

RESISTANCE

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ABSTRACT: The poetic space, as I see it, is a space of resistance. Resistance against the media which do not need poetry. Communication among poets is a go-between, a web of messages, performances and presentations, the circulation of books and digital materials. These activities are political, functioning as politics in the Greek sense: discussion in a public arena, exchanges of opinion and criticism, interventions, concerted decisions, group projects, a net of relationships around the production of texts, articulating versions and diversions of language. These activities and exchanges give the participants a sense of fulfillment. In this sense to pass is to think, to question a certain regime, to marvel that it is still there, to wonder what makes it possible, going into its enclaves, looking for traces of the movements which formed it and discovering in those stories apparently in ashes, how to think, how to live otherwise.

KEYWORDS: connectivity; resistance; poetry and resistance; autonomy; violence and utopia; violence and gender; micropolitics; Tibet

There is a body made of muscle, blood vessels, tendons and tensions; the moment is made of that, and the circumstances, which are not only a matter of fact, but also of formatting devices and technologies, plus the place and function that we play in it, not only real, but meaningful, or meaningless. At a certain level, the moment is realized or defined by speech, by verse, reaching ‘su definición mejor’.¹

The moment realized by poetry redefines circumstances and realities, goes through them, is in the process of being born—‘that can’t be explained, that is born’.²

The poem situates us. We are not situated by ‘them’: the patterns, the prejudices, the expectations of others. The verse is a project of autonomy.

It reorganizes our concerns and priorities; things are born. In this new conjecture, this new distribution, things show their actual worth for us.

We must perform and sustain an exercise of resistance, in order not to be eaten by the machine of work and business, family or office. If it takes hold of us, it appropriates the best of us and puts it at the service of an all-consuming job. It traps our bodies, our souls, and does away with them very quickly. Our life is spent making a living; we are

1. José Lezama Lima, *Poesía completa*, Havana, Instituto del Libro, 1970, p. 5.

2. Marina Tsvietáieva, *El diablo*, Barcelona, Anagrama, 1991, p. 37.

left with little time to take ourselves in hand.

We should be able to experience adventures of taste and criticism, the two virtues of the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*). Taste, for Kant, orients the free interplay of the faculties (reason and sensibility) thanks to a suspended disbelief with regard to the paradoxes and oxymorons of live thought. Enlightenment also provides autonomy of judgment, moral as well as aesthetic. It means, above all, a rejection of obedience, be it to a god or to its supposed representatives (bishops or kings). It is the *Viva la libertad!* sung by Mozart's Don Giovanni. Not to serve a master: Leporello's *Io non voglio più servir*, as well as Barbero's (in *The Marriage of Figaro*). Not to be a subordinate, not to accept submission.

The nineteenth century imagined utopias, supposedly in order to assure forever more freedom and equality, pushing towards a certain 'end of history'. The twentieth century made experiments towards the same end. The imperative of historical change became, for some, more important than individual freedom, which justified the terror practiced by the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. The dictatorship has meant a crisis of the model of the state and the state of legality.

I do not believe that a police state such as Cuba, where only passive resistance is possible, where Orlando Zapata, a prisoner of consciousness, has just died in a hunger strike, is tolerable. Leninist dictatorships, alas, are not altogether over. China is another example, North Korea also. Violence and illegality are practiced with the excuse of a utopia, 'that gives people direction', and direction it is! 'One doesn't know which is more terrifying; the violence or the utopia.'³

After the Second World War, but above all through the sixties, a new view of politics became manifest. Indians, blacks, US minorities together with newly formed groups of gay and queer militants, the women's movement, student revolt, new youth styles attached to music, drugs such as marihuana and LSD, outsider varieties of life outside 'the system', protests against the war, articulated visible operating demands. People from these groups passed around 'secrets', savvy, and shared experiences. They brought a new sensibility, a new behavior, a new attitude, and a new image.

