

JUAN GOYTISOLO

Fires, ashes, forgetfulness



Beauty Untamed

*Translated from Spanish by Peter Bush*

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## Fires, ashes, forgetfulness

**T**O SAY THAT the nine poems collected here visited me quite uninvited is strictly true. No doubt a large part of my fiction from *Don Julian* onwards is at once prose and poetry. The rhythm of narrative voices works in ratio to the responsiveness of readers endowed with a musical, literary ear, which is why the ideal reading would be one that is heard, the experience of the text read aloud. It is also undeniable that there are two sets of poems with a very different content at the end of my novel *State of Siege*, in the form of a short appendix. However, in this case they were written to meet the requirements of the intrigue around the double character that has disappeared mysteriously. Those poems with a quite distinct content were created by something other than their own energy.

The poems in this little book surfaced unexpectedly. They emerged—when I was out walking, was reading, or writing an article—in the form of verses that I hurriedly committed to paper for fear they might fade or be forgotten. Then, they suddenly reappeared, in short blasts, corrected and extended, gnawing at my mind, throughout the day, when I was drowsy or waking, as if they had continued unawares their silent toil in the night. That was how I came to write them, with scant participation on my part, in the autumn of 2010 (only one appeared a year earlier, singly and out of the blue). After those months of fertile pollination the visitations ceased. A friend suggested I should add more to create a decently sized volume. I replied point blank: there are nine and I won't add a single one. The unpredictable schedule of their visits was at an end.

The lines that are italicized reproduce words uttered by the demiurge in *The Blind Rider* or *Celestina* or are from the minutes of trials by the Inquisition of individuals it handed on to the courts for capital punishment. I found the precise format in *Crime without Punishment* by Vitali Shentalinki, on the Stalinist purges and executions.

In any case, I trust my readers will welcome the brevity of this collection of poems. As my much admired and politically loathsome Céline said, if it drops from your fingers it won't squash your toes.

*Juan Goytisolo*

## Fires

### I

Fire of contemplation.  
Skull hewn by a god,  
face and bodily sinews imagined  
throughout a lifetime.  
Incendiary tone of voice.  
Was the deed real?  
As the executioner said before the pyre,  
*Only the man who burns enlightens.*

### 2

Fire of consummation.  
Why that blind body,  
the flame  
rising within,  
the hand bestowing  
joy and pain?  
Blessed rain,  
volcanic lava  
extinct in a flash  
Will it be transit or life?  
Futile to ask.  
Your I is no more.

## Ashes

### I

Ashes  
without embers.  
End of consummation.  
Gone the flame,  
that lit  
the fire that brings life  
to voice and image.  
All is extinguished  
annihilating  
the vertigo of the moment.

### 2

As I admire your body,  
taut breech on tensed muscle,  
I regret wandering  
in the fiction of time,  
denied the warmth  
of your hircine chest  
and vigorous arms,  
separated by the abyss of a century.  
Yet your hazy figure  
across the years  
defies  
the mean and ephemeral  
grants me  
the gift of a mirage,  
your plenitude regained.

*(Engraving of a Turkish wrestler)*

## Forgetfulness

### I

Memory melting  
*like snow*  
*in a glass of water.*  
The image that evaporates,  
the heat that existed  
in the empty bed.  
Worn out.  
It is  
no consolation  
to look at  
a faded photo,  
*all is forgotten,*  
*all is left behind.*

*(7 October 1996)*

### 2

Forgetfulness  
tiptoes in.  
Dates, places, names,  
mercilessly erased.  
Ditched ballast,  
oblivion's feast.  
Traveling light  
you confront the chasm,  
already a shadow of yourself,  
at end point.

### 3

He gazes in the mirror  
at a body that is not his.

Anthropomorphic being,  
he roamed straight-backed  
in remote times.  
Life defeated him.  
Coiled within himself,  
memory a blank  
he witnesses  
his own consummation.

4

Happy he who dies  
not knowing he dies.  
Privileged by ancestors  
with no funeral rites  
or mourning fictions.  
One is and then one isn't.  
Forebears and offspring  
weep no absence.  
Content, at ease,  
flight across limpid air.  
Become turtle or stork.

5

A cat eyes me  
like an English duchess.  
What does it expect from me?  
Why stare so hard?  
Does it silently reproach  
an evil act I conceal?  
Is it an invitation  
to accept a sentence?  
The cat is no cat.  
It is my soul and my conscience.

# Beauty Untamed

## NO NET CAN CATCH THE FLOW OF LITERATURE

**T**HE HISTORY of European literature is usually studied within a framework of abstract cycles that professionals in the field explain by having recourse to sonorous labels they hand down from generation to generation: Pre-Renaissance, Renaissance, the Baroque, Neo-classicism, Romanticism, Symbolism, Modernism, and a whole series of derivatives, terms that are the fruit of abstraction that avoids concrete, individual analysis of the writers they classify. It is a very useful approach for secondary-school teachers and authors of literary manuals, but can never capture the singular features of works we read today because they remain strikingly modern. How does one fit the *Celestina* by Fernando de Rojas or *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by Rabelais into a Renaissance pigeonhole? The list of exceptions is endless, work located in a no-man's-land beyond the walls of lofty-sounding but reductive concepts. The list would encompass almost all the writers I think are worth reading.

