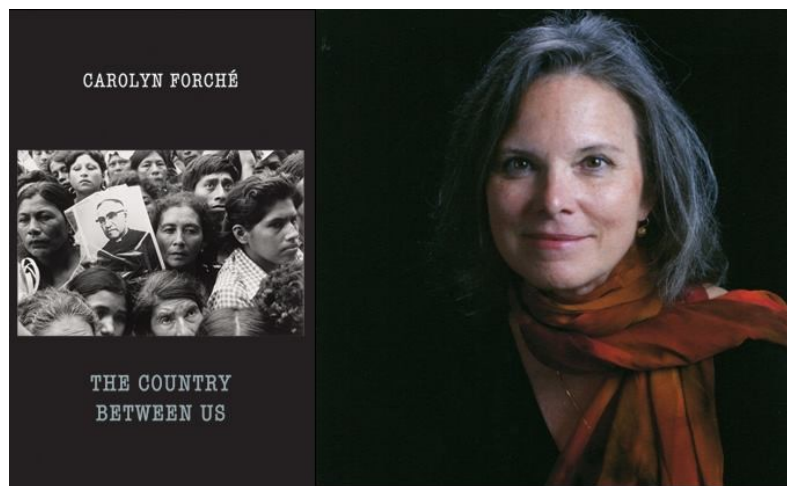


A Reading of Carolyn Forché's "In Salvador" Poems



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Introduction

"There are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing"

Susan Sontag

Some of the questions raised by poetry as an act of testimony in general, and in Carolyn Forché's "In Salvador" poems in particular, include:

--Before human suffering and human rights violations, what kind of responsibility does the poet have, if any? Should the poet speak about what he/she experiences? In which way?

--How does the poet find a balance between what is necessary to say and what is too much, or out of bounds? Is there something that should remain unsaid?

--Is speaking about what was seen more important than the risk of poeticizing or beautifying the horror?

--Who 'tells' history best? The poet or the historian? Why?

--Should poetry be used as an historical source? What may be the advantages and disadvantages of doing so?

In this paper I will address these issues.

In 1978, when she was twenty-seven years old, Carolyn Forché, (whose first poetry book, *Gathering the Tribes*, had won the 1975 *Yale Series of Younger Poets Award*), traveled to El Salvador. The poet arrived in El Salvador as a journalist and a human rights activist prior to this country's civil war. From her experiences, she created a number of poems that she assembled and entitled "In Salvador". This collection formed the first part of her second poetry book *The Country Between Us* (1981).

Later, Forché published an anthology named *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* (1983). In this work she acclaims the testimony of first-hand experience as "poems of witness". Such poems are written by those who experience and survive challenging conditions such as war, political or religious

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persecution, or exile. To Forché, witness "is neither martyrdom nor the saying of a juridical truth, but the owning of one's infinite responsibility for the *other one (l'autre)*".¹

Retaking Levina's thought of ethics as primary philosophy, Forché brings to the core of her poetic work about El Salvador an ethics of concern towards the exterior (the others), cast away from a deeply personal or emotional lyricism focused on the interior (the self). Below, I will offer a reading of three of the eight poems that constitute "In Salvador", in which the motifs of "interior" and "exterior", "inside" and "outside", "us" and "others" are a constant force. I will start by offering a comment on the poem "The Visitor", which portrays a specific episode, which occurred inside a prison. Secondly, I will discuss the poem "The Colonel", which has at its core El Salvador's military brutality. Finally, I will focus on the poem "Return", in which the poet narrates her return to her home country and the consequences of the El Salvador's experience in her poetic work.

*

The poem "The Visitor" transport the readers to the interior of a prison, where an unknown visitor warns a prisoner – Francisco – of the lack of time:

The Visitor

*In Spanish he whispers there is no time left.
It is the sound of scythes arcing in wheat,
the ache of some field song in Salvador.
The wind along the prison, cautious
5 as Francisco's hands on the inside, touching
the walls as he walks, it is his wife's breath
slipping into his cell each night while he
imagines his hands to be hers. It is a small country.*

There is nothing one man will not do to another.

