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Nota / Note

‘Never Say I’: Inscriptions and Erasures of the Self in Queer Poetry in Spanish and Portuguese¹

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For my sweetie

Michael Lucey’s recent book *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust*, published by Duke in 2006, takes its title (and the first of a long series of epigraphs) from a conversation between Oscar Wilde and André Gide, in which Wilde says: “now you must make me a promise. Your *Nourritures terrestres* is fine . . . very fine, even. But dear, from now on never again write ‘I.’” And, Gide adds, “as I didn’t

¹ This paper was presented as the keynote address of the University of Pennsylvania Romance Languages Graduate Conference, “Disidentifications,” in March 2010. This is its first publication.

seem to understand him fully enough, he went on: 'In art, you see, there is no *first person*'" (ix). Lucey adds a fragment from one of Gide's journals, reporting on a conversation with Proust: "I am taking him *Corydon*, of which he promises not to speak to anyone; and when I say a word or two about my memoirs: 'You can tell anything,' he exclaims; 'but on condition that you never say: *I*.' But that won't suit me" (ix). Lucey's anthology of quotations includes bits from Roland Barthes, Monique Wittig, Hervé Guibert and numerous others, showing a continuing fascination in French literature with the power and the limits of the first person in the expression of the self and in particular of sexuality.² Of course a similar anthology could be compiled from the Anglo-American tradition, from Whitman and Carpenter to Adrienne Rich and Judy Grahn, from Jack Spicer and John Logan to Rafael Campo (and even to the poetry of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick): the poles of the impersonal and the confessional have been powerful sources of tension in English-language poetry for a century and a half. In what follows I would like to reflect on some texts from different parts of the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking worlds, particularly poetic ones, that serve to extend this discussion, both through the inscription and the erasure of the self. But instead of going at this chronologically, I would like to disorder things a bit, starting with some quotations that interest me and seeing where they lead.

To start, then, here is a poem by the Mexican poet Abigael Bohórquez (1937-1995). The poem is called "Aquí se dice de cómo según Natura algunos hombres han compañía amorosa con otros hombres," and it reads:

De amor echele un oxo, fablel'e y allegueme;
 non cabules,—me dixo—non faguete fornicio;
 darete lecho, dixe, ganarás tu pitanza.
 La noche apenas ala, de cras en cras cuerveaba
 sus mozos allegándose a buscar la mesnada.
 Vente a dormir en mí, será poca tu estada,
 desde te vi me dixe, do no te tocan, llama,
 do te tocan, provecha, cualsequier se vendimia.
 y "andó"—que es de salvajes—: anduvo, anduvo, anduvo;
 non podía a tod'ora estar allí arrellanado.

² In this regard he offers a fascinating reflection on Roland Barthes's uses of Émile Benveniste's famous essay on the first person and personal pronouns, so important for literary structuralism (15).

El mes era de mayo, así su devaneo,
la calor fermosillo fermoseaba su estampa.

Más arde y más se quema cualquier que te más ame
—le dixen—, folgaremos como'l fuego y la rama.
Entonces preguntome —entendet la palabra—:
¿cuánto dáis? y le dixen: cuanto amor te badaje,
que el que ha los dineros siempre es de sy comprante,
muestra la miembresía, non enseñas non vendes.
Ay, vivo desdentonces empeñando la tynta
y muchos nocharnegos afanes hame dados
bien cumplidas las nalgas de aquestas culiandanzas.
La cuerva noche arrea ovejas descarriadas.
Yo pastoreo amores
con aparejamiento.

As in the Judeo-Spanish poems of the Argentine poet Juan Gelman, this is a bold exploration of poetic language through a rewriting of poetry of the remote past, in this case the Luso-Galician tradition in the Middle Ages of the “cantiga de amor.” Here, the rewriting of a poetic tradition which has often been seen as having a homoerotic core is done with tender humor: certain late medieval formulae are recapitulated, but from modernity. The month is May, the sheep have run away, the solitude of the night invites the shepherd to think of love, but there are membership cards and “culiandanzas”: the context is obviously post-Stonewall, post-Frente Homosexual de Acción Revolucionaria. The archaic language produces a shock of recognition, then, as the (apparently remote) speaker suddenly becomes present in every sense. Bohórquez delicately uses poetic language, then, to distance and to bring near; a passionate shepherd (as in the famous poem by Christopher Marlowe), he says to his companion: “Come live with me and be my Love,” and like the speaker of some of the “cantigas de amor,” his words depend on an amorous complicity.

