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Aesth/ethics of distance: (Un)Veiling grief in Rosa Montero's *La ridícula idea de no volver a verte*

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CHAPTER TWO

AESTH/ETHICS OF DISTANCE: (UN)VEILING GRIEF IN ROSA MONTERO'S *LA RIDÍCULA IDEA DE NO VOLVER A VERTE* (2013)

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Introduction

This chapter will analyse the generically hybrid auto/biographical grief memoir, *La ridícula idea de no volver a verte* (2013), by the well-known contemporary Spanish author and journalist, Rosa Montero (b. Madrid, 1951), as a singular text within the Spanish tradition of life writing.¹ The book traces a number of parallels between Montero and her biographical subject, the Polish scientist and two-times Nobel prize winner, Marie Curie—particularly regarding their respective grieving processes in widowhood. In order to discuss Montero's ethics and aesthetics of distance and how she negotiates with the autobiographical genre—specifically the grief memoir—first it is important to contextualise the author and the text within the Spanish tradition of life writing.

Spain and the Autobiographical Tradition

Contrary to Francophone and Anglophone countries, Spain does not have a strong tradition of grief memoirs about spousal loss.² In fact, Spain's relationship with the autobiographical genre is complicated and impacted by specific socio-cultural and historical circumstances. As Blanco and Williams point out, notwithstanding the boom in auto/biographies since the late 1970s, life writing in Spain and Portugal “has not been as rich or as important as elsewhere” (2017, 18). Manuel Alberca cites social and religious reasons for this (2008, 89). For her part, Laura Freixas claims that as a result of latent misogyny in Spanish literature and culture, Spanish women writers have tended to conceal their biographical material beneath “el disfraz de la ficción”; she associates this “intento de eclipsarse” with “el miedo a la intimidad” (2004, 118; 2009, 7-17). According to these critical perspectives, a

¹ Life writing is an umbrella term which refers to any narration of experience of the self or an ‘other’, including autobiography, biography and autofiction. In *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), Smith and Watson refer to life writing as a wide-ranging term to denote “writing of diverse kinds that takes a life as its subject”, which may be biographical, historical, novelistic or—through explicit self-references to the writer—autobiographical (88-91).

² As the Spanish-born American literary critic and author, Concha Alborg, points out in the preface to her own grief memoir after the death of her husband, *Divorce After Death: A Widow's Memoir* (2014), “Widowhood has become a timely topic” (4). Alborg observes that the American author, Joan Didion, was one of the first to address the subject in her book, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), followed a few years later by Joyce Carol Oates's *A Widow's Story: A Memoir* (2011). In Spain, the theme of widowhood in life writing lags behind that of its American counterparts. Notwithstanding this, Alborg points out—with a passing reference to Montero's *La ridícula idea* (2014, 5)—that it is gaining in popularity on this side of the Atlantic. Indeed, a year after the publication of Montero's hybrid text, Lea Vélez published her own grief memoir of spousal loss, *El jardín de la memoria* (2014). Although it is presented as a fictional novel, Inma Monsó's *Un hombre de palabra*—translated from the Catalan, *Un home de palaura* (2006)—also deals with the theme of widowhood.

writer such as Montero is likely to have a reticent approach to the autobiographical genre, as a result of her gender and nationality. Indeed, Montero—a fan of writing and reading biographies of others³—has a contradictory relationship with autobiography, and, as we will see, both flees from and moves towards self-expression in writing. She provides her own reasons for her wary attitude to the autobiographical genre in *La ridícula idea*—as she had done in her 2003 autofiction, *La loca de la casa*—and puts her theories into practice in the pages of the text.

Critical Response to Life Writing: Ethics and Aesthetics

In order to discuss how Montero navigates life writing—particularly grief memoirs and auto/biography—in *La ridícula idea*, it is worth considering the critical response to these generic categories. A number of journalists and literary critics denounce these genres for ethical and aesthetic reasons. For instance, the *New York Times* literary critic, Joan Maslin, calls grief memoirs a “lucrative loss-of-spouse market” (2011). According to Frances Stonor Saunders, “[t]he great pitfall of the grief memoir [is] using the dead as ‘writing meat’” (2011). The judges of the 2008 Orange Broadband Fiction Prize criticised the number of “misery memoirs” that they claimed were “infecting” women’s fiction (2008). In relation to biography, Janet Malcolm compares it to burglary (Gudmundsdóttir, 2003, 187), while Angier and Cline state that: “Betrayal and the exploitation of the dead: these are the recurring themes [...] in a trade that deals in the private lives of real people” (2010, 9). In *La ridícula idea*, Montero grapples with the ethical and aesthetic issues which come to the fore when writing about a deceased loved one, as she oscillates between revealing and concealing intimate details about herself and her husband.

