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Review/Reseña

Carlos Liscano, *Truck of Fools* [*El furgón de los locos*, Planeta, 2001], translated by Elizabeth Hampsten. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004.

The Spoken Animal: Politics, Language and History in Carlos Liscano's *Truck of Fools*

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Given the prominence of the *testimonio* genre in Latin Americanist academic debates during recent decades, it is somewhat surprising to note that Elizabeth Hampsten's 2004 translation of Carlos Liscano's autobiographical testimony is one of the first of such works from the Southern Cone to be translated into English. An English-language version of Mauricio Rosencof's *Las cartas que no llegaron* (*The Letters that Never Came*, University of New Mexico) was also published in 2004. Prior to these, at least one Chilean and two Argentine works have appeared in English: Hernán Valdés's *Tejas verdes: diario de un campo de*

concentración chilena (*Diary of a Chilean Concentration Camp*, Gollancz, 1975), Jacobo Timerman's *Preso sin nombre, celda sin número* (*Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, Knopf, 1981), and Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival in Argentina* (originally published in English with Cleis, 1986).

Liscano is a professional writer who, in addition to his work as a journalist, has published novels, short stories, poems and a dramatic monologue. His *testimonio* is thus somewhat atypical in that it is written by the author alone, and reflects an erudite—albeit also politically Left—perspective. Along with a translation of the memoir Liscano published in Spanish under the title *El furgón de los locos, Truck of Fools* also contains a translation of the essay “Una vida sin objeto(s)” as well as a short introduction by the translator and an afterword by David William Foster. The *El furgón* narrative is a fascinating first-person account of the years Liscano spent as a political prisoner under military dictatorship in Uruguay, from the time of his arrest in 1972 until his release in 1985 during the transition to democracy. The “Life Without Object(s)” essay, meanwhile, thematizes in a sophisticated and poetic manner some of the experiences and insights recounted “subjectively” in the first-hand account of *El furgón*.

Hampsten's translation is an important contribution to the fields of Latin American literature and memory studies in the Anglo-American academic world, and offers a valuable point of comparison, both for discussions of the Latin American *testimonio* genre and for studying political violence and state terrorism in different Southern Cone countries. As Foster notes in his afterword, Liscano's narrative can be used to highlight both connections and differences between the military dictatorship of Uruguay and those of Argentina and Chile. Similarly, Hampsten's decision to publish the essay together with the *testimonio* provides an excellent opportunity to discuss how formal differences between the two genres—which, in terms of content, are essentially about “the same thing”—lead to significantly different impressions on the reader.

Before turning to Liscano's text, it should be noted that the Spanish term used to describe texts such as Liscano's—*testimonio*—presents a problem for translation. It would be tempting to classify the work as a

memoir in order to distinguish it from collaborative accounts (such as the one produced by Rigoberta Menchú and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray), transcribed interviews (such as Noemí Ciollaro's *Pájaros sin luz*) and journalistic reports (such as Tomás Eloy Martínez's *La pasión según Trelew*). But the recording of personal memory in *El furgón de los locos* is not invested exclusively in celebrating (or mourning) the life of an individual. Instead, Liscano's writing is consistent with *testimonio* traditions described by both Miguel Barnet and Rodolfo Walsh, for whom the recounting of personal experience is situated within a broader social context of political conflict and collective struggles.

A substantial part of Liscano's narrative is devoted to describing the psychological and material dynamics of repression, including but not limited to what international law would recognize as torture. The techniques of repression were calculated not only to extract strategic information but also to destroy the subjectivity of the militant. Liscano's text goes into considerable detail in describing the physical and psychological dynamics of torture—in particular the technique known as the “submarine,” in which the prisoner is forcibly submerged in a tank of water to simulate drowning. Although he situates the scene of torture at the center of the work, Liscano does not engage in aestheticism. Instead, he uses these detailed reflections on torture to emphasize the fallibility of his captors, frequently portraying them as devoid of honor and unable to think. Similarly, he offers a symptomatic interpretation of their willingness to participate in torture (including cases when information gathering was manifestly not an objective), suggesting that his torturers sought to assert their own worth by visibly negating the agency and dignity of the other. His account works against the tendency to idealize both torture—as sublime, as an experience beyond language—and the torturer, whom Liscano insists on portraying as something less than a demonic, omnipotent figure.

