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THE WRITING OF THE DISASTER: GERARDO MARIO GOLOBOFF'S
CRIADOR DE PALOMAS

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How does one write disaster? In his homonymous book Blanchot postulates *all* writing as disaster, that is, as negativity, absence, violence, rupture, fragment: the intense and silent abyss which is at once the force of writing and its limit. Yet even if writing is *per se* already a writing of the disaster it is also — and this is essential — the *process whereby something called the disaster is written* (ix). For at the center of Blanchot's meditation, *italicized*, seared black on white into the page as deeply as the constraints of the printed medium permit, is the Holocaust; in his words:

the absolute event of history ... that utter burn where all history took fire, where the movement of Meaning was swallowed up ... How can thought be made the keeper of the holocaust where all was lost, including guardian thought? In the mortal intensity, the fleeing silence of the countless cry. (47)

Writing after Auschwitz is doubly disastrous, according to Blanchot, first, because it must witness Auschwitz as a date — *the date* — in history, and second, because Auschwitz has made the *fleeing silence of the countless*

cry, l'écriture du desastre, the only writing possible. Indeed, the paradigm for the literature of our time, our horrific time, can be found in the fractured texts, in the literature of the negative, of those who survived. To cite Blanchot:

The wish of all, in the camps, the last wish: know what has happened, do not forget, and at the same time never will you know ... there must be survivors to bear witness, perhaps to win ... Not until the revolts issuing from the depths, and then the dissidents and their clandestine writings, do perspectives open up — do ruined words become audible rising from the ruins, traversing the silence.

It is these broken words (and not the absolute, absolutist discourses of the System) that call us to *keep the ceaseless vigil over the immeasurable absence ... for what took up again from this end (Israel, all of us) is marked by this end, from which we cannot come to the end of waking again* (61; 81-84).

Ruined words audible from the ruins, traversing the silence. *Palabras, gestos, sombras que buscan un cuerpo* (*Criador*, 137). The Blanchotian meditation on writing as dual disaster, and on this writing as witness and sentinel, seems appropriate as a point of departure from which to consider Gerardo Mario Goloboff's novel, *Criador de Palomas* (1984). This is so because Goloboff, author of the words just quoted, also presents us with *una escritura del desastre*, a writing which attests the disaster as a date even as it posits language as the work of absence: *El lenguaje trabaja con la ausencia de la cosa*, he says, speaking of *Criador*. *En la narración, lo que yo busco ... es dejar sin tocar, que se note que de lo que se habla está ausente, que la ficción no toca ese suplemento, y no lo va a tocar nunca* ("Goloboff habla", 75). Like Blanchot, Goloboff writes under the sign of a reign of terror, the greatest in the history of Argentina, when, one could say, the movement of Meaning was swallowed up — the meaning of one hundred and fifty years of sovereign existence, the completed meaning of the authoritarian word, the meaning of comforting words that promise stability and certitude. Further, Goloboff also places Israel at the center of the whirlwind, as a Jew whose exploration of his country's descent to hell can only occur through his particular identity. This identity, he reminds us, was never far from the minds of the torturers: not only was theirs a model honed on the bodies of six million Jews; it was equally a model applied with a particularly Hitlerian rigor to Jews. He writes: *La condición judía no fue, durante la barbarie que imperó en la Argentina, el motivo único de las persecuciones, pero sí un agravante que no dejaron de señalarle ni en las circunstancias más fortuitas* ("De una lengua impura", 123-124). In *Criador de palomas* Goloboff gives narrative substance — or rather,

narrative absence — to these moments of the disaster understood in its Blanchotian sense, writing a novel which is at once a reflection on the barbarism and on language as the splinter and silence which challenges the formulaic diction of *Power and Death* (126-127; "Nuestra Babel", 74).

