

The Culture of Democratic Spain and the Issue of Torture

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The issue of torture has been both a problem in terms of human rights and one closely tied to international prestige and cultural polemics for the last four decades in Spain. While denunciations of tortures inflicted on enemies of the Franco regime were an important part of the opposition's public opinion campaigns during the dictatorship, after the general's death in 1975 the persistence of tortures practiced by the various police forces became a delicate political question for the newly established parliamentary monarchy. The transition to democracy during the 1970s coincided with two major developments that affected the social perception of torture. One was very visible; it could be summarized as the coming of age of international human rights monitoring. The other went explicable unnoticed, as it had to do with certain "reasons of state" and practices that must remain secret in order to function within their own logic: I am referring to the change in torture practices from "scarring" (those that leave traces on the victim's body) to "clean" (those which do not) techniques at a global level, as Darius Rejali has documented. In that context, accusations of torture undermined officials' efforts to promote a "normalized" image of Spain as a "wholly European" (i.e., "civilized") nation that sought full integration into the group of advanced democracies by leaving behind the repressive policies of the Francoist dictatorship.¹ The presence of torture as one of the hot topics in public debate, as it was during the 1970s thanks to the struggle of a minority of opposition politicians and intellectuals, was not compatible with the image that needed to be constructed to achieve identification with the targeted European ideal. Furthermore, the concessions made to the pockets

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of authoritarianism that endured within the military and other institutions meant that prosecution and/or denunciation of torture became often useless, and even dangerous, for anti-torture activists.

The consolidation of democracy did not bring with it deeper political reflection on the issue of torture nor decisive action to eliminate it. Rather, torture has been increasingly tolerated in mainstream Spanish society as a necessary evil. Generally speaking, it generated public outcry when it was overt, not stealthy, or when done “by mistake”—as in the infamous “Almería case,” featuring the 1981 torture and assassination of three young men wrongly identified as members of an ETA commando cell that had attacked an army general and killed three of his assistants three days earlier. Roughly at the same time, and paralleling a global trend, torture was becoming further aestheticized and commodified by mass culture. As is visible in the work of some musicians, filmmakers, and designers, nowadays torture appears frequently as a chic, sexy, and/or risqué element in mass cultural production in Spain.

This symbolic management of torture is a fundamental issue, since, as Judith Butler has put it, “whether and how we respond to the suffering of others, how we formulate moral criticisms, how we articulate political analyses, depends upon a certain field of perceptible reality having already been established” (64). Such establishment is closely related to cultural practices, and it is inevitably a field of contention. Within it, some literature undermines the banal framing of torture produced by prevailing notions in mass culture, and it can contribute to the construction of alternative ones. While torture has become “hot” in entertainment and other realms of symbolic production such as couture, most authors and literary critics consider it an extremely difficult subject to tackle. This has not, of course, stopped a number of them from dealing with the issue. Many writers who have not suffered torture have elaborated on “experiences reported at second hand, [in which] there is a fine line between torture and voyeurism” (Franco 242). However, one can find examples of literary discourse that counter the increasing trivialization of torture and at the same time denounce it powerfully, handling it in aesthetically plausible ways. Later in this essay I shall focus on a novel by Bernardo Atxaga and on a poem by Antonio Méndez Rubio (two authors who have developed their creative projects in the context of democratic Spain) to argue that there is a specifically literary critical response to torture as a political and ethical issue of major relevance, a type of response that can help readers understand the nature of torture and discern the utilitarian usages of this phenomenon.

Torture, Politics, and Culture in Post-Franco Spain

In Spain the treatment of detainees and the issue of torture have been the sources of the most compromising human rights scandals to shatter that nation's public morality and international image since the restoration of democracy. Reconfiguring that image—laundering the traces of the previous regime—was essential for the credibility and endurance of the political establishment that replaced Francisco Franco's *Movimiento Nacional* after the death of the dictator in 1975.² At least regarding torture, however, that cleansing meant little more than sweeping the dirt under the rug. Torture did not cease with the institutionalization of the new form of state.

The issue of torture reached its peak relevance within Spain's political debate during the 1970s and early 1980s.³ Communists, socialists, and Basque nationalists strongly denounced its practice by the democratic state's forces, arguing that it was one of the dictatorship's darkest legacies. Once democratic reforms seemed to be firmly in place, most of the denouncers of the practice of torture among the new political establishment ceased protesting it for three main reasons. First, it was legally penalized, so the Parliament had fulfilled its legislative obligation to create a framework against torture (even though, as we shall see later on, this framework was not as restrictive as it should have been). Second, torture was perceived as a lesser evil to be accepted in a context of the antiterrorist fight, or "war on terror," to put it in more current political lingo: in principle, the victims no longer included democratic activists, as had been the case under the Franco regime. And finally, there was some fear of a reactionary backlash, a possibility that the attempted coup of 1981 showed to be quite real.

Around the time of the legislative work to address the issue of torture, ill-treatment of prisoners and detainees was not a rare subject in the Spanish media. Torture was explicitly punished via the inclusion of a new article in the penal code approved by Congress in June and July 1978, and banned in article 15 of the constitution approved at the end of that same year. While these texts were being drafted, the anarchist inmate Agustín Rueda Sierra died on March 14, 1978, after being tortured in Madrid's Carabanchel prison, where a torture cell was discovered a few months later ("La policía"). Although several Spanish detention centers were accused of carrying out torture, the most notorious was the modern, high-security Herrera de la Mancha prison, which opened in 1979. There, the violent practices of the penal personnel became so scandalous that a group of prestigious academics, artists, and politicians felt compelled to write an open letter denouncing it ("Sobre Herrera de la Mancha").⁴ The highest ranks of homeland security issued a response whose tone and arguments differed little from those put forward by the previous regime, claiming that the accusations of torture were signs of a campaign against the police and prison

personnel that sought to undermine their authority and credibility (“Ibáñez Freire”).