Their political import challenged the traditional family, sexual mores, censorship (displaying sex through pornography, etc.). The response was police brutality and repressive reactions from various governments and institutions. The newly visible youths did not want to postpone adventure and pleasure to a later age that would never come. They were disobedient, tending to compromise neither with those in authority, nor with the older generations, which translated as 'anyone over thirty'.

A micropolitics of civil disobedience developed. It had little to do with the old politics, the old left, the old radicals, whose task was to maneuver (presumably through violent means) in order to assure control of the central power of government. This new kind of politics did not coalesce into a party, be it the Communist Party, or some other similar organization bent on complete supremacy. It was a micropolitics in the sense that it affected personal relationships, all the concrete everyday power relationships. You only needed to have the courage of your own personal truth, as if personal

3. Hannah Arendt, *La promesa de la política*, Buenos Aires, Paidós, 2008, p. 113.

truth was, at the same time, a non-logical universal, and therefore justified your becoming public about it.

The various Christian denominations gradually lost some of their institutional and pastoral predicament. The Pope became a White Dwarf. In a few Islamic countries, though, homosexuals are still executed. In time, freedom of expression progressively grew in most places. Today we are not confronted by a censorship performed by the police and the judges, as it was until the sixties. We are confronted by a soft censorship instead, exercised by the media themselves in the name of good taste and heterosexism.

I will give you an example. Ovejas Negras, a queer group from Montevideo, started a campaign last year against discrimination through paid ads on TV which showed a picture of two people of the same sex kissing. The ads were rejected by the privately owned Uruguayan channels (the state channels, on the other hand, accepted and publicized them). The private channels discriminated against a paid campaign against discrimination. As we can see, we are confronted here by a new kind of censorship.

All in all, micropolitics is not utopian or dystopian. It implements changes without many people even realizing they are taking place.

Let me talk about poetry. The poetic space, as I see it, is a space of resistance. Resistance against the media which do not need poetry. Communication among poets is a go-between, a web of messages, performances and presentations, the circulation of books and digital materials. These activities are political, functioning as politics in the Greek sense: discussion in a public arena, exchanges of opinion and criticism, interventions, concerted decisions, group projects, a net of relationships around the production of texts, articulating versions and diversions of language. These activities and exchanges give the participants a sense of fulfillment.

Each person is not an I, much less an identity. In the poem, the alternative use of all the personal pronouns, carrying on the verbs and actions, does not accord with an identity. One writes to become different, one plays with words to become other. The Buddhist intuition of the insubstantiality of the I opens up a flux of impressions, starts a motor, undergoes a trajectory, changes the horizon. Mounting on the rhythms of spoken word, the poem does not talk as expected. It is not divorced from current language, but it underlines the power of each word, its place in the phrase and the interplay of sounds to propel the music of speech.

The poem does not exist in a vacuum. Its freedom is not empty. It fights against concrete obstacles, it goes around them. It deals with a historic body of language, and the language of a body, inscribed in a context which may be vast, but is always historical. Autonomy does not mean independence. We are all in the same historical fishpond, so to say, yet we improvise, we resist, and become autonomous, become critical, taking each time a new line of development, a different perspective.

To hit a woman is gender violence. But we have to realize that the matrix of gender is violence in itself. It oppresses us. We are bound to adjust to normal expectations having to do with gender codes, dress codes, coded attitudes and behavior, in conformity with dominant heterosexism. Even without realizing it, we spend our

entire lives trying to adapt to what is expected from us, according to our gender identity. To be a true man, or a true woman means to produce an image and a mode of behavior in sync with the dominant roles. Any deviance is received with jokes, sarcasm, and/or physical aggression. Confronted at home and at school, at work or in the street with dominant codes of behavior, a queer person can choose to adopt a low profile, trying to go about undetected or, on the contrary, he/she can embrace his difference as the instrument of his realization and fulfillment. The queer person can opt for his weirdness, his singularity, as Oscar Wilde advocated, when he conceived of his life as a work of art. Freedom requires courage. To build one's life as a work of art is a practice of resistance.

