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Luis Goytisolo's *La paradoja del ave migratoria* as Postmodern Allegory: A Critique of Absolutism

Terri Carney

Luis Goytisolo's short work of fiction, *La paradoja del ave migratoria*, was published in 1987 in a Post-Franco Spain and a Postmodern world. I will investigate this unusual novel as a postmodern allegory, relying on Brian McHale's assertion that postmodern allegory challenges the "unequivocalness of traditional allegories" by problematizing the naive assumption that abstract concepts can be communicated transparently through language (1987, 141).¹ Luis Goytisolo populates his allegory with mythical, and historical characters that hail from a dizzying array of time periods, creating a heterotopic universe in which no one context of references serves as the key to interpretation. Characters are lifted out of familiar situations, and readers are prevented from making automatic associations and must read these characters and contexts without recourse to one absolute paradigm.²

In this brief analysis, I will take as a point of departure Gonzalo Sobejano's contention that *La paradoja del ave migratoria* is a satire of progress and history.³ I would add, more specifically, that *La paradoja del ave migratoria* is satirical in its allegorical treatment of Western man's investment in absolute truths and rigid subjectivity. The quest for wholeness or truth is heavily invested in an equally whole and conscious human subject, as Paul Smith argues in his book *Discerning the Subject*:

¹ José María Marcos's study is the only one to suggest an alternative generic classification for this work, referring to it as a fable ("Una fábula de Luis Goytisolo: *La paradoja del ave migratoria*").

² The postmodern awareness of the limited scope of all discourses and their inability to account for a multi-faceted reality is foregrounded in the work of both Peter Carravetta and Deborah Madsen. Each critic writes about allegory as a postmodern critique of absolutism. Carravetta contends: "theories of knowledge, such as rationalism, empiricism, phenomanism, positivism, etc.—have found it difficult to 'contain' the infinite variability of reality unless they systematically severed or ignored given aspects of it" (246). Madsen echoes these observations: "Postmodernist allegory represents the stifling or repression of the signifying potential of narrative signs, by a hegemonic discourse that cannot annex all signifying forms into its domain of control" (133).

³ In "La proyección satírica de *Antagonía*," Gonzalo Sobejano underscores the satiric element in Goytisolo's novelistic production. He sees *Antagonía*, *Estela del fuego que se aleja*, and *La paradoja del ave migratoria* as satires of progress and history, and as manifestations of the author's well-known anti-realistic stance on literary creation. Pointing to the connection among all of these works, Sobejano states: "el objeto de la insatisfacción que mueve al gran satirizador-poeta en *Antagonía* es precisamente el credo religioso o político que tiraniza al hombre bajo sus dogmas, la ideología ofuscadora, la ética abstinerente, el arte realista sometido a lo dado o al dato, la economía que se consume en el consumo, la sociedad engegucida por los códigos, la historia que se prolonga y no salta, el mundo que gira como noria ya no explota como volcán, la vida que prosigue y no avanza, el lenguaje que se marchita y se pudre en sus fórmulas; y lo que Luis Goytisolo exalta "ex contrario" o directamente en la composición radiante de su obra, no es sino el poder transformador de la imaginación capaz de hacer de la realidad aparentemente una, cierta realidad múltiple e infinitamente otra" (28).

We live, to put it baldly, in a humanist culture which is ‘holocentric,’ and whose discourses variously and to varying degrees betray not only the hegemony of the desire for holistic explanation, but also the faith (albeit a sometimes shaken or shaky one) in the correlative ‘whole’ human ‘subject,’ the model for and purveyor of whichever particular epistemological formation it is *obliged* to, or which concerns it. (89)

Goytisolo’s protagonist, Gaspar, invests heavily in hegemonic formations of self and world. Ironically, he is positioned in an eclectic fictional universe that repeatedly denies the fulfillment of his desires.