The majority of the accusations of torture in the late 1970s and early 1980s referred to abuses committed against Basque detainees. The main denouncer in Parliament was Juan María Bandrés, a representative of the Basque left-wing party Euskadiko Ezkerra. Congress established a special commission in 1979 to investigate the ill-treatment of Basque prisoners and the conditions in which they were held. Interestingly, the creation of this commission was achieved only as a consequence of the negotiations to free Javier Rupérez, a member of parliament who had been kidnapped by ETA. This fact may give an idea of the influence of extremist groups in those years and also of the weakness of the position that the newly established democracy held.

But purportedly leftist organizations such as ETA were not alone in their attempts to undermine the new regime in those turbulent years. Just nine days before the 1981 coup, an editorial piece in *Diario 16* referred to an earlier stage play by Antonio Buero Vallejo to support its condemnation of a notorious case of police torture:

[L]a muerte del etarra Arregui Izaguirre en el Hospital Penitenciario de Carabanchel debe movernos a pensar que tampoco los fundamentos morales de nuestra sociedad están del todo limpios. No hace falta ser un lince para suponer las causas de este fallecimiento. Desde la parábola escénica de Buero Vallejo—aquella estremecedora *Doble historia del doctor Valmy*—hasta el último informe de Amnesty International no nos han faltado recordatorios documentales de que la tortura sigue inmersa en nuestra cultura del desarrollo. (“Un mártir para ETA”)

(The death of ETA member Arregui Izaguirre at the Carabanchel prison hospital must make us think that the moral grounds of our society are not completely clean either. From Buero Vallejo’s staged parable—the terrifying *The Double Story of Doctor Valmy*—to the latest report by Amnesty International we have not lacked documentary reminders that torture continues to be immersed in our culture of development.)

Antonio Buero Vallejo wrote his play *La doble historia del Doctor Valmy* in 1964, but the Franco regime’s censors did not approve it and thus it could not be staged in Spain at that time. The play premiered four years later in Chester, England. It was not until a few months after Franco’s death that the play had its Spanish opening, which took place in Madrid’s Teatro Benavente on January 29, 1976. However, it is worth noting that the approval level of the still-operational censorship apparatus was not high: out of the fifteen censors, seven voted to forbid the play’s public staging. One of the censorship reports stated:

Aunque se sitúa en un país imaginario, en ningún momento se tiene la sensación de que ocurra, por ejemplo, en un país comunista, sino en uno más o menos dictatorial de occidente. Y, en occidente, el Estado policiaco que, teóricamente, más se parece al que pinta Buero es el español. Que sitúe la acción tras el telón de acero o, quizá, en un país suramericano, y podría pasar, pese, como digo, a lo repugnante del argumento. (Muñoz Cáliz 44)

(Although the play is set in an imaginary country, one never has the feeling that it happens in a Communist country, for instance, but rather in a more or less dictatorial one in the West. And, in the West, Spain is the police state that in theory looks the most like the one depicted by Buero. Have him place the action behind the iron curtain or, perhaps, in a South American country, and it might get a pass, despite the disgust its argument produces.)

After it was finally authorized and staged, Buero's play enjoyed great success, achieving its six hundredth performance on November 28, 1976. The play did not openly refer to Spain (something that would have made official approval impossible), but it had an immediate impact at several levels there. After the Madrid premiere, Buero received anonymous death threats. Rather than protecting him, the police, through the Information Head of the homeland security agency, stated in a February 9, 1976, report that the playwright was staging a "campaña teatral contra la policía" (Muñoz Cáliz 44) (theatrical campaign against the police). In any case, the impact of Buero's play on the political consciousness of at least some Spaniards would last several years, as is clear in the 1981 editorial quoted above.

That year, 1981, was of great relevance with regard to the social and political treatment of torture in Spain. The increasing political tension and the growing violence of groups such as GRAPO and, most importantly, ETA produced a social climate in which even those who had suffered the repression of the Franco regime's police and were most critical of paralegal practices started to turn a blind eye to the structures that made torture possible. In the epilogue to their *Spain: Dictatorship to Democracy*, Raymond Carr and Juan Pablo Fusi concluded,

What Spaniards do not deserve is a vicious terrorist campaign, unmastered by the security forces. In the first nine months of 1980 over one hundred Spaniards, from generals to workers, met violent deaths. Terrorist violence is a deliberate strategy designed to destroy democracy, to enlarge the area of *desencanto* until it becomes transformed into a nostalgic yearning for a return to the peace of General Franco. (258)

The situation was dire, and many yearned for security forces that could get it under control, at almost any price.

The approximately two hundred members of the military who stormed Parliament on February 23, 1981, belonged to the Civil Guard, a corps that was especially sensitive regarding public discussion of torture during the second half of the 1970s. In June 1976, for instance, the corps prevented the influential magazine *Cuadernos para el diálogo* from publishing a piece on torture in Spain (“*Cuadernos para el Diálogo* retira un informe sobre la tortura”). Much wider resonance was achieved by the case of Pilar Miró’s film *El crimen de Cuenca*, which depicted in gruesome detail the tortures inflicted by *guardias civiles* on two peasants wrongly accused of killing a third. The film was based on historical events from the early twentieth century. Contrary to what is found in most commercial films containing scenes of torture prior to September 11, 2001 (Hron 24), the torture is not rendered merely with a passing metonymic allusion to the instruments used to carry it out. The film’s explicitness and denunciations of the systemic failures and immorality in the military and judiciary were simply unacceptable in 1979 Spain. In November of that year, the Ministry of Culture’s *Dirección General de Cinematografía* (Film Office) denied permission to screen the film, alleging that it “podía tener escenas delictivas” (might contain unlawful scenes). Shortly afterwards, and without previous notice, the police sequestered all the copies of the film (although they failed to get a hold of one, which ended up being shown at the Berlin Film Festival) on the orders of a military tribunal; subsequently, the tribunal started to prosecute Miró herself. A request for a screening permit was made again on February 15, 1980, to no avail. The producers of the film sought the protection of the civil courts, and on July 31 a civil judge permitted the screening of the movie, arguing that doing otherwise would violate the freedom of speech guaranteed by the recently approved Constitution. However, it was not until February 20, 1981—just three days before the coup—that the BOE (*Boletín Oficial del Estado*) published the final heads-up. The film was premiered in August of that year, almost two years after it had been banned (“Publicada en el BOE la sentencia sobre *El crimen de Cuenca*”) and only a few weeks after the abovementioned “Almería case.”