***La ridícula idea de no volver a verte*: A Generically Hybrid Text**

Montero provides her typical metafictional commentary, as she describes the genesis of the text within the pages of the book itself. She explains that three years after the death of her husband, Pablo Lizcano, to cancer, while she was going through a period of writer’s block, she was contacted by her publisher, Elena Ramírez, and asked to write a prologue to a short diary written by Marie Curie in the year after the premature death of the latter’s husband, Pierre. The author confesses that Marie’s diary moved her to such an extent that what began as a prologue soon transformed into a book of its own, with the Polish scientist’s diary forming an appendix at the end (2013, 17). Throughout *La ridícula idea*, Montero identifies with Marie’s feelings of loss and grief caused by the death of her partner. However, this hybrid text is far from a conventional grief memoir. On the surface, it would seem that a great part of it focuses on the life of Marie Curie and her husband Pierre. Yet, it oscillates between a “biografía poco convencional” of the scientist, an “autobiografía poco convencional” of the life and musings of the Madrid author,⁴ an “ensayo narrativo”,⁵ and a photobiography.⁶

“Una biografía poco convencional”

Montero clarifies in her postscript that she employed “la gran Marie Curie como paradigma, un arquetipo de referencia con el que poder reflexionar sobre los temas que últimamente me rondan insistentemente la cabeza” (2013, 209). Thus, the diary and life of the Polish scientist serve as a springboard for Montero to reflect on the author’s own life, her personal memories, her relationship with her deceased husband and coming to terms with his death, as well as a number of questions which had been playing on her mind in the preceding years, such as the difficulties of the parent-child relationship, the restrictions of conventional social and gender roles, and contemplations on the enormous obstacles women have had to face in order to work and study in a patriarchal world. These musings form a series of labels, or hashtags, which recur throughout the text, such as “el #LugarDelHombre”, “el #Lugar o el no #LugarDeLaMujer”, “el #HacerLoQueSeDebe”, “#HonrarALosPadres” and “la #Ligereza”.

Montero and Curie each go through a process of mourning, and both use writing as a cathartic means of coming to terms with the loss of a loved one. However, each one expresses their bereavement in very different ways. Whereas Marie Curie writes her diary in the year immediately following her husband’s untimely death, Montero underlines the importance of having temporal distance from trauma, and is only able to write about her grief—

³ In the prologues to her biographical compilations, *Historias de mujeres* (1995) and *Pasiones: Amores y desamores que han cambiado la Historia* (1999), Montero emphasises her interest in reading and writing biographies of others.

⁴ Montero in interview with Jon Bandrés, 2013.

⁵ Montero in interview with Marta Caballero, 2013.

⁶ Fabien Arribert-Narce refers to Gilles Mora’s definition of ‘photobiography’ put forward in *L’Été dernier: manifeste photobiographique* (1983), as “a biographical or autobiographical genre in which the photographic image plays a crucial role, be it simply mentioned, described or actually reproduced within the text” (Fabien Arribert-Narce, 2008, 49).

albeit in an oblique manner—three years after Pablo’s death. Marie Curie articulates her most intimate emotions in a direct style in her diary which is addressed to her deceased partner. Conversely, Montero dialogues with her implied reader using the informal ‘tú’ form of address. At times, Montero camouflages her testimonial and autobiographical experiences. On other occasions, she mentions her own feelings and personal occurrences in a direct way, yet she always contextualises them in a larger framework, by placing them alongside stories about others who have experienced similar emotions.