¹ Cf. Carolyn Forché, "Reading the Living Archives: The Witness of Literary Art", in *Poetry of Witness: The Tradition in English, 1500-2001* (NY/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), p. 26

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The moment of the prisoner's death seems near. By introducing the image of "the scythe arcing in the wheat", the poet indicates finality: the cycle of that cereal's life has come to an end. The reader might wonder, is Francisco's life also almost ceasing, with "no time left". Francisco is totally isolated from the outside. He cannot exit his cell, and he is dependent on other people's visits to receive information. By naming the poem "The Visitor", and not "The Prisoner", the poet is giving emphasis to the one who comes to visit and brings information to the one kept behind bars. Most emphatically, the visitor uses a simple closing sentence not only to erode the hope of the one who waits, but also to make each reader doubt the assumptions of hope.

Francisco is being kept in total darkness, as lines 4-5 suggest and so, in isolation his ears become his eyes. This is probably the reason why this poem accentuates sonorous elements. They are as important as the visual ones; the former provide information to conjure up the latter. Several sonorous elements are presented in the poem, mainly: the visitor's whispers, which suggests he did not wish to be heard by anyone else but Francisco (the reader cannot know for sure if Francisco recognizes and knows his visitor or not) (l. 1); the sound of scythes cutting the wheat, accompanied by the aching songs of those who work in the field (ll. 2-3); the sound of the wind, which is compared to the sound Francisco's hands produce when they touch the inside walls, looking for guidance (ll. 4-5); the breath of Francisco's wife as he imagines that she is with him (ll. 7-8).

The reader does not have any information about the prisoner's reaction to the visitor's words, nor about the visitor himself: Who is this visitor? What relationship has he with the prisoner? Does Francisco know him? Does he come to visit Francisco because he wants to warn him and so, help him? Or, on the other hand, does the visitor want to harass Francisco, causing him greater despair? Does the visitor come as a friend and an ally or as an enemy?

Because the information comes from an outside source, and not, for instances, from other prisoners, it seems as if the poet could be showing how an outside situation (a country's political life, for instance) may affect, even to the point of destruction, an individual life, which is powerless and can do nothing but await the unfolding of events.

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Contrasting with the faint and distant sounds described in the poem, the poet's words at the finishing sentence are loud and clear. They are separated from the others and thus emphasized – "There is nothing one man will not do to another". Forché seems to confirm this statement in the poem that follows "The Visitor". The poem is called "The Colonel", one of the most violent of the eight poems she gathered "In Salvador".

The Colonel

*What you have heard is true. I was in his house. His wife
carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her
nails, his son went out for the night. There were daily papers,
pet dogs, a pistol on the cushion beside him. The moon
5 swung bare on its black cord over the house. On the television
was a cop show. It was in English. Broken bottles were
embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps
from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace. On the windows
there were gratings like those in liquor stores. We had dinner,
10 rack of lamb, good wine, a gold bell was on the table for
calling the maid. The maid brought green mangoes, salt, a
type of bread. I was asked how I enjoyed the country. There
was a brief commercial in Spanish. His wife took everything
away. There was some talk then of how difficult it had become
15 to govern. The parrot said hello on the terrace. The colonel
told it to shut up, and pushed himself from the table. My
friend said to me with his eyes: say nothing. The colonel
returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled
many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach
20 halves. There is no other way to say this. He took one
of them in his hands, shook it in our faces, dropped it into a
water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around
he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they
can go fuck themselves. He swept the ears to the floor with
25 his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something
for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor
caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor
were pressed to the ground.*

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The role of El Salvadorian's military forces on that country's social and political life is well documented.² Forché brings to public scrutiny one specific episode she experienced while there.

The first words of "The Colonel", utilized much later as the title of Forché's 2019 book of memoirs, directly address the reader. These words "What you have heard is true" can be seen as an invitation to believe in both what has been rumored in the press about the El Salvadorian situation, and what is being stated in the poem. In fact, the opening compels the reader to believe the poem as fact, and not as a creative story or a fantasy. The poem acts as hard evidence; it was not written to impress, to move or to create a certain effect. That can happen, of course, but the main purpose of the poem is to present something as poetic evidence of what actually happened. It is necessary to open the poem with this statement because, otherwise, the reader may think it was all an invention.