In practice, the 1981 coup attempt brought to a halt the work of the parliamentary investigative commission on torture. Although the military rebels failed to seize power, the coup reminded those trying to abolish torture that questioning the practices of the armed forces was not without its risks. Political efforts to end torture in Spain virtually evaporated after 1981, even though international organizations and officials repeatedly denounced the use of torture against detainees there. The Spanish government signed the United Nations’ Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment upon its approval on February 4,

1985, but it has repeatedly ignored a number of the specific recommendations from the United Nations and other international groups for preventing its use. In a 2003 visit to Spain, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Question of Torture investigated legal and factual aspects of allegations of torture or ill-treatment, in particular regarding detainees held in connection with counterterrorism measures. In his 2004 report, the Special Rapporteur concluded that although “torture or ill-treatment is not systematic in Spain . . . the system as it is practiced allows torture or ill-treatment to occur, particularly with regard to persons detained incommunicado in connection with terrorist-related activities.” Amnesty International’s research indicates that the continuing allegations of torture and other ill-treatment by law enforcement officials stem from “multiple failings by the Spanish authorities to comply with their international legal obligations which require them to take a range of legislative, judicial, and administrative measures to prevent ill-treatment, and to ensure the prompt, independent, impartial and thorough investigation of any case where there is reason to believe ill-treatment may have occurred” (*Spain*). With the changing social landscape in Spain, the victims of ill-treatment have a different profile than they had years ago; for some time, it has been immigrants and petty delinquents who have been the most affected. Spaniards were also shocked to see the police using a great deal of violence against a number of those protesting as a result of the growing social and political unrest that is characterizing the beginning of the 2010s. The conservative government of Mariano Rajoy seems unwilling to increase measures to prevent illegal use of force by the police; rather, it has proposed a ban on the recording of images of officers as they do their work (“Policías sin imágenes, fuente de abusos”).

The Risqué (Show) Business of Torture

The disappearance of torture as a topic of political debate within the institutions of democratic Spain in the 1980s preceded the dramatic escalation of commercial, “entertaining” approaches to the issue worldwide. Imagery of torture has been used in a variety of products ranging from fashion presentations and commercials to music videos and television shows of global consumption. In Spain, these approaches are characterized by an emphasis on erotic aspects, an appeal to voyeurism, and a vague contextualization. This obliteration of historicity facilitates their trivialization and disengages them from the reality of the practice of torture in Spain and abroad.

Although one can find myriad examples of mass media representations of torture in the last century (for instance, it is rare to find an action thriller film without at least some allusions to it), the so-called post–September 11 “war on terror” signaled a shift in the way these images are used. The public

dissemination in April 2004 of photographs of the tortures carried out in the Iraqi prison of Abu Ghraib had a global impact on the quantity and nature of the torture presented in mainstream media. Madelaine Hron argues that while by the turn of the century torture had already “become a cliché, if not a commodity, in popular culture” (26), direct references to the practice skyrocketed after 2004, becoming “even more realistic and graphic” in popular films and television shows (27). Clearly, not all these products treat torture in the same way, and the information that audiences gain about the practical consequences and moral implications of its use vary greatly. But, as Hron asserts, “each and every on-screen reproduction of torture, be it one of contestation or legitimization, risks drawing viewers further and further away from the ‘truth’—that torture is a grievous human rights violation—and instead lead them to greater desensitization and compassion fatigue” (30). Though representations of “real” and “fictional” tortures may both contribute to that inuring in viewers, they pose different problems; here I am only dealing with the latter, which are also much more common in standard media.⁵ Differences also seem to exist in how aestheticized torture is received, depending on the place that actual torture occupies within a national narrative. Thus, overt use of representations of torture as “entertainment” in the post-September 11 United States may be considered part of “the fantasy of an *effective* State” (Beverly 101, his emphasis). In Spain, however, this aesthetization clashes with the national narrative of a fully Europeanized and democratic country; consequently, depictions of torture in popular media there are often characterized by elusive contextualization and marked sexualization—mostly depoliticized.

In pondering the reception of mass-culture products that employ topical traits of the practice of torture, it becomes evident that torture has been long considered a problem alien to Spanish society (unlike, say, domestic violence, which is justly and widely addressed by Spain’s media). Designer David Delfín’s “Cour des Miracles” collection, presented at the 2002 Madrid Fashion Week (then called *Pasarela Cibeles*), generated public outcry over its showcasing of models with hoods that completely covered their heads, thick ropes around their necks, and bandages dashed with fake blood. The day after the show, a photograph of one of the models in a hood and bandages made it to the cover of *El País*, where the piece “Escándalo en la Pasarela Cibeles” was set between news about the imminent US attack against Iraq on one side and, on the other, a clash between judge Baltasar Garzón and Basque government officials regarding a demonstration that the former considered to be pro-ETA—two texts discussing situations that have at some point been marked by torture-related scandals. It is noteworthy, however, that those who bemoaned Delfín’s collection were stirred by what they perceived to be a “frivolización del maltrato a las mujeres” (trivialization of domestic violence against women) but did not address the obvious iconic connections to torture. Hooding, one of the ways the designer

presented his models in the controversial show, has been used widely by torturers as a sensory deprivation technique, to such an extent that the image of a hooded person has become iconic of torture (Eisenman 25), whereas it is not employed to denounce domestic violence. Delfin, who later claimed to be inspired by Magritte's work, was not the first designer to toy with the idea of using that kind of imagery to sell fashion. Ksenja Bilbija has written on the polemics raised in Argentina and Chile concerning images of young people drowning with their hands tied behind their backs—evoking the phantasmatic images of some of the disappeared, victims of the countries' dictatorial regimes who were tortured and thrown into the ocean—that were being used to advertise jeans. And Delfin would not be the last: John Galliano was even more explicit in a 2008 collection that was branded as “torture couture.” Although the props worn by Delfin's models were very similar to Galliano's, the interpretation of the Spanish public ignored the issue of torture, as if it did not belong to their political realm.