As opposed to the conventional understanding of memory as a mere representation of occurrences that have already taken place, the politics of memory in Liscano's writing functions as a production. Or perhaps the notion of “production” cannot avoid further muddying the waters, since it presupposes the existence of a subject who produces. Liscano's narrative is

concerned with moments and experiences that have not yet been integrated into a coherent, self-consistent chronology, and which fall outside the reflected identity between enunciating and enunciated subjects. In an opening exergue to his memoir, Liscano states that it is only in writing this retrospective account, some three decades after he was first detained, that he will have been able to utter the truth of this prior experience—that is, to repeat it and to make it meaningful not only for others but for himself. The exergue is worth quoting in its entirety:

For days, I've been in an army barrack, hooded to the shoulders: pants, T-shirt, shoes, all soaking wet. I am twenty-three years old. I don't know what day or what time it is. I know it is late at night. They have just brought me from the room where they torture; that's on the floor below, down the stairs to the left. You can hear screams, one person tortured, then another and another, all night. I don't think about anything. Or I think about my body. I don't think it; I feel my body. It's dirty, beaten up, tired, smelly, sleepy, and hungry. Just now, the world consists of my body and me. I don't say it to myself like that, but I know there is no one else but the two of us. It will be many years, almost thirty, before I can tell myself what it is I feel. Not tell myself "what I feel," but what it and I felt [*No decirme 'qué se siente' sino qué sentimos él y yo*] (*Truck of Fools*, 17).

This passage underscores several important motifs in Liscano's memory work. For one, it draws attention to the productive role of writing: as repetition and articulation, writing seeks to establish a temporality and create a constellation of images that would enable the years spent in prison to be remembered as part of larger whole, as belonging to a history that encompasses both the life Liscano led before his confinement and the present in which he is writing. The time in prison constitutes a "gap" in Liscano's personal history, and it is the task of writing to give sense to this time. In fact, it is not only in his personal life that Liscano seeks a sense of continuity, but likewise in the tangled web of his immediate family history. Both of his parents died while he was incarcerated; he was not permitted to attend any funerals, and when he is finally released from prison he learns that his parents' bodies have not yet been given a proper burial. The fate of his parents, whose remains lay unclaimed and forgotten for years in the storage area of a local cemetery, resonates uncannily with the fate of the "disappeared" in many Southern Cone countries in the 1970's. Liscano's

testimony sets for itself the task of being both a bridge over the abyss and a tomb that would offer a concrete site for memory.

At the same time, the passage quoted above sheds light on a second consideration, partially obscured in English translation, and which complicates the *sense production* motif I have just described. The reality of repression, including torture, disorientation, deprivation and isolation, is calculated to destroy the foundations of the prisoner's subjectivity: his or her sense of time, place, dignity, self-control, agency, etc.¹ In the passage quoted above, these effects are registered as the splitting of the conscious, speaking, reflecting subject (the one who says "I") and the body (which feels and suffers), and likewise as the separation of their respective relations to *sense* and *sensation*. (This connection between sensation and sense or meaning is lost, perhaps unavoidably, in the—very reasonable—translation of *sentir* as *to feel*.) If both the "I" and the body are involved in what we call sensation, however, this duplication of our sensory apparatuses poses a considerable problem for any theory of the subject as unity of lived experience. Pain, which has become the overriding corporeal sensation in this situation, is not an experience that can be made meaningful and communicated through words. We can use language to say *that* we feel pain, but words cannot adequately say *how much* or *what kind*, i.e. to what extent one person's pain is or is not like another's. The essence of pain resides in its singularity. The omnipresence of singular pain in this situation threatens to overwhelm language at the very moment when writing would constitute itself as a bridge over the abyss, or a symbol that could be shared with others.