Banal everyday actions set the scene—"His wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went out for the night"; objects – "daily papers", "pet dogs", " (a) television"; and the dinner; mainly "lamb", "good wine", "green mangoes", "salt", "bread" (cf. ll. 3-14) - contrast heavily with the "human ears" brought in by the colonel after supper. Those come inside a bag, whose ordinariness (since the bag is usually used to bring groceries home) is stripped by its content.

The objectification of the "many human ears on the table", comparing them to "dried peach halves" (ll. 18-21) clarify what is being said, allowing the reader to better imagine them; and represent the way they were treated and disposed, as mere tools and not parts of human bodies, advancing a total disregard for human life and dignity. The ears also demonstrate the total control of the colonel, who can do

² "At war's end, the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador registered more than 22,000 complaints of political violence in El Salvador between January 1980 and July 1991; 60 percent concerned about summary killing, 25 percent kidnapping, and 20 percent torture. Almost 85 percent of the violence was attributed to the Salvadoran Army and security forces alone. The Salvadoran Armed Forces were accused in 60 percent of the complaints, the security forces in 25 percent, military escorts and civil defense units in 20 percent of complaints, the death squads in approximately 10 percent, and the FMLN in 5 percent. The Truth Commission report concluded that more than 70,000 people were killed, many in the course of gross violation of their human rights. More than 25 per cent of the population was displaced as refugees before the U.N. peace treaty in 1992". (cf. Rodrigo Castro Cornejo & Michael Coppedge, "El Salvador: A Country Report Based on Data 1900-2012", Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Country Report Series, 5, November 2013)

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whatever he desires with El Salvadorans. The poet adds –"There is *no other way* to say this" (l. 21). The use of "*no other way*" implies the complete lack of words to describe that specific reality, having to refer to a familiar image, turned powerfully disturbing, suggesting that the ears were dry, smaller than usual and wrinkled. Here, the limits of the poet's language are put to the test - how is it possible to describe those human ears outside their common place, a human head? Will the poet be able to write about it? The poet is able to solve the difficulty through the use of a simile, which allows her to communicate with its readers.

Later, the colonel takes one of the human ears, shows it to the poet's friend and to the poet herself and puts it inside a glass of water, where it seems to come to life, like a dried peach half rehydrating when soaked. Perhaps it looked more what it used to look like before it was removed from its proper place. He is not only used to behaving in that brutal manner, it seems, but also likes to show them around, like trophies. He can make them appear and disappear, to give them more or less relevance according to his wishes, almost as if he were a magician, with manipulative hands, presenting a show to an audience.

The hands are responsible for a vast array of actions. The motif of the "hands" is one of the most recurrent in this collection of poems. In the first poem – "San Onofre, California", the hands are being tied together, suggesting an impossibility or difficulty of movement (cf. p. 11, ll. 12-13). On separate occasions, the hands appear as an utilitarian tool - used to catch pieces of bread; to look for something; to bring, to take and to show things (like the ears) around; to pose and to dispose; as nonverbal communication, to help express something that words cannot; to touch the halls, in order not to fall (as happened in the previously analyzed poem "The Visitor"); to knife other people; to throw people into holes or to dig holes where people are placed, dead or alive; to rip apart and to assemble; to give orders and to be obeyed. Additionally, hands are commonly used as a way of reaching or getting closer to other people – they are used to embrace; in the acts of love, to dress and to undress; to pick up babies and stroke a pet.

It is also possible to surpass the original context of these hands and to think about them in other contexts. It is worth considering the poet's hands, which are used to write and, in some cases, to testifying about what was experienced (first-

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hand); or those of the reader, who uses them to hold a book, to turn the page, to signal one or more passages. Finally, it is possible to think of the hands as a gesture of solidarity – to 'join hands', to 'give (or lend) a hand', to give something to others, be it material or not.