The archaism of the poetic language accomplishes something else: it inscribes a modern understanding of homosexuality into some of the earliest Romance lyrics (not only the “cantigas de amigo” and “cantigas de amor” but also the *jarchas* and the poetry of the Provençal troubadours). That is, it invents a tradition from which the modern gay or lesbian poet speaks. In Portugal, starting in the 1950s, a similar operation was carried out by the poet Mário Cesariny (1923-2006), who wrote a poem that similarly uses the “cantiga de amor” to speak of modern gay love: his

"Cantiga de amigo e de amado" proclaims that this will be not just a traditional (female-voiced, and heterosexual) "cantiga de amigo," but also a "male-voiced" (and here homosexual) "cantiga de amor." At the same time, Cesariny constructs himself as an anti-Pessoa, someone who does not speak through heteronyms or personae, and who regards Pessoa's authorial strategy as a subterfuge. Eduardo Pitta quotes several lines of his from 1989:

O Álvaro gosta muito de levar no cu
 O Alberto nem por isso
 O Ricardo dá-lhe mais para ir
 O Fernando emociona-se e não consegue apagar. (quoted in Pitta 10)³

This protest, which has been called an attempt to rescue "a poesia e a cultura portuguesa do cancelamento do corpo e do sexo implicados inevitavelmente pela Era de Pessoa" (Osvaldo Manuel Silvestre quoted in Pitta 10), explicitly takes on the cult of impersonality so central not only to Pessoa but also to Eliot and Valéry. Yet it finds a new poetry not on what was called the "confessional" in the United States (such figures as Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath) but on a marshaling of a collective voice. Cesariny's speaker declares:

E s'dormui, o de corpo delgado,
 sob'lo pano mais fraguado
 que todos que possam estar
 nessa côrte que não tem lado,
 em o quarto mais retirado
 o seu sopro quero catar.

As with Bohórquez, the archaism of the expression (which here directly refers to the *cantigas de amor*) achieves a move from the individual act of mourning (the speaker whose grief is only alleviated by the pills Dolviran and Deprimil, which here stand in for some more public mourning) with a community of "todos que possam estar." Cesariny's poem is an example of what Douglas Crimp called "mourning and militancy," with an emphasis on the *and*; it is an invitation to collective action.

³ See also Cesariny's poem on Raul Leal, one of the participants (with Pessoa) in the avant garde magazine *Orpheu*: "O Raul Leal era / O único não-heterónimo meu" (see <http://users.isr.ist.utl.pt/~cfb/VdS/v601.txt>).

If so far I have focused on acts of rewriting which evoke the very beginnings of poetry in the Spanish and Portuguese languages, I would also like to comment on translation, which is certainly one of the ways we can underscore the circulation of texts. In Diana Bellessi's vast poetic production—the recent edition of her “poesía reunida,” *Tener lo que se tiene*, is more than 1200 pages long—it is highly significant that she selected and translated the work of *Diez poetas norteamericanas*, with almost five hundred pages of *en face* translations and original poems by Muriel Rukeyser, Denise Levertov, Ursula K. Le Guin, Adrienne Rich, Lucille Clifton, Judy Grahn, Diane Di Prima, June Jordan, Irene Flepysz and Olga Broumas, and a prose selection from Barbara Deming. Bellessi (b. 1946) writes in her introduction to that volume, significantly entitled “Género y traducción”:

La traducción—y hablo estrictamente de la traducción de la poesía—es quizás la más próxima a la escritura del poema; se lleva a cabo en un lento proceso de ensimismamiento y de silencio, pesando a la vez la masa sonora de un canto, de un habla, originada en otra lengua que no es la materna. Exige también dar otro cauce, a través de la emoción propia, a pensamientos y emociones de una voz ajena. Algo que el poeta reconoce en su propia escritura cuando al decir *yo* se siente decir una voz próxima y a la vez lejana; se siente traducir en sí mismo algo que parece venir de comarcas lejanas en el tiempo. (3)