This repression of the historical presence of torture in Spain was also evident in the (non-) reaction to a popular music video by Colombian pop singer Shakira and her Spanish counterpart Alejandro Sanz, two of the most commercially successful Hispanic artists worldwide. The lyrics of the song “La tortura” (by Luis Fernando Ochoa and Shakira R. Mebarak, 2005) exploit the ambivalence of the language of the passions and pains of love, especially after the breakup of a relationship: “fue una tortura . . . perderte” (losing you—that was torture). The vocabulary evokes extraction, with expressions such as “dame, dame, dámelo” (give it, give it, give it to me) and, related to it, the body in pain: “me duele tanto” (it hurts so much), “no me castigues más” (stop punishing me), “un simple mortal” (a mere mortal). Even the lexicalized idioms used (“no he sido un santo”—I have been no saint; “no te rajes”—don't give up, but also “don't get cut”; “no tengo paz”—I get no rest; “no estoy hecho de cartón”—I am not made of cardboard) belong, in their literal meanings, to the semantic field of ill-treatment.

The ambivalence of the lexical choices in the lyrics is reinforced with a number of visual and aural elements in the video, which allude to the iconography of torture as it has been constructed in the public imaginary. At the beginning of the video, we hear police sirens while we see an out-of-focus “still life” of objects that are initially unidentifiable. Among the props shown at that point and later in the video, one can distinguish several articles related to torture, such as cables, leather contraptions, knives, and plastic wrap. These are items commonly found in daily life, completely innocuous when used according to their usual function—but when illustrating a song with a title as explicit as “La tortura,” the sense they carry can hardly be called subliminal. The same can be said of the liquids shown (tears and a tar-like substance on Shakira's body), which clearly evoke suffering. Blood, however, is substituted by the redness of tomatoes, which appear next to a

knife that seems about to cut a hand open—as if reminding the viewer that the video is, after all, harmless entertainment in which everything is ultimately fake. The setting is urban, impersonal, in the end undisclosed. Sanz's character gazes discreetly—or secretly—through his rear window, in an attitude that evokes surveillance; this scene is interpolated with others of a scantily clad Shakira dancing with a severe look on her face. Her choreography displays spasmodic movements, evocative of a body racked by pain. Here, as in so many pop music productions, the female body is hypersexualized, and the imagery of torture and that of pornography become intertwined.⁶ We also briefly see the figure of a body pressed against a pane of translucent glass in a gesture that could well be one of panic—hands up and spread apart—and reminiscent of a long history of clandestine violations of human rights.

Two Literary Responses to a Human Rights Issue

Delfin's and Shakira's works, and their receptions, are indicative of the predominant symbolic treatment of torture within a context in which its practice is mostly ignored or cynically justified. However, as I have pointed out earlier in this essay, one can find a number of literary texts that not only denounce the prevalent practice of torture in our society but also problematize its discursive framing. In this section, I will take a close look at two texts that present especially sophisticated manifestations of this latter approach. The first is by Bernardo Atxaga (b. 1951), the Basque-language author who has attained greatest international visibility. Among his major works is the novel *Soinujolearen semea* (2003), translated into Spanish as *El hijo del acordeonista* (2004) by Asun Garikano and Atxaga himself, the version that Margaret Jull Costa used for her 2007 English translation, from which I shall be quoting.⁷

In Atxaga's novel, a Basque writer named Joseba receives the manuscript of a memoir written by his friend David Imaz, who has recently died at age fifty in California, where he spent the last years of his life. The memoir tells the story of David's coming of age in Obaba, a fictional village in the rural Basque Country. It also narrates both David's and Joseba's involvement in politics during the last period of Francoism. The final section of the novel, "August Days," includes the chapters "Toshiro" and "Three Confessions," embedded stories apparently written by Joseba (who has edited the whole manuscript, adding his own words freely), and which will occupy the center of my attention here, as it is in them that torture becomes a central topic.⁸

I shall identify two different approaches to the issue of torture that Atxaga experiments with in his novel. The first, which is apparent in "Toshiro," engages the trivializing accounts of torture that are predominant in contemporary mass culture by parodying them. The second, exhibited in

“Three Confessions,” demonstrates how self-conscious literary discourse can make it possible to present an alternative to the banal framing of torture prevalent in commercial symbolic production. It also points to the value of a lettered response to the dogmatism of the proponents of torture and the kind of univocal truth sought by torturers.

“Toshiro” is titled after the name of a Japanese shipyard employee who rents a room in the same boardinghouse in Bilbao where three members of a leftist separatist organization (which remains unnamed, although it can be easily identified as ETA) are hiding as they prepare to act. The young men are the abovementioned David and Joseba, plus a third, Agustín; Ramuntxo, Etxeberria, and Triku are their nicknames. The first mission assigned to them is the distribution of propaganda among the shipyard’s workers, but they can’t seem to find a way to do it safely. They notice that their roommate, Toshiro, is depressed, and the proprietor tells them the reason:

He confessed to me, almost in tears, that he’d betrayed Masako [his fiancée]. He said he was unclean and must cleanse himself before returning to Osaka. . . . For the first few days, he whipped himself with a belt. But I told him not to. . . . I felt so sorry for him. And ever since then, well, you’ve seen what he does. He kneels in his room until he keels over from sheer exhaustion. (318)