This is most evident in the way that the text oscillates between a “biografía poco convencional” of the Polish scientist and an “autobiografía poco convencional” of the life and musings of the Madrid author. The reader is privy to Montero’s reflections on science and culture, her comparison between the society of the Curies’ era and that of contemporary times, and her subjective portrayal of Marie and Pierre, all of which help the author to both reveal and conceal intimate details about herself and her husband. Montero provides an illuminating biographical account of the Polish scientist from her childhood to her death (1867-1934), paying special attention to the historical and social context in which Marie developed her research, in a world ruled by men in which it was highly unusual, and very difficult, for a woman to study, work and become a successful scientist. Rather than simply restating facts that the reader either already knows or can discover in other biographies about Marie Curie, Montero makes interesting and highly subjective observations about her. The author’s portrayal of the scientist is full of digressions, speculations, and conjectures, or, in the words of Virginia Woolf, “creative facts”, “fertile facts”, “fact[s] that suggest and engender”.⁷ Montero’s “fertile facts” about the life of Marie Curie lead to productive inferences and hypotheses, which ultimately encourage the Madrid author to reflect on the scientist’s cultural surroundings and to compare them with those of contemporary society. Montero’s personal interpretation of Marie’s life and circumstances points to heretofore unfamiliar aspects of the scientist’s personality and provides a unique perspective on her socio-cultural background. In “The Art of Biography”, Virginia Woolf praises such a strategy as she points out that “[b]iography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners” (2008, 121). In addition to identifying with Marie’s grieving process, Montero wonders how the scientist managed to combine work and motherhood. The author speculates that the scientist may have suffered from anorexia and identifies with Marie’s bouts of depression and panic attacks. Commenting on Paul Langevin’s affair with the widowed Marie Curie, Montero criticises the double standards for men and women in these situations, and disapproves of the profound prejudice against the adulteress, “la tercera, la mala” (2013, 155), which she claims is still evident today. Thus, the biographical aspect of this hybrid text not only reveals a window on to the life and times of the Polish scientist, but also unveils prejudices about contemporary society. Montero employs this biographic portrait of Marie Curie for its strong symbolic force, as it provides her with a heuristic model which helps her to reflect on and learn about herself and to clarify a number of issues which are important to her. In this way, Marie’s life becomes a reference point for Montero to examine her own thoughts, particularly in relation to the “#LugarDeLaMujer” in patriarchal society, and to the roles people assume, often in an unconscious manner, in response to the perceived expectations of their parents. In a deductive manner, Montero’s “mirada etnográfica” (to use Alicia Rueda-Acedo’s expression 2012, 56), not only shifts from micro to macro, from the particular to the universal, but also from biography to autobiography. In these digressions, Montero’s journalistic style as an opinion columnist is evident, yet the prevalence of the “tú” form of address and the presence of the narratee/ implied reader throughout this dialogic text creates a conversational and intimate tone.

“Una autobiografía poco convencional”

The apparent concentration on the biography of the distinguished scientist has led several critics and writers to censor the author for failing to reveal sufficient details about herself and her deceased husband. Montero explains in the text that her friend Alejandro Gándara criticised what he saw as an imbalance: that Marie Curie and Montero were both in the text, but that Pablo was not (2013, 193). Added to this, the Madrid author discusses her struggles and explicates her reticence with writing in the autobiographical mode. Montero is careful to point out that the sections of *La ridícula idea* in which she deals with her own life and personal memories are not autobiographical in a conventional way. She insists that her hybrid text is not a testimonial novel, and emphasises that although she enjoys reading other people’s autobiographies, she does not like writing her own (2013, 193). The author provides ethical, aesthetic, socio-cultural, historical and personal reasons for her specific approach to life writing.

From a psychological perspective, she gives the reader the impression that it would simply be too painful for her to write about her deceased husband in a direct manner. As she explains, “[e]l verdadero dolor es indecible.

⁷ In “The Art of Biography”, Woolf discusses her views on what a biographer can do with fact and highlights the importance of how writers shape their evidence. Woolf’s essay stresses the significance for the biographer of “fertile facts”, or facts which point beyond themselves: “almost any biographer, if he respects facts, can give us much more than another fact to add to our collection. He can give us the creative fact, the fertile fact, the fact that suggests and engenders” (*Selected Essays*. 2008, 122-123).

[...] Porque cuando el dolor cae sobre ti sin paliativos, lo primero que te arranca es “la #Palabra” (23). Moreover, it would not suit either of their personalities, as Montero describes Pablo as stoic and reserved and refers to herself as “pudorosa” (Constenla 2013). In an interview with Silvina Freira, Montero states that she could only talk about her own pain because of her temporal distance from the event, which allowed her to face it with sufficient emotional distance, in the same way that she deals with the characters of her novels:

El hecho de que hubiera pasado suficiente tiempo hizo que el libro no fuera testimonial, que pudiera hablar con distancia, a través de mi propio duelo, del duelo de todos. Que es un poco la misma distancia que tienes en las novelas, cuando los personajes hablan de emociones que te son cercanas, pero no hablas de tus emociones, sino de las de todos. (2013)