The surface of *Criador* is deceptively simple. It takes us to the myth-place of Argentine literature, the pampa, in what recalls the quintessential *bildungsroman* of the plains, *Don Segundo Sombra*, as well as the ur-text of Judeo-Argentine literature, *Los gauchos judíos*. In a Jewish agricultural colony a boy, an orphan, is educated in the ways of pampa life by his uncle; the simple communal rituals of the countryside, the mate passed from hand to hand, the meat grilled and eaten in fellowship, the shared loaf of bread and jug of wine, evoke the quietist dignity of the inhabitant of the pampa — *agreste, silencioso, fraternalmente solitario* (84). By initiating the boy into these rituals and into the mysteries of the natural world, the uncle transmits to him the philosophy of the painspeople, poor in material goods, but rich in that authenticity resulting from a holistic form of life in which the protection of one's own intimacy is tempered by respect for the environment — the open spaces, ones fellow creatures, human and animal (34; 84). In fact, the lessons of this organic universe are brought home most directly to the boy through the doves he begins to raise at his uncle's encouragement; for the wild pigeons, an integral part of his pampa surroundings, embody the qualities of the men and women of the countryside (84), and it is these qualities that the adolescent begins to absorb as he develops an intimate, literally erotic, kinship with the birds.

But the story of this *Criador de palomas*, while summoning the imagery of fullness and integrity long associated with the pampa, is far from the innocent tale of a childhood in paradise. As much as Eden it is the ruptured and bloodied world of the Ark that is the informing metaphor here. The first of the pigeons appears after a torrential pampa rain, when, as in the Genesis account, a rainbow is seen in the sky, and the uncle teaches his charge: *Esa es la señal de un pacto* (15). In the Bible the bow in the cloud was a sign of God's covenant with humanity not to repeat the devastation of the flood; but like the dove with its olive branch, it was a sign, a writing, *after* the disaster, when living flesh had already become corrupt, had already fallen from the Garden into a reign of violence, had already been subjected to a destruction which had swallowed up all history. The rainbow and the dove (herself a survivor) thus retained the trace of a fragmented world seeking wholeness, a *potential* harmony amidst the ruins of a paradise lost, rather than the stamp of a primordial harmony in a paradise possessed. In *Criador de palomas*, for all the pampa quietism with its edenic overtones, this is the world which we enter, as one by one the doves do the labor of the disaster, inscribing, with their bodies, the calamity of history and language.

Clara, the first dove, is found in her cage, lying in a pool of blood; Verana, in the garden, throat slashed, body mutilated; Pampeana dies at night, of a gunshot wound in the chest; Muñeca also falls. Their shattered corpses are an alphabet of destruction, the markings of a shattered Argentine history. Most particularly, given the conscious dialogue Goloboff establishes with his strong precursor, Gerchunoff, what has been slit like the dove's throat is the fantasy of Argentina as a latter-day peaceable kingdom, the underlying assumption of *Los gauchos judíos*. In his inaugural work, Gerchunoff had postulated the Argentine pampa as a new Garden of Eden for the immigrant Jews of Eastern Europe, the place, as he put it, where *the days are clear and the nights are sweet*, where *the sky is always blue and white* (*The Jewish Gauchos*, xv-xvi). The entire book was permeated by a careful biblicism — the Jews working the land and guarding the flocks, gathering the harvest and celebrating the Sabbath — a biblicism calculated to underline the message of Argentina as paradise, especially for the battered stock of Abraham. Goloboffs' rendering is decidedly more problematic. The slaughter of the doves, followed by the death of the uncle and the exile of the child-narrator from the colony, write out a different version of Argentine and Judeo-Argentine history, summed up in the narrator's words: *La edad golpeó sobre nosotros de manera salvaje. Poco de lo que hubo queda, y poco, poco queda* (141). It is his Kafkan dream about the frail body of the dove Blanca decimated by two torturers in black, and not Gerchunoff's vision of a *generous roof that soothes ancient ... pains with ... motherly hands* which has become reality, Argentina's real-life trial (xv-xvi). In *Criador de palomas* the Jewish experience in what was to be the Land of Advent, an experience which did not live up to the expectations of a Gerchunoff, becomes the expression of the disaster, the writing of a negativity suppressed by the grateful immigrant, but come full-blown for his successor.