From Stonewall (1969) onwards the private life of queers became public, as a protest against police harassment and Christian ideology. It was necessary to open up the field of difference and to broaden the margin of tolerance. People came out of the clandestine ghetto. Decade after decade, circumstances improved. There are still further steps to take, in order to achieve equality of rights for all, including the right to civil marriage and the right to adopt children.

Beyond Christian values, beyond the theological crime of sodomy (as established by Saint Paul), a transmutation of values can find a means of support in other civilizations, as well as in the evolution of animal species. Through my writing I have tried to deconstruct gender as a matrix of oppression. I investigate traces of non-Christian cultures separated by time or space. And find echoes in distant places.

Our regime of taboos differs from that of other civilizations. They have their own regimes of taboos. To know the difference is illuminating, insofar as it gives us material for comparison, a different view of the possibilities of our own bodily performances and relationships. What seemed impossible becomes possible in other times and places. And it could become possible for us too. Even if we are dealing with a hallucination, mistaken data or non-exact perceptions can also be productive and useful, insofar as they stimulate us with concrete phantasies. I see liberation as an intercultural rift. The gap between cultures. Crack, crevice, fissure. A montage effect. It broadens the horizon of our personal experience. A mirage, an optical illusion, a fortunate error can be the shooter, the trigger, in order to rephrase pleasure.

In the novel *Ave roc* I focused my enquiry into the American Indian around North Mexico and California. Its history and present. The novel has two axes: the Gabrielino Indian festival, and the quest for peyote. Literature does not mirror reality. It rephrases other accounts of experience. It perforates reality like a meteor following its own trajectory. What had been suppressed is reborn by the ghostly virtue of Eros. It reinvents the images and the lifestyles of beaten or routed peoples, lost along the evolution of the species and historical change. In *Ave roc* I explored a genealogy of deviation, which has two aspects: first, to assess the abuses of the colonizer along centuries of conquest and annihilation; second, to recover the point of view of the Indians, a glance at their views and understanding of things. I appreciate their courage in combat as well as their civil (passive) resistance.

Inspired by the Tarahumara and Huichol Indians of Northern Mexico, the defeated tribes of the United States showed their ability to reinvent themselves in order to survive as communities and civilizations. Near the end of the nineteenth century they generated the new religion of peyote.

By consuming peyote in their religious assemblies, they fought the drinking of alcohol pushed on them by white liquor traders, and by transforming the Christian faith preached to them by missionaries, they avoided the loss of their spiritual drive and cohesion. Their beliefs and shamanistic practices were forbidden. In the new syncretic religion, Christ is the Goddess of peyote, the sister of a mythical warrior. The sister discovers peyote as a means to give spiritual force to the vanquished tribes. This is a line of American crossbreeding. It is a specific crossbreeding. *Ave roc* is a literary attempt to understand and appropriate a specific set of morals, a different use of the body.

My second novel, *El Diablo en el pelo*, deals with an extinct tribe of Uruguay, the Charrúas. This tribe was exterminated by the first president of the newly independent Republic, Fructuoso Rivera, in 1830. An ethnic community was lost, as well as a language. The crossbreed protagonist of my novel betrays some racial components that still survive among the Uruguayan population, and shows traces of their sensibility that exist surreptitiously in the countryside and the suburbs. I explore those faint traces of the vassal culture through the lens of gay relationships and male prostitution.

In the essay *Arte andrógino: estilo versus moda* I researched the successive street styles of youth through the last sixty years of Western culture, styles which emerge from below and challenge the hierarchical and conventional pyramid of fashion.

