their family in their novels —“dites, à travers l'écriture souveraine, la maladie de la mère de Proust, la mort du vieux prince Bolkonski, la douleur de sa fille Marie (personnes de la famille même de Tolstoï)...”. In the third place Barthes wants to bear witness to the existence of his own from the “moi d'écriture” irreducible from the civil author. Finally, what Barthes wants also to bear witness to is these of those of we love—“ces souffrances sont recueillies, justifiées” — through fiction. In their words, Barthes proposes to [mettre en scene] the unsayable affects that no other discourse would know how to grasp. And the novel, in its turn, becomes the medium of tracing them, so the narrative attributed to the characters gives Barthes sufficient distance to not fall into the assertive and arrogant voice of the essayist. If for Barthes “toute mémoire est déjà *sens*” (Barthes, 1978-80: 42), novelistic fiction that he will realize [realizer] could permit him a “déformation” of memory; in other words, the novel appears to offer the opportunity through writing in the present, to express the inexpressible of language in order to communicate its affects.

But for want of having achieved his novelistic project, it is in *La chambre claire* that Barthes will have developed the desire to speak to those he loves. In positioning himself as a spectator of photography, with a voice that reduced the distance between the time of the narrative and the time of the enunciation, Barthes can write in a more direct manner, he explains “la vérité des affects, non celle des idées” (Barthes, 1980: 469), and following the trend demonstrated in his novelistic project “Je me mets en effet dans la position de celui qui fait quelque chose, et non plus de celui qui parle sur quelque chose” (Barthes, 1980: 470). The fact that, for the first time, Barthes cannot negate the referent demonstrated in photography which implicates the existence of something or of someone who was behind the lens—“telle photo, en effet, ne se distingue jamais de son référent” (Barthes, 1980: 792)—provokes a discussion of his moods, this time under the most harrowing aspect.

The fascination with the particularity of photography, but also the wound which is brought about, comes from the fact that the image shows itself as a living thing [reel vivant] which is already dead, that “elle répète mécaniquement ce qui ne pourra jamais plus se répéter existentiellement”. The thing-as-such (*tel*) of photography—the Real—is its capacity to grasp a reality subjected to the imminent danger of disappearance, of the kind that for once, Barthes finds himself facing the extraordinary singularity of that which was, of the that-which-was, he writes “absolument, irrécusablement présent, et cependant déjà différé” (Barthes, 1980: 851). But this same fascination before the thing-as-such (*tel*) of photography brings the spectator to confront the incapacity of grasping the photographed Real. The referent, contrary to his reassuring status in the historical discourse and in the realist narrative, becomes a paradox- it does not follow the univocal logic of the sign, but it is meaning *per se*, movement, and like the text—the thing-as-such of photography would be the same as the thing as such of the text, Barthes explains—it refers to a presence and an absence, a meaning and a non-meaning, in brief, to a delay.

Like Orpheus before the unspeakable, Barthes, confronted by the intractability of reality, essays a sort of lack that, in its negativity, reclaims a transformation of conscience which he calls the *punctum*: space of mourning and survival to which writing responds by gathering and inscribing affect. The *punctum* also called “flèche” “blessure” or “pique”, comes to shake up Barthes, who collapses and falls into a *fading*. The experience of mourning brings Barthes to witness the existence of those he loves, but in the same way that he experiences in the *Journal de deuil*, the *punctum* that emerges from the rupture between life and death can only open a monologue of pathos. The conscienceness of the impossibility of recounting the existence of the other —“aucune anamnèse ne pourra jamais me faire entrevoir ce temps à partir de moi-même” (Barthes, 1980: 842)— because of the intractable character of the referent, drives Barthes finally to the experience of madness, losing himself in contemplation and the impossible embrace of that which will die, of that which is dead, in the same way that Nietzsche succumbed to madness facing the spectacle of a horse in pain. Nevertheless, speaking for the last time about his loved ones, the confession of Barthes, shaken by the singularity of the reference and going through the experience of death, gives rise to a singular narrative, that which is also an irrefutable contribution to the writing of the history of others. It is because the living and the dead do not coincide, since an irreducible gap that prevents symbolization lies between them, that one can bear witness. As Agamben says, bearing witness “est une impuissance qui accède à la réalité à travers une impuissance de dire” (Agamben, 1998: 159). Before the failure to account for the loved ones, Barthes ends up presenting himself as the last witness of their singularity:

Devant la seule Photo où je vois mon père et ma mère ensemble, eux dont je sais qu'ils s'aimaient, je pense: c'est l'amour comme trésor qui va disparaître à jamais; car lorsque je ne serai plus là, personne ne pourra plus en témoigner: il ne restera plus que l'indifférente Nature. (Barthes, 1980: 865)

Indeed, no one can bear witness any longer to the love of his parents, because their existence, just like Barthes' gaze upon it, attest to the singularity of the intractable reality of each. Attesting to "science impossible de l'être unique" (Barthes, 1980: 847) this paradoxical existence constitutes the same as the one we cannot reduce to the logic of the sign or to the discontinuity of historical discourse. In a note from April 12th 1978 from his *Journal de deuil*, Barthes asks himself "Écrire pour se souvenir? Non pour me souvenir, mais pour combattre le déchirement de l'oubli en tant qu'il s'annonce absolu" (Barthes, 2009: 125). It is precisely this possibility of leaving meaning open to the future—the memory in disintegration that permits us to not fall into *l'oubli*. In the distance between the living and dead, Barthes' recognition of the impossibility to grasp the referent comes in this way to reinforce the proof of that which by one's self lacks a voice, the mother. Barthesian writing before the thing-as-such of existence gives life, finally, to the victims of history that Montalbán wanted to recuperate.

In this persistence to bring attention the unsayable, does Barthes not find the formal responsibility announced in *Le degré zero de l'écriture*. And according to which the writer inscribes himself in different languages of his historical present? Far from the simple past and the third person of historical discourse, of the realist narrative, from the present and from the first person, Barthes finally follows the path towards the utopia of language. The harrowing writing of *La chambre claire* traces a path to speak of others without wanting to grasp/seize/catch/understand them. In this way, literature Barthes explains/states, "devient dépositaire de l'épaisseur de l'existence, et non de sa signification" (Barthes, 1953: 191). In this writing of the unsayable, a veritable loss of signified, the existence of past and present lives ceases to belong to one person in order to reappear, in a renewed way, beyond each reading.

If Goytisolo wanted to escape from realist photography, if Montalbán reiterated, given the disillusionment that accompanied the democratic transition, that "contre Franco, on vivait mieux" if they bemoaned the loss of historical memory, perhaps a return to the most personal works of Barthes could offer us a new way of understanding history. Far from the "dénonciation morbide de l'historicité" of which Montalbán speaks, Barthes' by his writing of the personal contributed to the foundation of the history of the unsayable, bringing to light the flight of meaning, the singularity of each existence. Through the course of

his theoretical evolution he discovered a model of writing testimony stripped of the burden of the traditional historical discourse, where the existence of those who would have been like literature, are in their turn “comme le phosphore, [qui] brille le plus au moment où elle tente de mourir” (Barthes, 1953: 193-4). It is up to us now to shine light upon the past, in order to change our perspective on the present.

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