At the beginning of his book – *Paul Celan, de l'être à l'autre* – Emmanuel Levinas quotes a phrase Celan has written to Hans Bender: "Je ne vois pas de différence, entre un poignée de main et un poème".³ In this passage, Celan affirms that, for him, no difference exists between a handshake and a poem, thus comparing a poem to gesture of greeting that usually conveys mutual trust and respect.

Taking the hands from their usual position near the body and stretching them in direction of someone else as to say – "Here am I and I offer this "I" to you, there, on the other side". When the hands are stretched, the other person is welcomed. When hands join and thus embrace, a dialog is possible. Similarly, a poem may be seen to greet, embrace and enter a dialog with its readers.

After placing the ears in the water, and using violent language, the colonel states – "I am tired of fooling around" (ll. 24-25), which implies that the ears were nothing but the beginning of what is yet to come. This is followed by a direct offense to the human rights advocates and activists present in El Salvador, referred to as "your people" (l. 28), and demonstrates that the colonel does not intend to respect the rights of anyone. He then throws the ears from the table to the floor and held the remainder of his wine in the air, as if he is making a toast or celebrating his power.

The colonel is a violent man. This figure exercises total authority as the head of the household: husband, father and, on top of that, a colonel. He dismisses the parrot's "hello", after which the poet's friend expresses mutely – *it is better not to say anything, to stay silent, not to confront him*. In addition to towering over everything, everything revolves around him. It is "his house", "his wife", "his daughter", "his son". They do not matter but for his possession and presence. By not having a name, even if a fictional one, the reader is fixed on his role as brutal army

³ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Levinas: De l'Être à l'Autre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France – PUF, 2016), p. 15

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commander, more than in the humanity of his personality -- his humanity is replaced by its professional role.

The colonel is, and is not, at the same time, a figure we can relate to. On one hand, he is just like us – with the same needs, to eat, to drink, to find shelter. On the other hand, though, he could not be more different from "common people", since common people do not have the power to behave like that, even if they wanted to. The brutality of the colonel's actions and of the political situation outside are mixed in daily life. The interior of the house, where life seems to go on undisturbed, with its cop show on the television, and a talking parrot, is augmented by the presence of "broken bottles" on the outside walls, whose purpose is "to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace" (ll. 6-8), and the gratings on the windows. This suggests two things:

Firstly, the colonel's house is a fortress and not easily accessed from the outside. It contains a variety of valuable possessions and products, some of them luxurious, - such as the *good* wine. The fact that the colonel has a maid, who is summoned with "a *golden* bell" (and not a silver or plastic one), shows that he has enough wealth to hire someone to take care of the house, something not available to the majority of the population who lives outside his realm. Secondly, there is a need of protection from the outside violence. This violence reaches its peak of expression by the presence of the human ears that invade that once personal space, now being openly taken over by symbols of El Salvador's societal and political circumstances.

The poem finishes with the ears on the floor, establishing a relation with the first sentence of the poem (ear – hear). They have been divided into two categories. On one hand, the ears that "catch the scrap of colonel's voice". On the other, those incapable of hearing (ll. Pp. 29-30). By creating this division, the poet may be asking the reader – *Have you heard what I just said? What kind of ears are yours? Ones that listen or ones that remain deaf? Are you going to believe my words?* inviting the reader back to the opening sentence of the poem – "What you have heard is (indeed) true". Moreover, the final image of ears pressed to the ground can refer to the common expression – "to have/keep an ear to the ground", that means getting to know what is happening, to acquire knowledge, and to be aware of potential danger.

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Historically, ears to the ground was a vigilant soldier's way of hearing hoof beats of approaching horses.⁴

A little before, the colonel questions the poet directly – "Something for your poetry, no?" (Il. Pp. 27-28). The same would be to ask: *how are you, as a poet, going to react about what you just saw? Will you write about it?* This introduces the issue of the status of the poet in North America *versus* that of South America. As Forché reveals, in an interview given in 2015, Leonel Gómez Vides and the Archbishop Óscar Romero, the same persons who invited her to go to El Salvador, wanted a poet, and not a journalist or an historian, to come to their country. They probably thought that the poets in the United States have the same power and impact as those in Latin America and so imagined that, as a Pablo Neruda in and beyond Chile, Forché would have enough influence to bring El Salvador to the core of every conversation in the US.