Montero explains in the text that she used to think it was indecent to use one’s own pain and suffering for artistic purposes. She deplored the fact that Eric Clapton dedicated his song, *Tears in Heaven*, to his deceased son. She felt uncomfortable with Isabel Allende’s autobiographical novel, *Paula*, about the death of the Chilean writer’s daughter. According to Montero, “era como si estuvieran de algún modo traficando con esos dolores que hubieran debido ser tan puros” (2013, 31). However, Montero claims that over time, she has changed her opinion. She now recognises that she too converts her pain into art, albeit in a more symbolic way. She explains that although she flees from autobiography in her fiction writing, universal and personal suffering lie at the heart of all creativity: “[A]unque en mis novelas yo huya con especial ahínco de lo autobiográfico, simbólicamente me estoy lamiendo mis más profundas heridas. En el origen de la creatividad está el sufrimiento, el propio y ajeno” (31). She highlights the paradox that “el verdadero dolor” leaves us mute, as it cannot be consoled nor described, yet writers continue to write, as “[t]odos necesitamos la belleza para que la vida nos sea soportable” (32). Montero elucidates and justifies both her own and Marie’s reasons for writing their respective texts, as she cites Georges Braque, who said that “el arte es una herida hecha luz”, and Fernando Pessoa, who stated that “[l]a literatura, como el arte en general, es la demostración de que la vida no basta” (32).

Montero highlights her preference for fiction over autobiography and the importance of reaching the unconscious through the writing process:

Pero siempre es tan difícil escribir sobre lo más íntimo. O al menos para mí lo es. No me gusta la narrativa autobiográfica, es decir, no me gusta practicarla. Leerla es otra cosa: hay autores inmensos que, partiendo de su propia vida, son capaces de crear obras maestras, como Proust y su *En busca del tiempo perdido* o Conrad y *El corazón de las tinieblas*. Pero yo siempre he necesitado utilizar la intermediación del cuento para poder expresar mis alegrías y mis penas. Los personajes de ficción son las marionetas del inconsciente. (193-194)

She associates the need for autobiographical distance with a desire for universality: “no hay buena ficción que no aspire a la universalidad, a intentar entender lo que es el ser humano [...]. La cuestión, en fin, es la distancia; poder llegar a analizar la propia vida como si estuvieras hablando de la de otro” (194-195). This brings to mind Montero’s views on fiction that she had extrapolated a decade earlier in *La loca de la casa*, and which she has repeated incessantly in interviews, whereby she equates novels to dreams, both of which stem from the unconscious and represent something profoundly symbolic.⁸ Thus, although she insists that her novels are not autobiographical in the traditional sense, everything she writes comes from the most profound part of herself.

Montero’s manner of speaking indirectly about her personal experiences can also be explained, since she is a woman of her time. The Madrid author grew up during the Franco dictatorship, and in her late teens and early twenties, she formed part of the hippy generation and countercultural movement that was flourishing at the end of the dictatorship. She was strongly influenced by the radical feminist movement that was stirring at the time, although she prefers to call herself “antisexista” rather than feminist (2003, 157). Like many of the female characters in her novels, the young Montero was also caught between two opposing discourses: the traditional conservative Francoist ideology on the one hand, and the so-called ‘progressive’, macho discourse on the other.⁹ Neither ideological view left any room for intimate outpourings, which were associated with femininity and a concomitant weakness and overt sentimentality. As Montero explains, in order to be successful, women had to pretend to be like “muchachos”: they had to appear strong, virile, and independent:

⁸ As ‘Rosa Montero’, the narrator-protagonist of *La loca de la casa*, states: “las novelas, como los sueños, nacen de un territorio profundo y movedizo que está más allá de las palabras. Y en ese mundo saturnal y subterráneo reina la fantasía” (2003, 28). Montero echoes this view in an interview:

Mis novelas no son nada autobiográficas en el sentido de lo que se entiende por autobiográfico: que a las circunstancias se les puedan poner nombres, apellidos, lugares, tiempos. Pero las novelas sí son como sueños que tú sueñas con los ojos abiertos, nacen del mismo lugar del inconsciente. Ese sueño está representando algo simbólico profundo tuyo que a lo mejor tú ni siquiera sabes interpretar. Entonces, desde ese punto de vista, todo lo que se escribe sale de tu yo más profundo. En mis libros siempre me estoy lamiendo mis propias heridas. (Montero in interview with Ivanna Soto 2013)

⁹ Ana of *Crónica del desamor* (1979), Lucía Ramos of *La función Delta* (1981), Lucía Romero of *La hija del caníbal* (1995) and the young ‘Rosa Montero’ of *La loca de la casa* all fluctuate between these two opposing discourses. Their learning processes are complicated by their efforts to free themselves from the socially constructed gender stereotypes that were instilled in them during their youth. This is particularly pertinent in the post-Transition Spain depicted in these texts.