While Liscano's work emphasizes the ethical and political importance of memory, it is also a profoundly poetic text. Not only does Liscano's writing work with poetic images as much as the elements of prose, it is also poetic in the sense implied by the Greek word *poiesis*, which refers to "making." As indicated in the essay, writing for Liscano is a reflection on how words open up a world for us. In "A Life Without Object(s)," he refers to solitary confinement—where the carceral logic

¹ The by now classic account of the destruction of subjectivity in torture is the first chapter of Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

realizes itself in one of its most extreme forms—as a “parenthesis,” a duration that has been emptied out of all the possible relations to others that ordinarily constitute our experience of time: devoid, in other words, of labor, struggle, creativity, and history. It is only in such exceptional circumstances, he suggests, that one first begins to suspect that language itself has an ontological nature—that is, that language does more than merely describe. At the same time, of course, the very existence of his memoir is a refutation of the notion that the space and experience of solitary confinement do not constitute a true *world*, if by “world” we understand *a totality of meaningful relations*. But whereas in ordinary circumstances these relations are shared with others, in a world constituted within the harsh, restrictive solitude of the prison, foundations are made exclusively of images and words that one must keep to oneself.

In a section of the essay entitled “El animal hablado” (which Hampsten strangely translates as “The Speaking Animal” rather than “The Spoken Animal”), Liscano indeed suggests that the human is in fact *spoken* before it can be said to be *speaking*. Whereas we typically speak of language as an instrument that can be used to express, communicate, demand, entreat, question, etc. (“the speaking being”), Liscano casts doubt on this reduction of language to the status of an instrument at the disposal of a subject. “The Spoken Being” suggests that in a certain sense, whenever we open our mouths to speak, it is in fact language that *uses* us.

The most forbidden object in prison was the word. If you spend a lot of time not speaking you get out of the habit. [When, one day, you are allowed to begin again, you find yourself dazed, you have a headache, or your jaw hurts, and you would prefer to listen to what others are saying, or even better, silence.²] Given a human being’s pig-headedness, which a prisoner shares by definition or he wouldn’t be there, having broken some rule—not being able to speak makes speaking his only desire. The word takes on a value it did not have in normal life: being able to say something and be listened to and responded to, becomes a marvel, the greatest of

² The bracketed text in this paragraph represents portions of the Spanish original that do not appear in Hampsten’s translation. In several respects, the translation of “Una vida sin objeto(s)” does not quite measure up to the high standards Hampsten sets in her translation of *El furgón de los locos*.

human marvels. That is when one discovers what he always knew but never had to state: that whatever one is, that sense of being comes from the word. [Later, the prisoner will take this conclusion and apply it to society at large, where the free people live. If, outside prison, there are people who lack words, people who cannot give names to things that exist nor to what does not exist, what sort of freedom do these people truly have?] He who cannot express himself or has no time to think of what or how to speak, does he exist? (5-6).

Liscano here raises the stakes of the testimonial act, suggesting that if one's "sense of being" stems from one's relation to language—or from the fact that one is a speaking being—then to be deprived of the word (through isolation, censorship, traumatic injury, illness, etc.) is to fall away from being itself. *Testimonio* thus stages the emergence of the subject, as *spoken* before *speaking*, and as bearing witness to the support that life receives from the word.

A parenthetical note on the English-language translation of "Una vida sin objeto(s)" is in order here. By virtue of omitting the second of the two bracketed portions, Hampsten's translation regrettably loses sight of several interesting points in Liscano's writing. The first point concerns Liscano's own attempt to "translate" what he has learned in prison, or to convert those insights that have been gleaned under exceptional circumstances into a tool that can be used for the analysis of ordinary social relations. Secondly, the omission of these lines also obscures the way in which Liscano plays with—by both citing and altering—traditional narratives of "conversion," such as might be written by a former prisoner who has now managed to integrate into society. For Liscano, the challenge of transition from prison to society is not so much that of learning how to adapt and fit into a new order or how to become "normal" again; rather, the question is how to transform an experience of manifest domination into an armament for social analysis and change in situations where domination largely goes unnoticed.