It should be noted that Toshiro also had a confession to make, as is expected in torture, although in his case it was about his flirtation, and the person who elicited it was the benevolent, mother-like Maribel. David has an idea: as a way of expunging his guilt, Toshiro can do the “job” for them: “We just tell him that we’re fighting for the rights of the workers and that if he helps us, his debt will be paid.” This amuses Joseba, who responds, “Especially if the police get hold of him. They’ll give him such a beating that, as well as paying for his sin, he’ll be in credit for the next” (319). The methods that Toshiro uses to punish himself are commonly inflicted by torturers around the world—kneeling is a positional “clean” technique known by the Japanese word *seiza* (Rejali 555.) The exotic token of Toshiro’s presence emphasizes the dubious verisimilitude of the story, which ends with a scene in a discotheque where the three activists meet the man who has done the job for them after he has been ill-treated by the police:

Toshiro was, as Maribel had said, limping slightly, and his face, beneath the bright lights of the discotheque, was that of someone who has endured several rounds in the ring. We embraced. “How are you, kamikaze? Did they give you a hard time?” Triku asked him. “I am very happy,” Toshiro replied. “Joseba was right. Now I have paid all I had to pay and can return with tranquil heart to Osaka.” In the noisy

discotheque it was impossible to know in what tone of voice he had said this, but he clearly meant what he said. “I told you that you would pay not only for what happened before, but be in credit for the next time. And that’s exactly what happened,” Joseba said. We ordered a bottle of champagne, and Toshiro explained to us that he’d played innocent with the police. (321)

The situation verges on the ridiculous: some time in the mid-1970s, a Japanese man in Bilbao willfully puts himself in harm’s way to expiate his sexual guilt; he is tortured, but feels “very happy” about it. The hedonistic milieu where the characters meet, and the indulgence associated with the gesture of ordering a bottle of champagne (which will later be followed by a second one), accentuates the triviality with which the experience of torture endured by Toshiro is dealt with. The sentimental and erotic aspects of the story—not only Toshiro’s betrayal but also the excuse he gives the police for his actions (that Japanese men are easily tricked by women)—add to its banality.

As he has demonstrated with works such as *Obabakoak*, Atxaga is an extremely self-aware writer, cognizant of the workings of literature and its capacity to incorporate other discourses and at the same time undermine them. In “Toshiro,” Atxaga parodies the archive of fictionalizations of torture that, through their sexualization, depoliticization, and banalization of suffering, have resulted in a widespread trivialization of this human rights issue. In contrast, subsequently he offers a very different treatment of the subject, one that deploys a very different response to it—the “Three Confessions.”

The confessions that make up the last part of the novel capture the experiences of Ramuntxo, Etxeberria, and Triku immediately after they are arrested. Of course, there are elements of irony in this text, too, beginning with the fact that the so-called confessions—the quintessential genre of alleged first-person sincerity—are the product of Joseba’s imagination, and that he is one of Atxaga’s fictional characters. (One could add that “Bernardo Atxaga” is also a fictitious entity, as it is Joseba Irazu’s penname).

The confessions reflect a variety of literary approaches to the challenge of dealing aesthetically with the experience of torture. One of them could be termed “naturalistic”; another one would be “fantastic”; yet another, “social realist.” Not one of them offers a definite answer to the problem, but put together they show some of the potential of an artistic use of language to increase our awareness and knowledge of the matter. The naturalistic approach that characterizes Triku’s confession makes the stealth torture techniques used visible for the reader so as to indict it. The setting is described meagerly, as there is not much to it (an empty room, no windows,

a fluorescent light). Then we read about the torture methods used on Triku—the policemen leaves “no actual wounds” on his body:

[T]hey made me stand to attention against the wall, with my knees stiff, and then they put a telephone directory on top of my head and started hitting it. Each hard, sharp blow sent a kind of electric shock all the way down my spine to the soles of my feet. . . . [The policeman] began to curse—“Bastard . . .”—and punched me several times. The other man said: “Wait, Jesús, use this instead,” and they put the bag over my head, and I felt as if my heart would burst. (345, 347)

Eventually, the text leaves naturalistic representation behind and exploits the uncanny in order to highlight the ineffability of a near-death experience. The cosmonaut story included in Triku’s confession is an effective exploration of the experience of torture beyond pain, in which other states of consciousness are considered. In it, Triku sees himself accompanying Soviet astronaut Vladimir Mikhailovich Komarov, both about to die of lack of oxygen while orbiting Earth in a failing spaceship (347–50). When the spaceship finally crashes, he wakes up in the hospital.

Ramuntxo’s confession includes an explanation of his team’s final mission and an acknowledgement of how the organization’s terrorist practices (killings, kidnappings, and so on) started to betray its own foundational ideals. Fed up, Ramuntxo makes plans to abandon the fighting and turn himself in to the police. Before he can do so, his unit is arrested. He confesses, declaring himself guilty of “everything” he’s asked about. Since he does so without being tortured, Ramuntxo is ostracized and labeled a traitor by his former collaborators, who also accuse him of cutting a deal with the government and orchestrating the arrest.

At about the same time as Ramuntxo, Etxeberria also decides to abandon the group. He is the one who actually betrays his colleagues: “I agreed on the conditions [of the arrest] with the governor of Navarra: there would be no violence during the arrest and no torture at the police station. There would be no need. I would supply them with all the information” (357). The deal, as we have seen, is not respected, and the torture Triku undergoes almost kills him. In order to fend off his colleague’s suspicions while serving time in prison, Etxeberria decides to self-inflict some wounds that he can later present as police ill-treatment: “I woke up twenty hours later in hospital. ‘There have been a lot of street protests about how you and your friends have been treated,’ the male nurse told me. I realized I was safe, and I felt glad” (359). With this acknowledgement of the existence of false claims used by some terrorists, Atxaga complicates the picture of the social reception of torture in Spain, where this phenomenon is often dismissed as a mere fabrication used by interested parties to delegitimize state power.

