



Patricia López-Gay. *Ficciones de verdad. Archivo e narrativas de vida* (Madrid; Frankfurt: Iberoamericana, Vervuert, 2020, ISBN: 97884919 21585).

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Some of the most interesting narrative literature recently produced in Spain is distinguished by the incorporation of auto- or bio-fictional elements (for instance, Miguel Ángel Hernández, *El dolor de los demás* [2018]; Pablo Martín Sánchez, *Diario de un viejo cabezota* [2020]). Not surprisingly, this ‘trend’ has already led to many academic studies on different aspects of autobiographical fiction. The new book by Patricia López-Gay is an extremely valuable contribution to this field, since it charts in a convincing and sophisticated manner the specifically Spanish genealogy and phenomenology of this literary tendency, covers the work of representative writers in a synthetic fashion, and develops an original argument about the intersection of auto-fictional prose and the narrative configuration of the archive.

The first section of the book, consisting of the Introduction and a panorama (‘Archive Fever and Auto-fiction’), provides a suggestive constellation of different, interrelated entry-points into the topic at hand. A first chapter discusses examples from contemporary art that resort to the notion of the archive, with reference to the specific challenges to personal and cultural memory in a digital age; it introduces a central tendency in the works to be studied, namely, to interrogate the status of the real, based on traces, and in the form of literary life stories (‘escrituras de vida’, 23). The next chapter addresses the ‘auto-fictional turn’ in the genre of autobiographical writing since the end of the Franco dictatorship in Spain, arguing that it unsettles the referential illusion: ‘Auto-fiction provokes the dislocation of the probative effect of the archive’ (29).¹ López-Gay briefly summarizes here the theoretical positions on auto-fiction (such as the well-known studies by Manuel Alberca) as well as a gamut of literary examples generally pertaining to this tendency—from novels dealing with bio-fiction and historical memory (Javier Cercas) to

forms of trans-generic life writing (Andrés Trapiello) and autobiographical blogging (Manuel Vilas). In the following 'panorama', a first chapter explores the technique of photography as a 'modern paradigm of the archive' (49). López-Gay traces the historical connection of photography to the mode of literary realism (in the Spanish context: Benito Pérez Galdós), its poetics of transparent signification, and the truth-related, probative scientific-positivist discourse of the nineteenth century. Invoking classical and recent theorizations of photography (W. Benjamin, S. Sontag, M. Hirsch, E. Cadava) she argues for the connection between life narratives, archive and photographic memory, pointing out that the technique of photography problematizes the idea of the unique original (53). The following chapter adduces seminal discussions of the concept of archive (A. Farge, J. Derrida); it emphasizes aspects of subjectivity and fragmentation, and advances towards the specific interest of this study, namely, 'life narratives that emerge within the intersection of auto-fiction and the passion of the archive,' in literary works that explore the truth of fiction and the fictionality of truth, that show events not as factually true but as possibly true (74–75).

These theoretical and conceptual points are exemplified in a chapter that takes its cue from a richly contextualized analysis of the first known photographic self-portrait, Hippolyte Bayard's *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man* (1840). López-Gay discusses the iconographic parallels with Jacques-Louis David's famous painting, *The Death of Marat* (1793), and, drawing on the written narrative on the backside of the photo, highlights the peculiar, 'auto-fictional' twist of Bayard's image, which consists in its construction of a 'symbolic distance that illuminates the impossible position from which the self-represented figure declares its own disappearance' (83). The analysis of this intriguing photograph serves as an effective means to define the 'strategies of ambiguity that destabilize the *pact of truth* between the writer and the reader' (85). In her discussion of the textual and paratextual strategies that invoke the generic markers of both autobiography and novel, López-Gay subtly rehearses the most central theoretical positions on auto-fiction's constant reconfiguration of the fabricated and the indexical, including, as in Bayard's image, the staging of authorial death (P. Lejeune, S. Doubrovsky, and R. Barthes).

In an apt excursus, the final chapter of this panoramic section provides a brief yet very suggestive approximation between the contemporary form of auto-fiction and Cervantes' *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. In this way, López-Gay is able to show auto-fiction's link to the meta-fictional aspects in the prototype of the modern novel as such, and thereafter the specifically Spanish dimension of this historical genealogy becomes visible: '[...] if the novel sought to emulate the autobiographical for centuries,

today autobiography seeks to appropriate the novelistic' (95). Already in Cervantes' work the term 'historia' plays upon the semantic ambivalence between 'story' and 'history', between literary imagination and factual truth (96). Moreover, the supposed transcription into Castilian of an Arabic manuscript by one Cide Hamete Benengeli for the internal narrator of *Don Quijote* implicitly qualifies this novel as 'a discourse elaborated from the archive' (96). Here and through other means Cervantes' novel is also extremely self-conscious with regard to the question of authorship. In part, the concept of original authorship is denied, and in part, an idea of authorial property, control, and selfhood is asserted. In short, *Don Quijote* exemplifies a central analogy between auto-fiction and this sort of novelistic fiction, namely, the unclear boundary of where the rendering of reality begins or ends (101). The chapter also briefly elaborates on the fact that the status of the real has taken on a specific quality in our contemporary period and in contemporary literature, where it is not simply opposed to fiction, but combines with the virtual and the potential, in what the Argentine critic Josefina Ludmer has called 'post-autonomous literatures', or what the Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has called 'liquid reality' (102). While *Don Quijote* is, of course, not a model for autobiographical narrative, there is a single, significant example for autobiographical narrative in the novel, *La Vida de Ginés de Pasamonte*. The encounter between the mad knight and this character reflects on the paradoxical impossibility of an autobiographical account to reach the end of a life (104; cf. *Don Quijote*, ch. XXII). More than a third of the book, then, is concerned with these 'preliminary' and conceptual probings, thus approaching the topic from a variety of complementing, overlapping angles, which naturally entail some repetitions of the basic argument.