Soy de la contracultura de los años setenta: desterramos los sujetadores y los zapatos de aguja y dejamos de afeitarnos las axilas. Después volví a depilarme, pero de alguna manera seguí luchando contra el estereotipo tradicional femenino. Nunca he llevado tacones [...]. Pero es que por entonces era verdaderamente difícil que te tomaran en serio siendo mujer; en consecuencia, había que parecerlo más bien poco. Había que mimetizarse y ser uno más de los muchachos. (43-44)

Throughout the text, the author reveals the pernicious effects of these types of dogmas, such as a certain type of feminism which obliges women to be strong, independent, secure, and full of self-esteem. Montero admits that for years, she had to hide the imaginative side of her personality in order to be taken seriously:

Incluso escondí durante décadas mi parte más imaginativa y fomenté la lógica, porque las discusiones intelectuales y racionales eran el ámbito del varón, el territorio de combate en donde te ganabas el respeto del contrario, mientras que las fantasías eran vagarosas tontunillas de mujer. Por eso mis primeras novelas son todas más realistas, y sólo pude comenzar a liberarme de esa represión o mutilación mental con mi quinto libro, *Temblor*, una novela de ciencia ficción que fue publicada en 1990. (44-45)

The author explains that in order to fit in and be successful early in her writing career, she took on the persona of “uno de los muchachos”. She compares this to the stereotypical attitudes toward Marie Curie because she was an ambitious woman: Einstein described the Polish scientist as “muy inteligente pero es tan fría como un pez” (42). The only photograph of herself that Montero includes in the text is one taken in her twenties, in which she compares herself to Patti Smith, a clear symbol of her generation of women who wanted to appear like one of the boys (44). In a humorous and playful manner, Montero compares this with a photo of Lady Gaga:

Con el tiempo, las mujeres aprendimos que ser como los hombres no era precisamente lo más deseable. Y, en vez de una Patti Smith, las chicas de hoy tienen una Lady Gaga, que se viste de hombre, de mujer o de filete de ternera, según le viene en gana. Mucho más libre. (45)

Montero also compares Marie Curie’s manner of dress to that of her daughters, based on photographic evidence which she incorporates into the text (42). The author claims that—like Marie and her older daughter Irène—she avoided dressing up and repudiated her femininity so that she would be taken seriously in a macho world.

As well as alluding to psychological and socio-cultural reasons for her reticent attitude towards writing directly about herself, Montero also provides an ethical explanation. She reflects on the ethics of life writing as she wrestles with the tensions between respecting the privacy and intimacy of her own life and the lives of her significant others on the one hand, and her obligations to truth and her desire for freedom of expression on the other. In *How Our Lives Becomes Stories* (1999), John Paul Eakin examines the difficulties life writers face when they write about real people and events. He discusses the inevitable ethical and privacy issues that come to the surface and the moral (and possibly harmful) consequences of what and who authors choose to write about. Appropriately, he asks: “What is right and fair for me to write about someone else? What is right and fair for someone to write about me?” (160). In *The Ethics of Life Writing* (2004), Eakin returns to this ethical challenge and states that ethics is “the deep subject of autobiographical discourse” (6). As he points out: “Because we live our lives in relation to others, our privacies are largely shared, making it hard to demarcate the boundary where one life leaves off and another begins” (8). This critic quotes Richard Freedman, who poses the question in the following manner: “‘Writers have a right to write, but how far into the privacy of others does that right extend?’ In particular, what rights do the dead retain that the living are bound to respect?” (Eakin 2004, 10). Montero grapples with this ethical conundrum in *La ridícula idea*, as she strives to protect Pablo’s privacy as well as her own, yet she feels compelled to write about him and her experience of mourning his death.