Archbishop Romero believed that a poet would be able to understand El Salvador's situation independently, and not be influenced by objectivity or ideology. Moreover, he thought there should exist creative voices, cast away from specific political or social interests. The journalistic work, too stuck to journalistic conventions, would, in his opinion, also not suffice.⁵

⁴ Cf. "Keep an ear to the ground", *The Free Dictionary Online*, accessed October 1, 2020
<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/keep+an%2F+ear+to+the+ground>

⁵ "Forché: (...) Then Leonel Gómez Vides came into my life, with his very different idea about the place of poetry in the world. He wanted a poet to come to El Salvador. He knew that war was coming.

(...)

deNiord: He really wanted a poet to go there, a poet who was going to witness as well as to report on the atrocities.

Forché: He had this idea that it was important for a poet to see this in advance, so that when war began, this poet could somehow speak to her countrymen about the situation in a way that was much more serious, Leonel thought, than journalism.

(...) He believed that poets have a capacity to read the world in an unusual way that didn't involve illusory notions of objectivity.

deNiord: He was also interested in sort of the essential language of poetry.

Forché: Yes. He believed that poetry would affect the world. And it would affect the world not only in our time but in the times to come, because in Latin America, and in many other countries, and in our own country, I would argue, poetry does survive the age".

(Chard deNiord, "An Inexhaustible Responsibility for the Other: A Conversation with Carolyn Forché", *World Literature Today*, (August 2015)

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"The Colonel" is an example of the "poetry of witness". In the article "El Salvador: An Aide Mémoire", Forché presents an explanation for her collection of poems about El Salvador. In it, the poet justifies her poetic project, by stating that she has been told "that a poet should be of his or her time". The many human right violations, which took place in the twentieth century, some of them observed by the poet, were thus converted to what she calls – *a poetry of witness*. This poetry aims, most and foremost, to document, and present "narratives of witness and confrontation":

I have been told that a poet should be of his or her time. It is my feeling that twentieth century human condition demands a poetry of witness.

This is not accomplished without certain difficulties; the inherited poetic limits the range of our work and determines the boundaries of what might be said. (...) There is the problem of poeticizing the horror, resembling the problem of the photographic image which might render starvation visually appealing. (...)

I decided to follow my impulse to write narratives of witness and confrontation, to disallow obscurity and conventions which might prettify that what I wish to document.

(Forché, 1981: pp. 6-7)

Forché continues to provide explanations about "poetry of witness" in the introduction to her anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* (1993), which presents a collection of poems of the "extreme" from a diversity of linguistic and literary traditions, containing poems written on The Armenian Genocide, the Revolution and Repression in Soviet Union, the Spanish Civil War, Repression and Revolution in Latin America, among others. In it, the poet refers to "poetry of witness" as poetry that recognizes that something took place, at a particular moment in history.

Poetry of witness would not be strictly "personal" or "political", since its goal is not to reflect one's thoughts and feelings; to convince or persuade someone to do, or think something; nor does it convey a moral or political message. Contrarily, it would be "social", recognizing that something took place at a certain place in time, representing a real event and thus allowing for that specific event to become a "trace", an "evidence" of wider social implications. Following that line of thought, when referring to her poetic work, Forché prefers the designation of "poet of witness" over that of "political poet", since she feels the word "political" to be too limiting. For this reason, Forché does not particularly agree with those who have reduced her to the condition of "political poet", upon the publication of *A Country Between Us*. As the poet advises, (cf. Forché, 1993: p. 31):

Poetry of witness presents the reader with an interesting interpretative problem. We are accustomed to rather easy categories: we distinguish

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between "personal" and "political poems" – the former calling to mind lyrics of love and emotional loss, the latter indicating a public partisanship that is considered divisive, even if necessary. The distinction between the personal and the political gives the political realm too much and too little scope; at the same time it renders the political too important and not important enough. (...)