Through precise contextualization and techniques such as polyphony, multiperspectivism, irony, and parody, Atxaga weaves a pluralistic text that presents literature as a discourse that can problematize both the monological truth sought by practitioners of torture and the pervasive textual framing that trivializes the practice of torture or tries to justify it. His novel also reflects on the effects such an experience can have on the link between an individual who has suffered it and his/her community, an aspect that is also present in the next text I will contemplate, a poem by Antonio Méndez Rubio (b. 1967) from his 2008 book *Razón de más*:

RAZÓN DE ESTADO

LO que no hay que decir:
para qué. Rézale únicamente
 a quien entonces dio la explicación.
 Un temblor de animal recorre el fondo.
 Tantos rostros miraron desde arriba
 que el final no se vio. La tortura se concibe anónima
 desnudez: pero en la desnudez
 se amanece también
 sin la luz
 a no ser
 que se agradezca el crepitar del miedo.
Para qué. No hablar desde la voz.
 ¿Decir? No es tampoco una ayuda.
 Elegir responder.
 Y cavar, y cavar. Y más cal viva. (40)

REASON OF STATE

There's no need to say:
what for. Pray solely to
 the one who spelled it out.
 An animal quiver ripples below.
 So many faces watched above that
 the finale went unseen. Torture is designed anonymous
 nakedness: but in nakedness
 dawn still glows
 without light
 except when
 welcoming the crackle of fear.
What for. Not speaking from voice.
 Saying? That's no help either.
 Choosing to respond.

And digging, and dig. Figuring in the quicklime.⁹

Remo Bodei has argued that the widespread perception of continuous crisis during early modern times brought about a change in the understanding of the notion of “good government.” It was back then that Giovanni Botero first theorized about the issue of the reason of state, relating it to principles of justice and rationality. However, a pervasive climate of permanent conflict favored a change of focus from those principles to the constant fight to defend or reinforce the state at any cost, a view favored by Niccolò Machiavelli. It is to these ends that some consider it necessary to employ means that actually go against those earlier principles of legitimacy. Since then, secrecy and tergiversation have been fundamental elements in the operational logic of modern states, for, as Michel Foucault argues, “power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms. . . . [S]ecrecy is not in the nature of an abuse; it is indispensable to its operation” (86).

Such masking requires a dense symbolic net that materializes in the massive output of state bureaucracies and that constructs an order preserved by institutions. With its calculated linguistic violence, some poetry points to the artificial nature of, and presumable need for, that order, which is not generated spontaneously but rather is instituted by a limited number of people with specific interests. Dismantling the impersonal linguistic codes of bureaucracy calls for a de-automatizing or defamiliarizing treatment (as Viktor Shklovskij would put it) as much as for the intersubjective emotional drive that sustains lyric poetry. We can typically find these two elements combined in irrationalist discourse.

According to Carlos Bousoño, irrationality stems from “el hecho de que la emoción procede de una significación que se ha asociado inconscientemente al enunciado poemático, y que, por tanto, permanece oculta” (23) (the fact that emotion comes from a meaning that has been unconsciously associated with the poem’s wording, and thus remains concealed). This poem by Antonio Méndez Rubio *conceals* precisely in order *to reveal* a fallacious political strategy, one characterized by stealth, by concealment. This strategy lurks at the heart of the modern state, regardless of occasional advancements toward increased transparency—which are often the result of pressure exercised by nongovernmental and/or international organizations. As Darius Rejali has demonstrated, even the majority of consolidated democratic states continue operating from the secrecy of action and the tergiversation of discourse. The logic for this is based on a generalized conformism that can be related to the conditions facilitated or imposed by all types of regimes; as Bodei argues,

Now that democracies involve virtually the entire adult population it is incumbent that the citizens be “enlightened” so that they may make reasoned choices. This is an unending task, subject to regression, as was seen in twentieth-century totalitarianisms and more recently in the populist drift in many democracies, in which the fear of terrorism (often artfully fueled), the control of the means of mass communication and the manipulation of public opinion have brought about a climate of mutual suspicion, together with nationalistic or religious pleas that enjoy unthinking obedience. In place of William James’ “will to believe” we find the will to make believe, and with this one becomes accustomed not to subtlety or to discretion, as in Gracián’s baroque man, with his tortured interiority—but to a sort of flattened conformity. The greatest secrets are those that never appear and are not in need of contestation. (Bodei 895)

One may think that Bodei is too lenient when he associates official secrecy and the abhorrent practices that it conceals only with totalitarian regimes and some democracies that, according to his words, have a core of goodness that can occasionally be corrupted by populist drives. Even though the public justification of those practices may be apparent in periods in which officials seek political gain from their cynicism (such as the one marked by George W. Bush’s “war on terror”), it should go without saying that the nature of these kinds of actions carried out outside the realm of law requires keeping them secret.¹⁰

The sort of irrationalism displayed in Méndez Rubio’s poem has the aim of disrupting (and thereby making visible) the rhetorical mechanisms of state power. It is not the result of unleashing oneiric or visionary images; rather, it is based in very different procedures of linguistic transgression. In essence, Méndez Rubio’s piece is *cryptic* language—and we would do well remembering that the term comes from *κρυπτός*, Greek for “concealed.” In the poem, the logical connections between the elements that compose meaning are weakened to the point that they almost break apart. Méndez Rubio exercises a meticulous violence on language to obtain a controlled fragmentation and diffusion of discourse. By doing so, his piece evokes the verbal, physical, and ultimately ontological precariousness of any individual who is made irremediably vulnerable to the practices produced by, and that feed, the reason of state. I must emphasize that the veils on meaning that make comprehension of the poem so difficult have a greater function than the mere pursuit of poeticity. The writing’s cryptographic quality becomes is not just there to excite aesthetic emotion or to explore formal transgression; it also, and most importantly, stirs our ethical judgment.¹¹

But let us analyze how this concealment is carried out in the poem. A starting point may well be the question of the poem’s lyric subject. Its identity is dubious—the reader cannot easily identify whose voice it is that

we hear. As critic Miguel Casado has remarked regarding another poem by Méndez Rubio, “el sujeto de los poemas, su protagonista, no permanece uno, se configura como gama de posiciones, como punto cambiante en la también cambiante textura existencial—cada vez produce un sentido, cada vez habla con una voz” (265) (the subject of the poems, their protagonist, does not remain singular. It is configured as a variety of positions, as a changing point in an existential texture that is also changing; it produces a different meaning each time, it speaks with a different voice each time). In “Razón de Estado,” this diffused heteroglossia is made visible within a single poem. The piece is enunciated from an elusive locus; there is no precise grammatical subject. Verbs are often in impersonal forms: impersonal passives (“se concibe,” “se agradezca,” “se amanece”) and infinitives, among which three, not coincidentally, pertain to the semantic field of communication: “decir,” “hablar,” “responder.” Even those verbs that appear to be in a personal form have an indeterminate subject. Who should “rezar” (pray), who “dio la explicación” (gave an explanation), whose are those “rostros” (faces) who “miraron desde arriba” (watched from above)?