La paradoja del ave migratoria is the story of Gaspar, a prominent architect, painter, and sculptor, who enters the world of filmmaking. His professional interest in the visual arts metaphorically represents Gaspar’s drive to visually contain his world, thereby securing his position as objective observer. However, Gaspar’s character is plagued with contradictions, such as the irony produced by his name. In stark contrast with his legendary predecessor, who was both an astrologer and an interpreter of dreams, Luis Goytisolo’s Gaspar is helplessly disoriented and confused. He cannot read a map, and he is terrible with names and faces. He is a modern-day incompetent wise man, in late twentieth century Barcelona, who wants to make a movie. Gaspar’s filmmaking project serves as a vehicle for his quest for his essential self. His obsession with finding the perfect location for the shooting of his film leads him to Doña Ovidia, the farm of his mother’s family that he visited as a very young child. The return to the farm suggests a desire to recapture his origin and thereby assure his integrity. Gaspar attempts to recapture the Doña Ovidia of his youth but becomes frustrated with his imperfect memory:

De Doña Ovidia, por el contrario, más que recuerdos, guardaba vislumbres de recuerdos...(144)

Doña Ovidia hubiera podido representar una evocación de ese espacio de olvido que precede a los primeros recuerdos. Una madre que Gaspar ni tan siquiera recordaba. (141–42)

Although Gaspar recognizes that his memory is imperfect, he still believes that the “real” past exists behind his partial recollections.

Gaspar rigidly defines himself as a subject. He would best be described as an *individual*, a word that, according to Smith, is a static and plenary image or “I” that corresponds to the Cartesian subject of Western epistemological practices. Gaspar’s unproblematic assumption of an idealized image as his full identity is bound up with cultural codes that promote the individual as whole or integral. The fiction of the Individual is indeed embedded in Western culture. Human beings strive for individuality, for isolated self-possession and the wholeness it seems to guarantee. Martin Jay refers to this tendency as *ocularcentric*, linking the dominance of vision over the

other senses with a parallel rise of the individual as the accepted model of subjectivity.⁴ From the eye of God granting absolute truth through divine revelation to the modern scientist observing truth through the microscopes; from the absolute eye of the mind to the information-seeking human eye of empiricism, Western civilization has consistently relied on the visual model as a basis for gathering and exchanging knowledge. Gaspar is the product of this ocularcentric discourse in pursuit of absolute truth and the absolute identity it promises.

The preliminary scene establishes Gaspar as the quintessential “Renaissance man,” described as “un ingeniero, arquitecto, pintor y escultor conocido en todo el mundo,” and by his wife Virginia as “nuevo Leonardo.” Jay highlights both da Vinci and the Renaissance as paramount to the history of ocularcentrism:⁵

Not only did Renaissance literature abound in ocular references, not only did its science produce the first silvered glass mirror able to reproduce the world with far greater fidelity than before, not only did some of its greatest figures like Leonardo da Vinci explicitly privilege the eye over the ear, but also the Renaissance saw one of the most fateful innovations in Western culture: the theoretical and practical developments of perspective in the visual arts, an epochal achievement. (44)

This geometrical mapping of the visual field turned the philosophical eye of the mind down to the everyday world and imposed its idealized structures in order to maintain a secure, absolute vantage point. Gaspar is a parody of Western man when Western man is understood as the ocularcentric subject described by Jay. He strives to control himself and the world around him as if he were able to assume a position exterior to both. The irony lies in Gaspar’s inability to imagine a viewpoint that would include himself. The workings of the allegory erode the logic of Gaspar’s gaze. The chaotic discursive worlds confront and threaten his imagined wholeness.

Gaspar’s mastery-seeking gaze defines his relationships with women as scopophilic, voyeuristic and fetishized.⁶ All three ocularcentric adjectives emphasize the extreme asymmetry of the relationship between observer and observed, marking the observer as powerful. When focalized through Gaspar, these relationships rigidly implicate gender in the paradigm, positioning the

⁴ In *Downcast Eyes*, Jay explores the implications of the relationship between ocularcentrism and Western metaphysics. Although his focus is specifically on the anti-ocularcentric discourse of contemporary French philosophy, Jay believes that the visual paradigm is complicitous with all manifestations of Western epistemology.

