

Adolfo Castañón

The Ubiquitousness of Memory Made Poetry

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Adolfo Castañón, born in Mexico City in 1952, is undoubtedly a multifaceted, cosmopolitan, diversified poet, faithful to his own dispersion. For him, poetry, essays and short stories are nothing less than faces of a single literary continuum in which image and concept, intensity and humor,

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Photo by Dante Barrera

passion and intelligent dialogue are wedded as though they really constituted phases of a poetic unity, since poetry is not only the mirror of a vision of the poet's world but, above all, makes up the creative impulse to sculpt his most intimate recesses. In his religious need, the poet erects what is human (language, consciousness, tradition and their opposites) as the maximum representative and judge of his game. In Castañón, words find their place as essential words: there is a ubiquitous will of form, a constant quest

for the exact word, the musical, rhythmic phrase, with no detriment to their profound content.

In this sense, it is not surprising that Adolfo Castañón has recently been named to the Language Academy: he not only knows the rules of what is permitted in the linguistic game, but experiences himself the passion of fighting in and for the word, to bestow upon it unique aesthetic integrity through his essays, poems and short stories, as well as his translations and editorial work. As a translator, he has known how to be a poet (let us remember his translation of Gil Vicente) when he recreates classical, universal texts but, even more, when he knows how to win over the Spanish-speaking reader and wrap him/her up in that aesthetic will that characterizes him as a man of letters. As an editor, not only does he have authentic editorial sense—which undoubtedly influences his poetry—but he has also known how to think about his craft, putting it at the top of art. *El jardín de los eunucos* (The Garden of Eunuchs) deals precisely with the figure and functions of editors.¹ Castañón has done this work masterfully, starting at *Cave Canem* magazine, all the way to his outstanding role as editorial manager at the Fondo de Cultura Económica publishing house. However, the overall theme of *The Garden of Eunuchs* is books themselves, the printed culture, and the mediations between author, editor, work and readers.

Through words, we capture different realities to give them new meanings. Words retain memory and dilute forgetfulness. For Castañón, as he said in the epigraph of his book *Fuera del aire* (Off the Air),² “Memory is vampire and policeman.” Attentive to the past, to what we were, memory reconstructs and watches us: it gives coherence to an identity that otherwise would dissolve daily. However, at times it stalks us to bleed us in memory. Vampire and policeman, memory would not be sustained without words because, like images, they are the only things that can retain it.

And precisely memory is the most outstanding theme in one of Adolfo Castañón’s most important poems, *Recuerdos de Coyoacán* (Memories of Coyoacán).³ This is a long poem that pays homage to the two figures in twentieth-century Mexican liter-

ature which may have most captured the poet’s attention and thinking: Alfonso Reyes and Octavio Paz. If in his “San Ildefonso” Reyes says, “Perhaps I was not happy since I contemplate / with a doubtful glance / the things of remembrance,” Castañón also begins his poem evoking the past:

I was someone else and I am the same
I don’t know if I was happy:
I walked by night
through the city of memory
The city sleeping
among its names.

Memories of Coyoacán is a poem that can be read on many levels. The images of the city and that country “of half-truths / of pious bilingual lies,” in which only the scenery is real, the musicalization of the macabre rhythm (the “fateful dates” of the calendar) emerge from a sensibility that, on the one hand, isolated itself in reading Jorge Luis Borges, Octavio Paz or the anthropologist Frazer, but, on the other hand, did not leave to one side—how could it?—the generalized farces in which the Devil outshone God.