We need a third term, one that can describe the space between the state and the supposedly safe heavens of the personal. Let us call this space "the social".

In order to be able to witness, one has to be completely immersed and saturated in a given situation. If a person lacks interest in the world or situations, and is oblivious to the surrounding situation and circumstances (be they historical, political, cultural or societal) that person will have nothing about which to witness. The poetry of witness, thus, entails receiving a social and cerebral space, with an openness to the world and its people, that surpass the limits of the personal space preferences. It transcends self-focused lyric poetry limitations; and crosses that of the political partisan space that is too narrow and closed in a specific ideology, being able to express unrestricted evidence.

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Moving from the interior of the colonel's house to the core of El Salvador's army conflict - the exterior - Forché, in a poem, which dialogs with Josephine Crum (to whom the poem is dedicated), continues to narrate what she saw in El Salvador. Immediately after "The Colonel", comes the poem "Return", which, among other subjects, refers to the profound change the poet feels upon going back to her native country from El Salvador:

Return
(For Josephine Crum)

Upon my return to America, Josephine:
the iced drinks and paper umbrellas, clean
toilets and Los Angeles palm trees moving

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*Tell them of José in his last few hours
and later how, many months later,
a labor leader was cut to pieces and buried.
Tell them how his friends found
55 the soldiers and made them dig him up
and ask forgiveness of the corpse, once
it was assembled again on the ground
like a man. As for the cars, of course
they watch you and for this don't flatter
yourself. We are all watched. We are
60 all assembled.*

*Josephine, I tell you
I have not rested, not since I drove
those streets with a gun in my lap,
not since all manner of speaking has
65 failed and the remnant of my life
continues onward. I go mad, for example,
in the Safeway, at the many heads
of lettuce, papayas and sugar, pineapples
and coffee, especially the coffee.
70 And when I speak with American men,
there is some absence of recognition:
(...)
96 I cannot, Josephine, talk to them.*

(...)

*116 Your problem is not your life as it is
in America, not that your hands, as you
tell me, are tied to do something. It is
that you were born to an island of greed
120 and grace where you have this sense
of yourself as apart from others. It is
not your right to feel powerless. Better
people than you were powerless.
125 You have not returned to your country,
but to a life you never left.*

Forché, back in the US, seems not to fully identify anymore with her home country. "Iced drinks", "paper umbrellas", "clean toilets" and "Los Angeles palm trees moving" mean nothing to her (cf. ll. 1-3), as she is afraid of everything and everyone, walking in a society that is, at the same time, hers and not hers anymore. Aggravating her feeling of non-belonging are the dilemmas of communication she experiences. After El Salvador, the poet possesses a knowledge that few around her

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have. This creates a barrier between the poet and the others and further contributes to the poet's anxiety: "And when I speak with American men, / there is some absence of recognition:/ (...) / I cannot, Josephine, talk to them". (Il. Pp. 71-72, 96).

This poem also presents a big criticism to US's society, which enjoys reading about someone else's struggle: "So you've come to understand why/men and women of goodwill read/torture reports with fascination". (Il. Pp. 25-27); and appreciates other people's fight, as long as it is kept outside their own borders (cf. Il. Pp. 35-57). Moreover, now that the poet knows what it takes to produce some consumer goods her countrymen buy at their supermarkets, she becomes furious. The coffee, in particular, hides behind its production a great amount of violence and exploitation.⁶ This may be unknown to the vast majority of the US's consumers, but Forché knows all too well: "I go mad, for example,/in the Safeway, at the many heads/of lettuce, papayas and sugar, pineapples/and coffee, *especialy the coffee*" (Il. Pp. 67-70).