The remaining part of the book falls into two main sections, one dedicated to Jorge Semprún (1923–2011), the other to a triptych of more strictly contemporary Spanish authors (Javier Marías, Enrique Vila-Matas, and Marta Sanz). In the work of Semprún, López-Gay identifies the (political) origin of Spanish auto-fiction. Since Semprún moved to Paris during the Spanish Civil War and produced most of his literary work in French, he was a 'Spanish' author only in part. *Autobiografía de Federico Sánchez* (1977; *Autobiography of Federico Sánchez*) is his first work written in Spanish. Already, the title, referring to the alias Semprún adopted for his clandestine work as a Communist during the Franco regime, introduces an element of fictionality. Moreover, the work exposes its literary genesis out of a personal archive (109). López-Gay explains how autobiographical narrative takes on new significance in post-dictatorial Spain and how Semprún's work is distinguished by novelistic traits, since it 'fills

in gaps and clarifies what might have been' and refuses the traditional stance of the realist, omniscient narrator (110–111). Drawing also on interviews she conducted with Semprún shortly before his death, López-Gay conceives of his work as an auto-critical commentary on the 'vulnerable character of all memory' (113), as political in the sense that it amounts to an 'aesthetic reorganization of totalitarian and totalizing discourses' (117). A second volume of autobiographical narrative was originally written and published in French, *Federico Sánchez Vous Salue Bien* (*Federico Sánchez Bids You Farewell*, 1993), although it is concerned with Semprún's work as minister of culture after his return to Spain (1988–1991); it was translated in 1996 by the author himself as *Federico Sánchez se despide de ustedes* (1996). López-Gay analyses this activity of self-translation as a confrontation between authorial self and the self-as-translator (122). The latter introduces various modifications and comments on the text of the original French version, which are essentially designed to convince a contemporary Spanish-reading public, for which the specific political names and events signify in a more direct way, of the author's stance of independence within the socialist government of Felipe González. In contrast to the first work of autobiographical memory, the second book exhibits a further multiplication of the authorial self and an increased measure of exposing the act of re-writing and fictionality (128–133).

In her discussion of contemporary authors, López-Gay emphasizes how these make use of new media constellations, authorial roles and technologies of the self in the digital age. These chapters provide not so much readings of individual works as synthetic, condensed approaches to the individual poetics at hand. In the case of Javier Marías, López-Gay shows that in his novels (notably, *Negra espalda del tiempo*, 1998; *Dark Back of Time*) and literary essays, Marías elaborates 'a synechdochic relation between the subject and its archives' (155), linking the subject to other possible authorial selves, visual and verbal references and their gaps. She identifies the poetics of Marías with the trope of *prosopopoeia*, thus understanding (auto)biography as a 'textual mask that substitutes for the person evoked' (160) and as the tension between the disappeared subject and its material traces. This leads to a possible identification of the self with the other: a 'conflation between the biographical and the autobiographical' (162). The heavily meta- and auto-fictional writings of the equally consecrated Enrique Vila-Matas, including, for instance *Dietario voluble* (2008, *Voluble Diary*) or *El mal de Montano* (2002, *Montano's Malady*), are distinguished by an infinite archive of quotations and fragments, thus subverting any notion of 'original' authorship. López-Gay associates Vila-Matas' writing with the avant-garde poetics of *collage* and a practice of digital post-production, or cut-and-paste strategies that further diminish the

ontological difference between original and copy (172–174). The recent auto-fictional works by Marta Sanz are less oriented toward the meta-fictional strain exemplified by Marías and Vila-Matas (both invoke the heritage of Laurence Sterne), but rather foreground the author's own body as a constitutive part of an autobiographical, feminist project. In works like *La lección de anatomía* (2008/2014, *The Anatomy Lesson*) and *Clavícula* (2017, *Clavicle*) Sanz foregrounds the 'democratizing' impulse of auto-fiction (187) and the material metaphors of writing on the skin, of the body-as-text. López-Gay interprets Sanz's project and her aesthetics of the abject (J. Kristeva) as claiming a political possibility of auto-fiction, the utopian idea of language as an efficacious means of communication and interpellation of the reader (196–197). The authorial figure opens itself to the social and 'generates productive fissures with the real' (199).

In her conclusion, López-Gay insists on the active dimension of the archive, the 'performance' (206) of archiving that is open to the temporal process. Auto-fiction thus interrogates the stable, mimetic relation between autobiography and life, stressing instead life in movement, as constant interrogation and expansion: '[...] life writing constructed as a web of uncertain traces, a fabric of an imaginary present of life, which recognizes the past and projects the future' (206). *Ficciones de verdad* is the result of a sustained and active engagement with theories and practices of auto-fictional writing in Spain. While clearly focused on some of the most significant writing in contemporary Spain, it draws on international scholarship and theory as well as comparative aspects throughout. By suggestively confronting the notions of auto-fiction and archive, López-Gay opens up new perspectives for future research, both within and beyond the context of contemporary literature in Spain.

NOTES

- 1 This review is also aimed at readers who cannot read Spanish. I have therefore translated the original quotes.