Paul Cahill offers a possible response to those questions, arguing that

Antonio Méndez Rubio’s poetry, like his poetic speaker’s body, does speak, but does so in nobody’s name. That is, it examines the dynamics underlying politics, (in)visibility, and disappearance, rather than alluding explicitly to the plights of particular social agents who suffer in a globalized world characterized by increasing economic and political disparity and one in which totalitarian regimes make those who challenge them disappear.

I believe that, at least in the poem analyzed here, Méndez Rubio prevents his writing from speaking “in nobody’s name.” He does not specify who those suffering social agents may be, and he does not observe phenomena of disappearance and political invisibility from a theoretical distance. As I shall demonstrate later, the poem ends with a strong allusion to physicality, thus refuting the notion that its irrationalism may have its limit in “language games”: wherever there is a tortured body, no doubts can be raised about the materiality of being, of its ultimate reality.

“Razón de Estado” exposes the difficulty of personifying the victim just as much as the perpetrator of torture. The plight of the victim remains hidden by the secrecy of the state and its inherent dilution of responsibilities through the chain of command and through its justifying discourse (“la explicación,” [the explanation]). State agents are sheltered by the anonymity assigned to them. Their victims are deprived of their identity and are exposed to anomie. The poem also suggests the universality of the issue, which in the text is not tied to a specific time and place. This seems to be

appropriate, since torture has occurred and keeps occurring in many different contexts.

In the second line, “*para qué*” (what for?) refers to the political end of the means used to safeguard the state’s interests. Toward the middle of the poem these means are made explicit: torture. From the point of view of those upholding the reason of state, torture’s objective is that which “no hay que decir” (need/must not be said) in the first line. It is imperative to keep it silent; for even though torture is an abhorrent and internationally banned practice, it is widely used with impunity.

The direct mention of the word “torture” seems counterintuitive within the poem’s expressive logic. The charge of the term is such that it can be seen as breaking the subtle formulation of the piece, in which what is barely said or not said at all has at least as much importance as what is actually exposed. But the presence of the word is totally justified, as it brutally contrasts with the bureaucratic euphemisms that are used to conceal it (such as “aggressive interrogation techniques”). Calling torture by its name unravels the state’s stealth linguistic conventions.

“*Para qué*” appears in the poem again enclosed by the blank space of the page, by “el crepitar del miedo” and “No hablar.” Semantically, this all points to exposure; one can sense the doubts and suffering of the victims, who try to make sense out of their loved ones’ disappearance or their own—something difficult, if not impossible, if one is unfamiliar with the logic that prompted it. The density of impersonal verbal forms and the violence of the enjambments give the poem a forced, rough syntax that is close to incoherence. This evokes an almost aphasic mumbling that can be associated with the destructive effect torture can have on its victims’ discourse and, more broadly, on their lives, as Elaine Scarry has argued. Scarry’s book has had a deep influence on studies of the literary treatment of torture, despite its serious conceptual and historiographic flaws. I find Rejali’s work much more compelling. He affirms that these difficulties with expression have their worst consequences not in “the gap between the brain and the tongue, but between victims and their communities, a gap that is cynically calculated, a gap that shelters a state’s legitimacy” (31). Moreover, one should note that the dehumanization that torture provokes does not go in only one direction. Bereft of language, debased, a torture victim is violently alienated from the ideal of a human existence. At the same time, in the eyes of the community, the torturer, if seen as perpetrator of absolute evil, also loses humanity. That is the source of the ambivalence of that “animal quiver,” which may belong to either the victim or the perpetrator.

If “torture is designed anonymous,” it is because it is the product of rationality and calculated secrecy—that of governmental policies whose ultimate responsibilities are hard to track. The enjambment separating “anonymous” and “nakedness” underscores the ambivalence of that anonymity: the identity of the perpetrators is hidden, and they try to erase

the victims' names as a way to increase their reification. But these bodies are the most definitive evidence of the state crime that must be concealed, kept in the shadows. They are therefore an undeniable material reality that can help in denouncing that crime, casting some light (thus the reference to daybreak) on the occultation policies that sustain torture. "Except when" (line 10) torture is approved of, as is the case among those who see it as a necessary evil.

The closing line weighs on the poem, dragging it from an initial seeming lack of concreteness—which is close to abstraction—to the material depth of the world and the bodies that inhabit it. Before this last line, the fissure that the poet was creating to violate language threatened to become an insuperable crack, an insurmountable divide between his imagination and the space his readership shares with him. But Méndez Rubio does not lose control over his assault on words. Rather, he emphasizes the physical realities (both sonic and graphic) of language to maintain that control and make sure his message gets to us. From a phonetic standpoint, the polysyndeton and the repetition of /ka/ and /ba/, along with the limitation of vowel sounds to just /a/ and /i/, contribute to bringing the reader to an exhumation scene in which the silence of the solemn occasion is broken by the noise of the metallic tools that perforate the ground. Typographically, the y's and v's visually emphasize a dynamic of deepening with their down-pointing vertices. It is impossible to determine if, within the fiction construed by the poem, the digging is that of torturers who are burying their victims, and then throwing down caustic lime to hasten their consumption, or if it is rather the recovery of some bodies, and the opening of the common grave has encountered the obstacle posed by the quicklime. I believe that we would do well in accepting a double, simultaneous chronology, which gives perfect completeness to the temporality of the poem. The closing of the text would thus coincide with that of the grave, but it is nonetheless an open ending, which stays on the page to be probed, interpreted, questioned—as the past should be.