⁵ In *Staging the Gaze*, Barbara Freedman conducts a survey of Renaissance optics and their pertinence to the construction of Shakespearean comedies, drawing a similar parallel between ocularcentrism and the construction of subjectivity.

⁶ All three of these terms are used in film analysis to describe the absolute illusory subject-positions created by the cinematic apparatus and its espousal of the logic of disavowal. See Jay’s *Downcast Eyes*, 481–84.

woman as object of Gaspar's male gaze. Consequently, women are stripped of their individuality as people, reduced to observable and substitutable objects.

As the novel progresses, Gaspar's fantasies about the female body become increasingly violent. His desire physically to engulf a mysterious blond girl from his past is the physical equivalent of his possessive gaze, erasing the otherness of the woman-object in a violent affirmation of the self. "Lo único que Gaspar sabía era que deseaba estrecharla y estrecharla entre sus brazos hasta integrarla en su propio cuerpo. [. . .]¿qué había en aquellos ojos, en aquel cutis, en aquella sonrisa? ¿Qué era ese impulso de abrazarla y acariciarla, en modo alguno reductible a mero impulso sexual?" (34). The reduction of the woman to a list of body parts bespeaks the violence inherent in fetishizing.⁷

In a conversation with his wife, Virginia, about crimes and the desire to commit them, Gaspar confesses an adolescent urge to murder an old woman with a hammer. He also fantasized about raping a young woman that lived in his neighborhood. The details of his confessions are chilling and precise, as if he had actually experienced them. Just as the hammer silenced the repugnant old woman in the murder fantasy, the male sex organ penetrates and appropriates the young woman of the rape fantasy, in a calculated drama of domination.

In spite of Gaspar's efforts to secure an absolute Subject-position, evidenced by his attitude towards women and his ocularcentric professions, he repeatedly encounters frustration on his path to a constantly deferred revelation of self-possession and absolute truth. The initial promise of fame and self-fulfillment by means of his film evaporates with each succeeding encounter between Gaspar and a fragmented world of competing discourses that do not mirror his imagined self. His rigid construction of himself as absolute Subject cannot tolerate "messy" social interactions that are fleeting and fluid. Without the security of distance and stasis, Gaspar is rendered socially inept, unable to reproduce his idealized self-image in the social, performative world.

Throughout the course of promoting his film, Gaspar attends media functions in which he meets with reporters or film critics to talk about "Ensayo General." The interview-dynamic overwhelms the rigidly constructed Gaspar, leaving him speechless in a resounding barrage of unanswered questions. The questions are left by Goytisolo suspended on the page without the names of their enunciators, intensifying the reader's sensation of anonymity and alienation. Significantly, these questions are asked by disembodied voices from behind curtains and bright lights. The unpredictability of the interview dynamic overwhelms Gaspar, who is unable to engage with the troubling and insinuating questions. Blocked from Gaspar's view and symbolically reduced to voices, the inquisitors metaphorically frustrate Gaspar's desire to visually objectify, and therefore

⁷ In a seminar on sexuality and the sexes, Lacan maintains that men tend to desire detached body parts and that this drive to fetishize is due to their inability to embrace the wholeness of the other: "Thus, man's sexual desire is ultimately narcissistic, and the object(s) of his desire are precisely those imaginarily detached body parts, those *objets a*—breasts, buttocks, mouths— that trigger his desire . . . the man, as defined by the phallic function, relates to an *objet a* rather than to a human Other" (Lee 179).

control, those around him. Gaspar's inability to see these people enhances the loss of control he has over his public image, which, in this situation, seems determined by the interviewers and not the interviewee. The absence of Gaspar's voice represents his incapacity to engage in the fluid and alienating nature of performative language, which threatens his illusion of self-possessed individual.