As talking about the self always involves talking about the other, she is acutely aware of the dangers of life writing and its possible insidious and negative consequences. As Montero observes: “La conexión entre la realidad biográfica y la ficción es un territorio ambiguo y pantanoso en donde se han hundido no pocos autores” (2013, 194). She gives the example of Truman Capote, who published the first three chapters of his supposed masterpiece, *Answered Prayers*, in a magazine. This caused such a scandal that he lost all his high society friends, who objected to the way they were portrayed in his book. Soon afterwards, one of those friends, Anne Woodward, died by suicide. Capote never finished his novel, and succumbed to a life of drugs and alcohol, which eventually ended up killing him (194). Montero uses this story as an example of those writers who do not manage to maintain the precarious balance between fiction and reality, which can have devastating consequences. She admits, however, that it is not easy to know where to draw the line: “No es fácil saber dónde pararse, hasta dónde es lícito contar y hasta dónde no, cómo manejar la sustancia siempre radiactiva de lo real” (194).

Montero wonders whether Pablo would approve of her text, and hopes she has not betrayed his trust. She confesses that she censored herself in the book that we are reading, as she decided to remove two paragraphs about her husband that she had included in an earlier version of the text (194). For her, it is an irresolvable conflict: on the one hand, those two scenes were about other people, as they dealt with universal human pain; yet, on the other hand, “eran sobre todo mías y de Pablo” (195). She explains that she could not break this link of perfect, quiet intimacy between them. Evidently, she does not want to turn her relationship with her late husband into a market commodity. In her attempts to protect his privacy and the intimacy of their relationship, Montero safeguards herself to a certain extent from possible accusations of egotism and exploitation voiced by such critics as Maslin and Stonor Saunders, as discussed earlier in this chapter. The Spanish author illustrates the tensions between her

ethical obligations on the one hand and her desires to reach “la libertad interior” in her writing process on the other: “Ya sabes que ansío ser libre, totalmente libre al escribir; quiero volar, quiero alcanzar la ingravidez perfecta. Pero hay ligaduras personales profundas de las que no deseo o no sé desprenderme” (195). She employs an apt metaphor to convey this internal struggle, as she compares herself to a hot air balloon that sways in the air, but which is still tied to the ground with a rope (195).

From an ontological perspective, Montero discusses the impossibility of describing the essence of another person through language. She counteracts her friend Gándara’s suggestion that Pablo is not in the book, and claims that it is impossible that he could be in it any more than he already is. Montero asks: “¿Cómo hablar de él con naturalidad, con libertad? ¿Qué se puede contar para revivirlo?” (195). She emphasises the scale of such a task by alluding to Pablo’s life trajectory from childhood to adulthood: “Pablo era un niño. Pablo era un hombre. Era un niño dentro de un hombre” (195). Nevertheless, she lists off some of his characteristics: he liked silence just as much as he liked arguments; he was extremely intelligent, stubborn, grumpy, seductive and honest; he was a very good writer and journalist; and he was elegant, athletic and meticulous. Then the author censors herself once more. She states that she could say much more about him, but that it would not get us anywhere, as she insists that this is not the way to define him. Notwithstanding this, she proceeds to give a list of things that she remembers about him:

Le recuerdo leyendo atentamente cada día hasta la última noticia de los periódicos. Y llevando la contraria en una cena de amigos por el puro placer de discutir. Le recuerdo sacando a la calle, sobre un cartón, caracoles recogidos en nuestro pequeñísimo jardín, porque no tenía corazón para matarlos (solía hacerse el duro pero era así de bueno). Le recuerdo feliz paseando por los montes. (195)

Once more, Montero stops herself: “En fin, releo este último párrafo y creo que lo más acertado que he dicho es ‘Le recuerdo’. Dentro de mi cabeza está todo él” (195). Her fluctuations between revelations and concealments highlight the author’s paradoxical relationship with life writing, whereby her allegiances to privacy and freedom seem to be in tension.