However, we would be missing something fundamental if we ignored the coincidence of those four final lines in which metalinguistic verbs (speaking, saying, responding) and the "voice" have such a remarkable presence. Like many other great poems, this one by Antonio Méndez Rubio is inscribed with a poetics of its own, a response to that "what for" with which its conclusion opens. What is writing for, what is literature for, in a context where horrors such as torture and forced disappearances are still a reality? "Speaking from voice," to continue operating in the frame set by the *doxa*, by the type of opinion (or lack thereof) reinforced by mass culture, would mean participating in the perpetuation of the existing moral and logical conformism (Bourdieu 172). "Saying," the following step in the gradation proposed, does not go beyond *episteme*, a kind of discourse that still separates language from things, subject from object. Therefore, one

must go even further: “Choosing to respond,” to react by joining reason and emotion. In this case, doing so through a language that responds to the opacity of power with the peculiar sort of clarity facilitated by its cryptography.

Texts such as the ones by Atxaga or Méndez Rubio discussed here are successful in provoking a reader’s feelings, generating a response to the issue of torture that is not only intellectual and aesthetic, but also empathic. They cultivate unrest and suspicion about the discourses that build the world we inhabit—discourses that are instituted by agents aware to differing degrees of the type of symbolic frames to which they contribute. It may be argued that what matters most when dealing with the issue of torture are the moral and humanitarian implications of this abhorrent practice—ultimately, the suffering that it causes for its victims. Its representations and spectacularization are obviously a secondary issue, but one that needs to be recognized and analyzed, as torture will only be considered a reality to be extinguished if the referential constructs that render it unacceptable for all governments and citizens are firmly established.

Notes

1. The fact that torture is still practiced in countries of Western Europe, a region of the world that for many (mostly Europeans themselves) embodies the uncontested apex of civilization and morality (Böröcz), is for most sensibilities an abhorrent reality. It is also an uncomfortable truth that can stir feelings of chauvinism among its citizenry and undermines the credibility of its institutions. Yet the emphasis on the incongruence between the image of moral superiority and the ongoing use of torture may obscure a more important and unquestionable fact: that torture has been present for most of the history of European nations—Spain among them—even in times of political freedom. While the existence of torture in Spain during certain periods is uncontested (the Spanish Inquisition comes to mind immediately as evoking some of the quintessential images related to those practices), there is a strong resistance to accepting the idea that it has also been facilitated by democratic governments and used by their law enforcement units.
2. For some testimonies of torture victims under the Franco regime and during the first post-dictatorship years, see Gómez Roda.
3. “Nada más restaurarse la Monarquía, la lucha contra la tortura fue, junto con la campaña por la Amnistía, una reclamación política constante, que impulsó a manifestarse en contra a todos los sectores” (Martínez-Fresneda and Savater 40) (As soon as the Monarchy was restored, the struggle against torture was—along with the campaign for the amnesty of political prisoners—a constant political demand, which encouraged all groups to speak out against it.)
4. They included philosophers José Luis López Aranguren, Javier Sádaba, and Fernando Savater; member of Parliament Juan María Bandrés; writers José Bergamin, Lourdes Ortiz, Manuel Vicent, and José M. Caballero Bonald; film directors José Luis Borau, Carlos Saura, and Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón; dancer Antonio Gades; journalists Soledad Gallego Díaz and Nativel Preciado; clergyman

- Basilio Martín Patino; producer Elías Querejeta; and sociologist Julia Varela, among others.
5. Susan Sontag problematizes this issue (with regard to our response to images of violence in general and of war in particular) in two essays that frame her intellectual journey: *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others*.
 6. For a compelling discussion of the increasing pornographic profile of the pop music industry, see Levande. About the disturbing mixture of sex, torture, and mass culture, see Butler, Eisenman, and Sontag on the infamous Abu Ghraib pictures.
 7. The novel was an international critical success: it was translated into fourteen languages, it received positive reviews in venues such as the *Guardian*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Financial Times*, the *Independent*, and the *New York Times*—just to mention a few English-language ones—and won its author the Cavour Prize and the Mondello Prize, and Jull Costa the *TLS* Translation Prize. However, its reception in Spain was controversial. A negative review sparked a bitter polemic between the critic Ignacio Echevarría and the directors of *El País*, who considered the review an ad hominem attack. This resulted in Echevarría's dismissal from the list of the newspaper's contributors and a minor scandal in literary and journalistic circles.
 8. For more encompassing interpretations of this novel, see the volume edited by Irene Andrés-Suárez and Antonio Rivas, especially the essays by Pozuelo Yvancos, Olaziregi, and Martín-Estudillo.
 9. This translation is the work of Andrés Alfaro, to whom I am also indebted for his proofreading of this essay. I have offered a more detailed reading of this poem in volume 16 of *La Nueva Literatura Hispánica* (2012), coordinated by Jorge Machin Lucas.
 10. As John Beverley rightly points out, “What is surprising about Guantanamo, for example, is not how much of what went on there the Bush administration kept secret from the American public, but rather how much it was willing to reveal. One assumes that, as a matter of course, most contemporary states, including the United States, employ and/or countenance torture—you do not have to look too far beyond your local police station to find evidence of more or less routine and longstanding use of extreme physical and psychological duress or outright torture against prisoners. But such practices were officially disavowed; they took place in the ‘shadows,’ literally and figuratively. What is new during the Bush years was the way in which torture became part of accepted public discourse and debate in the United States” (99).
 11. For a lucid and comprehensive analysis of the different forms of recent “engaged” poetry in Spain, and of the literary context in which Méndez Rubio carries out his creative project, see Bagué.

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