In my third novel, *Yo era una brasa*, the main character is a black woman from Uruguay. She is a woman of all trades, has a musical gift, and performs as a dancer and a singer. She has the life of a vagabond, good at almost everything she does. She goes about from place to place, and changes from woman to man and viceversa, depending on her occupation and on her sexual partner. I gathered some precise information about the lives of the Afro-Uruguayan descendants of slaves, exploring their possible inscription in the expressive arts of the country. Their survival through poverty and racial discrimination has been an affair of resistance. I found almost no trace of black characters in Uruguayan literature, soap operas, or film. The black person emerges only at the time of carnival, through core candombe percussion, the commonplace characters of the vedette, the *negro velho*, the *negra velha* and the dancing in the *Llamadas* carnival.⁴

My poem *Centralasia* is a free verse version of a journey through Tibet. It researches Buddhist thinking and twists it to an extent, reversing it somehow, although it does not reject its liberating virtue. After all, Buddhism is but a series of variations and nuances, or rather a flourishing of various sects. The poem includes episodes of hunting, tough trekking, strenuous conditions, architectonic and tectonic visions. Friendship, love, and

4. The 'llamadas' is the black part of the Uruguayan carnival, in which groups or 'comparsas' dance to the percussion of drums. This takes place on one or two nights during the carnival period.

sex. An erotic encounter with a horse dealer. The horse dealer brings horses to the Tibetan partisan groups who fight the Chinese invaders of the country.

Our conscience has become global. Or it can be. What happens in Tibet is not alien to other peoples. The Chinese occupation has now lasted fifty years. Out of seven million, the total population of Tibet, apparently one million have perished or were liquidated by the forceful occupant. Showing a total disrespect for Tibetan culture, the occupant destroyed almost every religious monument, temple and monastery (six thousand of them). A few were partially reconstructed later on by the monks. The Chinese organized book burnings (you can watch them on youtube). These were no regular printed books though, but unique incunabula and manuscripts. Something possibly immortal, the shape of a civilization, was erased. Together with the autonomy of a living people. Loss of life and destruction of the imago of the roof of the world. Given the hard conditions inside the country, where dissent can be expressed only at the risk of life, Tibetan resistance is mostly an international affair. A planetary consciousness. A world phenomenon of connectivity.

Our territory is the whole earth. Our problems, our resources, are compromised here and there, in near and faraway places. Technology suppresses time and reduces distance. To live in a specific place, to have such and such a job, to share a language and the local version of it, are the decisive means of our development as groups and individuals. But our situation is global, and we know it. Connectivity, although matched by chance, is motivated. Our consciousness grows through each encounter, and makes possible the long-distance exchange of tasks and purpose. Such elbowing makes it possible to share knowledge, lifestyles and criteria, opening new spaces for tolerance. Our moral sensitivity should accord with the new consciousness.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, 'Modernist' Latin American poets played with exoticism. Julián del Casal wrote *Nieve* in tropical Cuba. He was infatuated with a 'Japanese-Cuban' lady. The Uruguayan Julio Herrera y Reissig wrote the Basque sonnets. And Rubén Darío was accused of exoticism by the Uruguayan critic José Enrique Rodó. The Modernists mixed races (crossbreeding) and juxtaposed places (exoticism).

After the Modernistas, the Avantgardists, the Italian Marinetti and the Chilean Vicente Huidobro became obsessed with velocity, the new means of transportation, and with 'traveling by parachute'. Exoticism and velocity were the concerns of poets a hundred years ago. I think that today we can use a third term to describe that developing process: connectivity. In this global context, we learn about feats of pacific resistance (Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama). Sometimes one can only express dissent by dying.

In our lives the global and the local coexist. A certain way of speaking, certain local expressions or intonations, deriving in quick and casual understanding among those who share them, the circumstances of our corner, are not exchangeable. Still, beyond commonplace identity, I go for change and transformation. So that which seemed to be ours becomes strange. In this sense to pass is to think, to question a certain regime,

to marvel that it is still there, to wonder what makes it possible, going into its enclaves, looking for traces of the movements which formed it and discovering in those stories apparently in ashes, how to think, how to live otherwise.

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