Bellessi's work is marked by an attention to the voice, what she calls here the expression of the self as both proximate and distant, and so her reflection on the ways in which the translation of poetry is also a discipline of the self (an “ensimismamiento”) and the expression of another voice is fascinating. And, of course, this attempt to bridge voices animates the book of bilingual poetry that Bellessi wrote with Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Twins, The Dream* (1996). Bellessi writes in her introduction to this collaborative volume: “No, nunca fuiste tus personajes. Fuiste el Bosque, y yo tus personajes” (14).⁴

Turning now to *Tener lo que se tiene*, we see many references to the same cast of characters, and the same rhetoric of discovery of the self

⁴ On the same page of this introduction Bellessi also repeats word for word the reflection on poetry translation that I just quoted from the introduction to *Diez poetas norteamericanas*.

through the other. The first reference to Barbara Deming, perhaps written after Deming had been hospitalized in Alexandria, Virginia due to a terrible car accident, is the poem:

—En memoria de la Difunta Correa—

Hace cinco días que en los fondos del Hospital de Clínicas está abandonado el cuerpo de una mujer. Empiza a no aguantarse el olor. Cocineras mucamas y lavanderas iniciaron un paro exigiendo que se saque el cadáver de aquí. Se regresa a casa, querida Barbara Deming. Hace un año dorado con pájaros que cagan la casa de gobierno.

Su pecho amamanta el mundo. Era guerrillera. (111)

Here indirection finds through a network of suffering women a space for nurturing (“amamanta el mundo”). The legendary popular saint in Argentina, the anonymous body in the hospital in Buenos Aires, Diana writing to Barbara (perhaps the most important feminist pacifist intellectual of the period in the United States) who has spent an awful time in the hospital: the “earthly nourishment” which Gide wrote about becomes real through the circulation of stories, of poems.

This becomes even more explicit in a poem dedicated to Deming, from *El jardín* (published in 1992, eight years after Deming's death⁵):

¿Que fortuito azar
une lo que para siempre
se desune?

Con quien se funda alianza
de amor hay una deuda:
seguir con palabras
su espíritu en retirada
Una canción de despedida
que huye del sentido
para fundar el
sentido de la magia

Así su forma no perece
Se guarda en la canción
que pertenece a un collar
de la estirpe de la

⁵ The poem was surely written after Deming's death in 1984: Bellessi published books of poems in 1985, 1988 and 1991, so the inclusion of this poem in *El jardín* renders it a remembrance of Deming some years after her death.

alianza
 Animales, plantas
 hombres y mujeres configuran
 el arca del recuerdo

la marca de lo hecho

bajo una ley que sabe
 el peso de su propia
 disolución cuando llegue
 la hora de la retirada. (458)

Ring, necklace, debt, song: these talismans of love are acts of inscription in memory, whose magic guarantees presence after the disappearance (“retirada”) of the other. Memory is an ark and a mark of experience (and the internal rhyme between “arca” and “marca” affirms that connection). Note that this poem, like the one dedicated to the Difunta Correa, is a powerful inscription of the self in a poem in which there is no first person singular. What unites, bringing together what is disunited (“une lo que . . . / se desune”), is the speaker when she is engaged with her memory, when what Bellessi calls her “ensimismamiento” yields to the founding of a community. Along similar lines Bellessi chooses an epigraph from Simone Weil, “Sólo se tienen deberes. Nuestro derecho es el deber del otro” for *La edad dorada* (2003), and often writes of the theme of what she calls “Sumisión/ a la alteridad” (535) in the poem “Lo propio y lo ajeno” (which is also the title she uses for a book of her essays). In another poem from this same period, “Dialogando en su belleza,” she writes:

Si lo singular en mí
 te ofrezco y lo tuyo
 desde el terror acepto,
 ¿amor será? el abismo
 que se abre la certeza
 perenne de ti mi amada (593)

In similar terms, Bellessi writes of Denise Levertov, after the latter’s death, that “Cincelado en mí,/ te llevo” (734), and concludes the poems with lines expressing her gratitude to Levertov for

. . . haberme enseñado
 a dejar casa segura
 para sostener el rostro
 del otro, y así el propio. (735)

The relation between “el otro” and “el mismo,” to use Borges’s formula that Bellessi is tweaking here, becomes the space out of which the poem emerges. Whether she writes of love or of translation or of social difference, Bellessi insists throughout her work on the idea that the self is shaped through communication, through empathy, through solidarity.