In a passage that can be read as a reference to the ever changing repetitions of history in general and Central and South America in particular (cf. Il. Pp. 31-35), Forché alludes to four relevant historical figures from the last century, all of them killed in different circumstances and countries, mainly Che Guevara, Camilo Torres, Victor Jara and José Martí. By referring to these personalities, Forché may be asking: will those conflicts never cease? Will people continually fight for what they think is right, despite the consequences their actions may bring to them, the people around them and their countries? Will they ever learn from the past? To complement this idea, it is also worth considering the poem "Message", in which the poet says: "Tonight you begin to fight/for the most hopeless of revolutions. (...) You will fight/and fighting, you will die. (...)" (cf. pp. 23-24, Il. Pp. 5-6; 16-17), accentuating the circularity of certain historical events, that seem to repeat in distinct countries, in different times, possessing others names, for other reasons and with diverse protagonists, but having the same or similar causes and consequences.

⁶ For more information about this subject, please refer to: Jonathan Newman. "*Violent conditions in Ethical Coffee Production*", *Longberry*, 1, no. 2 (2016): pp. 15-22. See also: Jeffery Paige, *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998.

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The poet struggles to continue with her life after El Salvador – she is incapable of resting, of relaxing, or feeling at ease. The most special thing she, as a poet, possesses – the power of words – seem to be worth nothing, and to be absolutely insignificant. What she most treasures – the possibility of writing - has been completely changed from what she experienced there, almost as if she had gone there with a language, and returned without it: "Josephine, I tell you/I have not rested, not since I drove/those streets with a gun in my lap,/ not since all manner of speaking has/failed and the remnant of my life/continues onward" (Il. Pp. 61-66). How to come back? How to return to a "normal life", when one is aware that somewhere, someone is not having a "normal" life, or is living a life so permeated with violence, that it has become the norm, and not the exception? Can revisiting poetry grant the poet access again to the language she thinks she had lost?

The way that this and the other poems are presented throughout the book is worth noting, since the poet continually returns to the technique of "enjambment", i.e., the lines are broken, splitting the information between one verse and the other. This may suggest that the poet wants to show that it is extremely difficult to express the information the poem contains in one single line, and, so, needs time, in order to breathe, and then carries on. It can also suggest that the language used to write the poem, which can be compared to a body that used to move well but not anymore, has been wounded and ripped apart, and the poet, in a supreme effort, is trying to reunite it again, through writing, in a corpus of poems, just like a surgeon mends, in an operation table, a body that has been hurt. (Or a damaged hand learns to grip firmly, surely and confidently again instead of with uncertain weakness).

The same technique is used on Forché's recent memoir, *What You Have Heard is True*, in which the poet provides a detailed account of her times in El Salvador. On it, Forché consistently constructs her texts without punctuation, which results in words following words and images following images that were cut in half (cf. Forché, 2019: p. 281):

*On both sides of the road there was smoke it was blue and still/
rising when we passed although the fields were already black
from/
being burned everything was burned they had shot the cattle
yes/*

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*even them and the pigs they had also shot so they were lying
there/
already bloated and there was a smell of meat as well as death
and/
a howling that couldn't actually have been heard but it was
there/
the wattle in the houses was burned and the corn in the cribs we/
didn't stop we slowed down the turkey vultures were above us/
many also already on the ground they don't sing they hiss some/
things we saw through the field glasses some with naked eyes
we/
couldn't tell how many people we didn't know how long it had/
been that's all I told them.
Leonel had driven as slowly as he could through the smoke.
"Look, Papu. Look at this. Remember this. Try to see".*

At the far end of the poem, Forché refers to the United States, using the metaphor of the "island", as a country separated from the others (cf. ll. Pp. 116-125). Back to a country which, in the words of the poet, suffers from a profound geographic and linguistic isolation,⁷ the thematic of "distance" seems to be a special concern of the poet.

On the first poem of the book, titled "San Onofre, California", in which the poet is referring to something that is happening in an unknown location in the South, Forché writes: "the cries of those who vanish/might take years to get here" (p. 11, ll. 19-20). The same is to ask: How long does it take for news to cross borders? How long, if ever, does it take for the ones who are "inside" to get to know what is happening "outside"? Can people, despite being so closed, as close as living in neighboring countries, still be enormously apart? Similarly, on the poem "The Island", dedicated to the Nicaraguan-Salvadoran poet Claribel Alegría, whose poems Forché translated, the poet questions: "(...) do you know how long it takes/any one voice to reach another? " (cf. p. 14, ll. 76-77). The same is to ask: how much do human beings *actually know* about each other? And how long will they need to finally *know*? Will the voices of those who live in places that are not so central to traditional world's narratives ever be heard?