Yet just as Goloboff's pampean doves write the disaster as an epoch in history, so do they bespeak writing as disaster. From the beginning, the word goes hand in hand with the dove, *is* the dove, as if to recall a rabbinic tradition which glosses the biblical phrase "golden doves" as a metaphor for writing (Faur, 114-116; *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* I, 54). The first lesson in the magic of the word comes with the first dove: *Tu primera paloma ... Tendrás que ponerle un lindo nombre*, the uncle says to the boy. *Elegí bien, mirá que en una palabra brillan muchas luces* (17). The teaching is from the *Zohar*, the major work of Jewish mysticism, and reflects the Kabbalists' attitude towards the potentialities of language, particularly writing, since for them every created thing had a linguistic, indeed a *lettristic*, essence. To name, then, was an attempt to assume these potentialities, to accept the *tremendum* of language's power (as God's instrument) to call worlds into being. In *Criador de palomas*, however, the act of naming certifies not

presence, but absence: the dove's name, Clara, becomes saturated not with brightness, clarity, and plenitude but with the emptiness, silence and the pain of loss. When Pampeana dies, writing again evinces violence and negativity, the abyss between the illusory thing-in-itself and its writing, which — Derrida reminds us — can only articulate rupture with totality, distance, lapse, solitude (70, 71). *Tuviste la presencia*, the narrator says after Pampeana's demise. *Ahora esas manos oscilan por encontrar las formas. Ya no es igual: lo vivo pasa y lo que amaste cesa* (84). The lesson that *death strolls between the letters*, that absence is, in Derrida's formulation, the *letter's ether and respiration*, is brought home most directly to the boy-narrator by Clara, the dove who initiates him into writing: thanks to Clara, a carrier pigeon, he can for the first time *write to someone* (Derrida, 71; *Criador*, 92). Corresponding with another is already an absence, and the hand, moving along the page, struggles to fix the abandonment, to tie it, in the words of the narrator in *Criador* (93). In the final analysis, however, language, writing, cannot achieve this aim, for the exile from Eden as an event is also the exile of language from the primogenial, unified Word which perhaps once was. All our current words can capture are the smithereen of that marvellous original oneness, the mirror of utopia: *solamente recogía palabras sueltas, vocablos casi incomprendibles, fragmentos sin sentido, añicos seguramente del maravilloso espejo*, as the protagonist expresses it (112-113). Writing as exile, exilic writing, is, thus, what *Criador de palomas* is ultimately "about": the doves that the protagonist-writer raises, nurtures, caresses, loves are words, the scratch marks on the paper that are the imprint of his banishment from Eden, but also, despite everything, the memory of what paradise might have been and might still be. Perhaps it is not inappropriate to mention here — though I know that an author's biography is not equivalent to his creations — that like his fictional protagonist-narrator, who both "lives" the experiences of the novel and "writes" about them (alternating the temporal flow between past and present to capture the dual function of experiencier and recorder), Goloboff, born in the area of the Jewish agricultural colonies, wrote *Criador* in exile, and that the name "Goloboff" contains the word "golub", which in Russian means *paloma*, dove.

Ruined words audible from the ruins, traversing the silence. Blanchot's reflection on the dual disaster of writing is a work of negativity, part of his ongoing questioning of the place of literature and thought in a world informed by death. In his view, because it has absorbed the shock of annihilation, extinction, emptiness, of the end of myths and the erosion of utopia, language can no longer affirm; it can only be, must be, the brand plucked from the fire, the remnant whose "remant-ness" testifies to the horror, and in so doing, may yet prevent its return (47). *There can be this point, at least, to writing* (10). Goloboff is equally concerned with language

and its relation to an eroded utopia, speaking of that lost mythic time where there was an intimate link between word and thing, and postulating the absence of this link, the scraps of that link, as the space of writing in a debased world ("Goloboff habla", 75). For both Blanchot and Goloboff a poetics of the gap is the one poetics possible, as they both historicize writing around a crucial breach in history. But the gap, as Blanchot indicates, is a challenge to Knowledge and Power; and Goloboff concurs:

En toda lengua hay por lo menos dos: una que es la del Poder; otra, que está fuera del Poder ... me gustaría sentir mi lenguaje de escritor ... como un murmullo contra las fórmulas dichas o vociferadas, como un susurro ante el ruido y el grito ... Yo quisiera esforzarme por ser un digno heredero de esos escritores de la contradicción, de la marginalidad, de la síntesis de lenguajes creados, recreados, del silencio .("De una lengua", 126-127)

Which brings us back to *Criador de palomas*. At the end of the novel, the exile returns home, now a man, to begin the task of reconstructing the ruined homestead. Suddenly he hears a strange movement close to him, a small, light, imprecise step: the dove has returned (156). The writing of the disaster, by bearing witness, may yet open up perspectives, perhaps to win.

NOTES

- 1 For Blanchot's earlier position on things Jewish see Mehlman.

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