The ideal of impersonality, associated in Anglo-American poetry with figures like Pound, Eliot and Stevens, has its corollary in poetry in Spanish and Portuguese in an abstract love poetry which avoids specifying the gender of the speaker or of the beloved. I have written elsewhere about this tendency in some of the Mexican Contemporáneos group. In *Fractura: a condição homossexual na literatura portuguesa contemporânea*, Eduardo Pitta has written of Eugénio de Andrade, “acerca de cuja poesia o mais longe que se foi não passou de um tímido 'impulso sexual neutro', como se os referentes sem género gramatical, diluindo o discurso, fizessem tábuas rasas do desígnio homossexual do poeta” (9).⁶ Certainly this is true of a lot of gay and lesbian poetry of the period from the 1930s to the 1950s, from Xavier Villaurrutia to Gabriela Mistral to Vicente Aleixandre to Porfirio Barba Jacob to Emilio Ballagas to Carlos Pellicer. Cernuda in Spain (and then in exile in the United States and Mexico) and António Botto in Portugal (and then in exile in Brazil) are crucial figures who begin to name names, and Virgilio Piñera’s insistence in 1955 in saying, in the essay “Ballagas en persona,” which, among other things, provoked a rupture with Cintio Vitier and José Lezama Lima and brought the end of José Rodríguez Feo’s support of Lezama’s magazine *Orígenes*: “si los franceses escriben sobre Gide tomando como punto de partida el homosexualismo de este escritor; si los ingleses hacen lo mismo con Wilde, yo no veo por qué los cubanos no podemos hablar de Ballagas en tanto que homosexual. ¿Es que los ingleses y los franceses tienen la exclusiva de tal tema?” (194). And certainly the translation of the poetry of Constantine Cavafy opened up new spaces for poetry in Spanish and Portuguese, most visibly perhaps in the poetry of Jaime Gil de Biedma in Spain, but also in that of Harold Alvarado Tenorio in Colombia. A new frankness permeates the poetry of Abigail

⁶ The quotation is from Joaquim Manuel Magalhães’s *Os Dois Crepúsculos* (1981).

Bohórquez and Juan Carlos Bautista in Mexico, or of Néstor Perlongher and Carlos Moreira in Argentina, to cite poets from just two of the countries in this survey. Interestingly, though, none of these poets write in the “confessional” vein that dominated Anglo-American poetry, including openly gay poetry, in the period. They choose instead to “impersonate,” as Michael Lucey says of Proust:

This is an excellent example of the narrator's stance throughout the novel—his pretense of being separate from the social world in which the text of the novel nonetheless insists on embedding him. It is also an example of the role played throughout the novel by impersonation--the more or less successful manipulation of the indicators of the first (and other) persons—in the construction and maintenance of the statements that simultaneously reveal and advance (presupposed and entail) claims for our own social position. (217)

“Impersonation,” so familiar to us from gender and sexuality studies as a crucial term for the performance of the feminine and the masculine (whether across lines of biological sex or as the performance of the so-called “natural” gender role), is a useful term to bring to the discussion of modern poetry, so marked by Pound’s and Pessoa’s ideas of poetic persona and by Eliot’s and Valéry’s ideal of impersonality. Instead, then, of speaking of personae, or of the impersonal or the confessional modes, why not think of the construction of poetic voice in terms of construction and performance? I think, in fact, that this is what Bellessi is talking about in her writings on gender and translation.

“Never say I”: it is of interest *à propos* of Michael Lucey’s title that already in 1934 the conversation between Gide and Wilde should have been known in Latin America. Bernardo Arias Trujillo (1903-1938), the Colombian writer known for his posthumous novel *Por los caminos de Sodoma*, cites it in his essay “Palabras de un hombre libre,” collected with his other political writings in *En carne viva*. After translating the quotation (interestingly, leaving “dear,” the term of affection that Wilde campily uses when speaking to Gide, in English), he adds: “Este libro no es obra de arte. Es sencillamente una colección de emociones y su índole no permite guillotinar esa horrenda primera persona que todos los artistas atacan. Que Dios me perdone” (80). Arias Trujillo, however, cultivates the first person in his other writings, and (scandalously, for the time) asserts the identity of

poetic speaker and author. In 1932, for instance, he published the poem "Roby Nelson," an evocation of a young man of fourteen whom he met in Buenos Aires. It begins:

Lo conocí una noche estando yo borracho
de copas de champaña y sorbos de heroína;
era un pobre pilluelo, era un lindo muchacho
del hampa libertina.