Furthermore, Montero explains that she cannot transcribe Pablo’s essence into literature, for she believes that literature, and art in general, cannot reach this interior zone: “La literatura se dedica a dar vueltas en torno al agujero; con suerte y con talento, tal vez consiga lanzar una ojeada relampagueante a su interior. Ese rayo ilumina las tinieblas, pero de forma tan breve que sólo hay una intuición, no una visión” (196). She claims that the more one gets close to “lo esencial”, the less you can name it: “El tuétano de los libros está en las esquinas de las palabras. Lo más importante de las buenas novelas se agolpa en las elipsis, en el aire que circula entre los personajes, en las frases pequeñas” (196). For this reason, she concludes that she can say no more about Pablo, as “su lugar está en el centro del silencio” (196). Through Montero’s explanation of her paradoxical relationship with life writing, the author gives the reader a clear hermeneutic sign for how to understand and interpret her (and other) literary texts. She advises the reader to pay attention to the ellipses, the silences and the gaps.¹⁰

Photobiography

Montero’s reluctance to reveal intimate details about her personal life are also evident in the forty-one images (mostly photographs) peppered throughout the text, fourteen of which are related to Marie Curie’s life and family. Of the nine photos associated with Montero’s life, none of them portray Montero and Pablo in their twenty-one years together. Indeed, most of the photographs are of places that they visited together (2013, 88; 111; 207) and two are of Montero’s body parts (her hand and her arm (133; 185)). Whereas images of Marie Curie and generations of her family abound, there is only one photograph of Pablo, taken when he was a ten-year-old boy on a fishing trip (68) and one of Montero in her twenties as “uno de los muchachos” (44). As Anne Lenquette observes:

A pesar de los numerosos paralelismos entre Rosa y Marie o entre Pierre y Pablo, se produce un extraño desequilibrio entre la excesiva presencia material de los Curie mediante una cantidad ingente de fotografías y la casi ausencia de huellas fotográficas de la pareja Rosa/Pablo. Por lo tanto, se vislumbra una especie de contradicción entre el propósito autorreflexivo y la ocultación de la propia imagen. (2014, 65)

The most important photograph is the one at the end, which, from a visual perspective, does not reveal much information to the reader (2013, 185). It is an image of a fig tree behind a stone wall in the countryside. This

¹⁰ As the critic, Rob Pope points out, from a hermeneutic perspective, this notion of reading for absences and gaps was developed by Macherey in his *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966):

For Macherey, the primary focus of textual study is what the text *does not*—or *cannot*—say (the *non-dit*). Every text can therefore be characterised not only by [...] its expressed subject matter (its **presences**) but also by what it represses or suppresses (its **absences**). [...] The role of the critical reader, therefore, is to search for the ‘gaps and silences’: the figures and events that have been quickly glossed over, marginalised or ignored. (Rob Pope, 2005: 109; emphasis in original).

photograph represents Barthes's notion of the 'punctum' for Montero, as it has the most profound impact on her because of what it signifies.¹¹ She places this photo at the end of her text, in the final chapter entitled "El canto de una niña". Montero explains that while out walking her dogs that morning, she noticed a fig tree. Remembering that Pablo loved these trees, she tells the story of the start of her relationship with him, when they went to a house in the country that his parents owned in the Province of Avila. Pablo showed her the countryside of his childhood. She remembers that at the start of the walkway, just outside the village, there was a fig tree. He told her that each year, at the end of August, a little girl would sit under the branches and would spend hours there singing to scare away the birds. Pablo told her that story many times, and Montero understands why it fascinated him. This photograph portrays the emotional intensity of Montero's feelings for Pablo, and it encapsulates for her much more than his outward achievements. Thus, the Madrid author pays homage to the intangible, unquantifiable, subtle and often concealed aspects of personality, which lie beyond the realm of the testimonial or biographical *sensu stricto*. As Montero explains at the end of the text:

Quizá los humanos estemos tópicamente acostumbrados a fijarnos sólo en los grandes hechos, en los actos pesados, en la solemnidad y en el afán. En cosas tan obvias y ruidosas como el descubrimiento de la radiactividad y la penicilina, o la llegada a la Luna, o el auge y la caída de los imperios. Que, por supuesto, son sucesos memorables y es lógico que nos llamen la atención. Ahora bien: eso no es todo lo que hay. Pero supongo que hace falta vivir mucho, y lograr aprender de lo vivido, para llegar a comprender que no hay nada tan importante ni tan espléndido como el canto de una niña bajo una higuera. (206)

¹¹ In *La Chambre Claire* (1980; Richard Howard's translation: *Camera Lucida*, 1981), Barthes differentiates between two ways of understanding photographs: the 'studium' denotes the cultural, rational, political, social, and intellectual interpretation; whereas the 'punctum' alludes to the purely emotional and personally touching effect of the photograph on the spectator. Interestingly, Barthes finds the 'punctum' in only one photograph of his mother, which is also the one he does not reproduce in his text.

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