Rebuilding through articulate language what we were and what has escaped us during a time of uncertainty, of social chaos and political authoritarianism (the theme of 1968); recovering time lost, the memory of that stream of movements, and embodying it in the immobility of a work of art. This is a task that goes beyond putting together a puzzle and that, therefore, is intimately linked to poetic activity: a chain of searches, encounters and mis-encounters. When you read *Memories of Coyoacán*, it is not difficult to imagine a City-Serpent or feel a series of moods that the poet projects amidst a city that dances “grafting the circus on a player piano.” The perception is retrospective and it could be no other way, and far from shouting like Alfonso Reyes, “Wipe clean my memory!” he situates himself inside it to discover that he was another and nevertheless continues to be the same; to conclude, “I am the one who knows / I am the one who is not yet.” We continue being and only death will give us the complete image that, obviously, we will not

know. Nothing is fully realized. We must live and continue living: here is a lesson in true modesty vis-à-vis life. And if Reyes says, “Perhaps I was not happy,” Castañón makes the doubt broader and more emphatic as well as our lack of knowledge about this matter, the past, when he reiterates, “I don’t know if I was happy.” *Memories of Coyoacán*, an autobiographical poem, a poem of memory (or the memory of that poem experienced, lost and then recovered), is also history turned into myth, the biography of a quasi-human city. There is Huitzilac and the murder of Francisco Serrano; there is University City, the Three Cultures Plaza and “so many other innumerable places / like the continual Fiesta.”

As an essayist, Castañón calls the exercise of his intellect and his sensibility, his reflections, essays and different comments “rambles.” That is why it is not surprising that he has gathered his *Paseos* (Rambles) through the world of literature in what has up to now totaled five volumes. This essayist has the will to recover what the work of other authors has prompted in his sensitivity as well as what his own reflective gaze has created. Like the great twentieth-century Latin American essayists, Adolfo is a universal man with profound knowledge of European letters (particularly French and English) and, therefore, of our own tradition. He is an essayist with an intense vocation for Latin America, which has led him to dialogue and travel throughout the continent both in his books and physically. In “Umbral” (Threshold) of *América sintaxis* (Syntax America),⁴ about letters in our America (the fifth volume of *Rambles*), Castañón conceives of America as syntax, that is, as a relationship. He knows very well that we of the Americas rightfully own universal culture, so he does not hesitate to contribute to its recovery through translations of already classic authors like George Steiner. If his *Arbitrario de literatura mexicana* (Arbitrary of Mexican Literature),⁵ the first volume of *Rambles*, is a reflective dialogue with a few Mexican writers and a flood of inter-texts that make the broad field of associations blossom, *Syntax America* is, in the words of its author, “a kind of cordial, intellectual agenda, willful in the sense that taste does not depend on will, as Dr. Samuel Johnson used to say.”

In his short stories and vignettes, we find another facet of the same poet: sensuality and imagination combined with subtlety and intelligent, sometimes caustic, humor, such as in the following “postcard”, which is profoundly ironic, from his first book, *Off the Air*:

The eyes injured by fire and with the fever, the birth of a new memory. Like when something falls into the water, the objects that surround me disappear. Today it is that serene fever not at all similar to delirium. In the same way that it snows, I find the event: sweet, constant, day and night. (The irreparable secretly trickles.) In the daytime, I manage to cross the streets of haze; then, immobile as though I feared breaking something, I spend the afternoons in front of the fire contemplating incandescent forms. The images and their dense desire do not tarry: this afternoon a friend was attacked by three blond men. While one of them hit his head against the ground, the others waited. When I approached they unsheathed their knives and, without violence —almost artistically— they opened my friend’s throat. I have been amazed for some time that I found beauty in all that.

Adolfo Castañón’s vision is essentially poetic. Regardless of the genre he picks, everything he sees can become a poem and be turned into art. His being a poet, far from leading him to a marginal existence, has taken him to the very center of a primogenial, lasting cosmos: the cosmos of the word. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Adolfo Castañón, *El jardín de los eumucos* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, 1998).

² Adolfo Castañón, *Fuera del aire* (Mexico City: La Máquina de Escribir, 1977).

³ Adolfo Castañón, *Recuerdos de Coyoacán* (Mexico City: Ditoria, 1998).

⁴ Adolfo Castañón, *América sintaxis* (Mexico City: Editorial Aldus, 2000).

⁵ Adolfo Castañón, *Arbitrario de literatura mexicana* (Mexico City: Editorial Lectorum, 1993).