The poem then proceeds to talk about their sharing of heroin and of a bed, and of how "sus manos galopaban en pos de mis monedas, m ías galopaban en pos de sus caricias" (online). The young man is not an innocent:

¿Qué quiere usted que hagamos?
Me dice con la gracia de una odalisca rusa;
y se quita la blusa, se desnuda
y me ofrece su cuerpo como si fuese un ramo.

This is as bold as any of the poems written in this period by Porfirio Barba Jacob or Luis Cernuda, known for their path-breaking frankness about sexuality in the 1930s. It also insists quite clearly on an identification of poetic speaker and author, despite Arias Trujillo's awareness of Wilde's stricture against the first person.

I will draw a final example from *Bestial* (2003), by the Mexican poet and gay activist Juan Carlos Bautista (b. 1964). The section "Pasodoble" of his book is a series of elegies for the Mexican torero Vicente Arellano (1964-1984), who died in a motorcycle accident instead of in the bullring:

Ay,
tú debiste acabar en la arena
con un toro inclemente matándote a cornadas,
asombrado de la perfección de tu rostro,
enardecido por los chorros de sangre que brotaban de tu pecho,
y por tus blanquísimos dientes apretados,
mientras contraía músculos,
hincaba las pezuñas
y regaba con su semen el sitio de tu muerte.
Debiste morir mientras un público anorgásmico chillaba de estupor
y las mujeres y maricas organizábamos una romería de duelos. (38)

In the following two elegies (and all three are called "corridos," in keeping with the bullfighting theme), Bautista evokes the memory of a lover he had named Humberto who is "idéntico a Valente" (40), and in the third elegy desires that Humberto and Valente

. . . se conozcan en mi sueño,
 en esta página misma,
 que se amen bajo la regadera furiosa,
 asombrados de ser tan hermosos e idénticos,
 enamorados de su propia semejante. (42)

To then go on, “Luego quiero hacer de Valente un toro y de mí un torero” (42), and then later, “invertir los papeles” (42):

Y yo,
 bestia que ha conocido el salvajismo mimado,
 el áureo holgar
 en gramas technicolor,
 me lanzo al ruedo
 urgido de destruir mi cuerpo (mi cuerpo),
 humillado muy pronto por las faenas de Valente,
 bajo diez mil ojos homosexuales que ven la burla
 y vislumbran la sangre,
 mientras el toro cegato se exalta como un enamorado
 y chillan los hombres en las gradas,
 chillan los malditos
 porque han visto la ceremonia en la que ellos—toros—
 son lidiados por un macho que los violenta. (43-44)

What is notable in this series of poems is their theatrical dimension. This is not (or not only) the confession of adolescent infatuation recalled two decades later; it is a fantasy that is performative, an impersonation. Bautista, like Bellessi and Bohórquez in their different ways, calls attention to the ways in which a poetry of queer sexuality is a complex negotiation between the self and others. I would argue that this element of impersonation, which requires both the inscription and the erasure of the self, is central to at least this contemporary tradition of queer poetry, one that is of interest because it is not confessional, nor does it require an affirmative narrative of coming out. Instead, poets like Bohórquez, Bellessi and Bautista (and I had no intention of focusing on the letter B in the alphabet, but so be it) have forged a collective voice in their poetry, and have thus been attentive to what Lucey calls the struggle “not only over what would be said, how same-sex sexualities would be conceptualized and represented, and in what manner they would be treated, but also over who could say what needed to be said, who could be taken seriously in doing so” (257). Lucey adds: “between and among them, we see coming into place the

set of terms in which literary negotiations around this kind of speech, these acts of interpretation, would happen for at least the next several decades" (258). Some of the most interesting queer poetry of our present still turns on these negotiations, and still challenges those who would interpret it.

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