The episodic nature of the novel also works to undermine Gaspar's illusory integrity. He finds himself in Barcelona, the Galapagos Islands, and even Egypt, on a cruise down the Nile. The extradiegetic narrator finds Egypt particularly interesting, making a key connection between Ancient Egypt and absolutist paradigms. The juxtaposition of the prototypical ocularcentric individual and one of the greatest absolutist regimes in history invites readers to discern the conspiracy among empire, totalitarianism, absolutism, and ocularcentrism. Camille Paglia suggests this connection in her book, *Sexual Personae*: "Egypt, the first totalitarian régime, made a mystique out of one-man rule. And in that mystique was the birth of the Western Eye" (57). The narrator's attention revolves around the reign of Ramses II, a power hungry Pharaoh known for his grandiose monuments and his manipulation of history. He is also believed to be the Pharaoh who reigned during the Exodus of the Jews.

The narrator clearly distrusts the motives of this great Pharaoh and the explanatory hieroglyphs that boasted of his ideal character and accomplishments:

Por más que las esculturas, bajorrelieves y pinturas sintetizaran gran parte de su existencia: vínculos divinos y humanos, triunfos militares, grandes obras realizadas, esparcimientos, cacerías. Por más que gran parte de lo allí reseñado fuese mentira. (82)

The narrator also calls Ramses II "un mitómano." Both of these examples erode the discourse of the Pharaoh as truth, suggesting another version of truth that takes the manipulations of the Pharaoh into account in the self-interested construction of his image.

According to François Lyotard, the post-1960 post-industrial culture of Western societies has lived without metanarratives: overarching metaphysical, teleological explanations by which we can judge the world and ourselves. Lyotard prefers the free play of deauthorized discourses to what he sees as the fascism inherent in the institutionalizing of one discourse as absolute.⁸ The extermination of the Jews in Nazi Germany stands as the historical and physical evidence of this linguistic violence, lending flesh and blood to the common phrase "destruction of the other." In *La paradoja del ave migratoria* the Egyptian enslavement of Jews is juxtaposed with the Nazi annihilation of Jews, through the following ghostly allusions:

Más que viajeros dando fin a un crucero de placer por el Pacífico, aquel abandono del buque, a costas cada uno con su equipaje, sin maletas ni ayuda alguna, salvando con paso vacilante los railes de una grúa tendidos sobre el muelle, más bien hacía pensar, a la

⁸ See Lyotard's *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*.

neutra luz del amanecer, en un grupo de convictos conducido a un remoto campo de exterminio. (95)

The images that emanate from the fictional situation suggest a consciousness concerned with the injustices and hypocrisies of History.

Algo rezagado, Gaspar contempló al resto de los visitantes adentrándose en tropel por los oscuros corredores, atraídos por el sarcófago vacío que les aguardaba en la última cámara, similares, en su inocencia, a un grupo de judíos camino de la cámara de gas, ignorantes del montón de cuerpos del que terminarían formando parte, un amasijo de esqueléticas desnudesces expuesto al atónito objetivo de las cámaras fotográficas de las tropas aliadas al hacer su entrada en el campo de concentración. (82)

In these passages, the totalitarianism symbolized by Ancient Egypt and Nazi Germany is haunted by the steady undercurrent of Jewish experience, which invalidates the absolute pretensions of these regimes by confronting them with the stories that they exclude from their versions of History.

La paradoja del ave migratoria undermines the drive for monolithic paradigms that build totalitarian empires and create rigid Subjects that deny the fluidity of lived experience. The violence implicit in Gaspar's relationships with others is mirrored in the violent and horrific consequences of the absolutist regime that resulted in the Holocaust. In either case, micro or macro-level, the free play of discourse is stifled under the overarching pretensions of one discourse that denies the validity of others. Postmodern allegory is the perfect vehicle for exposing the dangers of hegemonic discourse because it dramatizes the free play of competing discourses that characterizes contemporary society. In our post-totalitarian epoch surely we are courageous enough to explore alternatives to our absolutist paradigms that now seem inadequate.⁹ Luis Goytisolo invites readers to at least critically consider this.

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