⁷ cf. deNiord, *An Inexhaustible Responsibility for the Other*

Conclusion

"In Salvador", Forché is able to create a narrative, from poem to poem, in which every composition, although independent, can be better perceived as a whole, for the last poems of the collection fill the gaps the preceding left. Since these poems closely relate to historical events, the names and events mentioned in them are nothing but references that the reader has to follow in order to have access to the bigger context. This collection must, therefore, be accompanied by the study of other sources – historical, sociological, journalistic, in the form of essays, reports, interviews, documents; and artistic, in the form of pictures, drawings, or other texts, in order to be able to grasp, in a manner as inclusive as possible, a polyphony of voices capable of offering a multitude of views and not just one oppressive and silencing "official" or "convenient" representation.

Though anchored in the experience of a single poet, these poems end up representing the struggle of an entire nation; and can be seen to represent the human condition; they surpass the individual context of the poet and become a manner of transmitting a trans-individual historical experience. As Forché argues in *Reading the Living Archives: The Witness of Literary Art* (2014)⁸, the readers of poems of witness become themselves witnesses to what is in front of them, and the poems themselves become "living archives" – they become *consultable*, liable of being studied as "containers" of the specific events they address, thus proposing another way of investigating past events, and offering a complement to historical research.

In "In Salvador", Forché takes her readers by the hand and invites them, with absolute precision and control, to join her on a journey that is simultaneously hers and that of a country and its people, forever changed by conflict. The poems in this

⁸ "In the poetry of witness, the poems make present to us the experience, rather than a symbolic representation. When we read the poem as witness, we are marked by it and become ourselves witnesses to what it has made present before us. Language incises the page, wounding it with testimonial presence, and the reader is marked by the encounter with that presence. Witness begets witness. The text we read becomes a living archive". (cf. Forché, "Reading the Living Archives", p. 26)

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collection allow the readers to observe, even if at a distance, the lives of others; to temporarily exit their own "protected lives" and access those of distant ones, turning poetry into a repository of human limits, gestures, voices and cries. In doing so, the poet leads the readers to observe otherwise unseen aspects of the prisons, the houses, the fields, the visitors, the prisoners and the colonels in El Salvador. Given the contingent cycles of historical events, this multitude of references can even surpass their original context and become metaphors both of past times, and serve as warnings about the future. Repetitions in the same or other places and in similar circumstances, are also right here, right now, urging us, as Leonel Gómez Vides did to Forché, to remain alert, and to try to see.

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ABSTRACT

Between 1978 and 1980, immediately before El Salvador's long-lasting Civil War, American poet Carolyn Forché (1950-) worked in El Salvador where she represented *Amnesty International* as a journalist and a human rights advocate. Forché addresses her experiences in "In Salvador" -- the first section of her second poetry book, *The Country Between Us* (1981). In what follows, I will offer a reading of three poems -- "The Visitor", "The Colonel" and "Return" while remarking on the way Forché was able to create a very specific poetics, which primary goal is to document her experiences and reveal their surrounding circumstances.

Key-Words: Carolyn Forché; Contemporary American poetry; El Salvador; *The Country Between Us*; "Poetry of Witness"

RESUMO

Entre 1978 e 1980, imediatamente antes da Guerra Civil de El Salvador, a poeta americana Carolyn Forché (1950-) trabalhou como jornalista e defensora dos direitos humanos para a *Amnistia Internacional*. Forché relata a sua experiência naquele país na primeira parte -- "In Salvador" -- do seu segundo livro de poesia, *The Country Between Us* (1981). Neste ensaio, proponho uma leitura dos poemas de El Salvador, ao mesmo tempo que observo o modo como a autora criou uma poética específica, cujo objectivo é, principalmente, documentar as suas experiências e as circunstâncias que as propiciaram. Para esse fim, três poemas são considerados, nomeadamente: "The Visitor", "The Colonel" e "Return".

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