If, for example, we take the concept of Romanticism, about which millions of pages have been written, we immediately stumble across a small hurdle. Spanish, French, and Italian Romantics and English, German, and Russian Romantics share common elements, usually surface features, but they cannot explain the huge difference in quality between the first group and the second. French, Italian and Spanish Romantics—the latter inspired by the French—are generally mediocre and garrulous and completely inferior to the Romantics from the other three countries mentioned. One looks in vain for a Spanish Keats or Coleridge, Pushkin or Lermontov, or a genius of the stature of Hölderlin. Many translations of these writers easily surpass the poetry originally written in Spanish (notwithstanding the inspired late work of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer).

If we add in the routine method of classification by generation, namely, the grouping of writers in terms of their age, and the erasure of the individual features of a novelist or poet in relation to his

contemporaries, the confusion introduced by such schema becomes even greater. One has only to step back in history to expose the crude head-shrinking nature of such approaches. Was Cervantes a leading member of the generation of 1580, Goethe of the 1790 or Tolstoy of the 1858 generation? We see yet again the uses and abuses of labeling, dating, and naming frames that reveal nothing of the content of the works they attempt to describe. A cursory glance at the pages of cultural magazines and textbooks saturated with terms such as “generation,” “realism,” and “formulism,” enables us to draw one striking conclusion: rather than starting from a study of a particular writer’s work in order to justify assigning one of these formulaic labels, they slot him into the requisite pigeonhole without any discussion of individual technique. The skeletons of writing thus examined no doubt resemble each other but the real body of work is completely dissimilar.

It is no secret that the history of literature and art involves alternating cycles in which the astonishing strength and originality of new forms and tendencies triumphs over others where, because of a series of circumstances the critics should be analyzing, the innovative impulse declines, the poetic spark vanishes, and the repetition of worn-out themes and forms changes Parnassus into a barren threshing ground. Spanish literature has experienced phases when it has flowered and then withered, when words of substance have given way to hollow rhetoric. The poetic intensity represented by St. John of the Cross, Góngora, and Quevedo—I deliberately choose three very distinct creators—abandoned Spain at the end of the seventeenth century and didn’t reappear until the twentieth.

One has only to review the history of different civilizations on the planet to see that long periods of apparent slumber can usher in creativity that suddenly blossoms out of the blue. This happened in South America in the mid-twentieth century. Previously, the continent’s narrators and poets (Brazilian Machado de Assis being the singular exception) didn’t cross the boundaries of what Milan Kundera aptly calls “the local context,” namely, the space occupied by those who best represent the features of a given nation or language, but don’t add anything new to the leafy foliage of the tree of literature (“the wider context”). A poem like *Martín Fierro*, for example, undoubtedly embodies values of tradition and identity that are praiseworthy, but it



doesn't speak to those who live outside its place of birth. The statues erected to the writer mark out the frontiers of his poetic fame.

We had to wait sixty years for the almost simultaneous appearance of authors who, from Borges to Paz, inscribed their works in a more universal frame, whether from Buenos Aires or Mexico, Havana, or Montevideo. These and others sowed the seeds of the so-called boom of the sixties that was centered in Barcelona and Paris. The constellation of novelists that included Cortázar, García Márquez, Fuentes, Vargas Llosa, Cabrera Infante, Roa Bastos, and Onetti blurred the political frontiers independence had brought to the New World. They didn't write novels that were Argentine, Colombian, Mexican, Peruvian, Cuban, Uruguayan, or were from any of the eighteen countries of Latin America, but innovating fiction that owed as much to readers in Europe and North America as to the pioneering work of Juan Rulfo, Lezama Lima, Carpentier, Leopoldo Marechal, or Guimarães Rosa. With these novelists the Spanish language regained its leading role in the creation of fiction it had lost after the death of Cervantes.

No nets or abstract schema can properly account for the way literature flows and cascades.

## NOVELISTS SHOULD READ POETRY

**P**ROSE AND POETRY are different, but aren't incompatible or opposed. I am not referring to the so-called poetic prose cultivated a few decades ago by the seers who were more or less close to the regime of General Franco, but to that secondary orality analyzed so perceptively by Walter J. Ong in his key work, *Orality and Literacy*. Ong describes how alongside the primary expression of oral culture that encompasses gestures, intonation, facial expressions, and other semiotic elements (Milman Parry showed how these coexisted in the recitation of Homeric verse in the public square), there exists the orality of the solitary writer who hears the sound of the words he commits to paper. Although a "normal" reader may not notice this orality, it is evident to a reader with a sense of curiosity, who reads silently or even aloud. The majority of novels and stories published today couldn't survive being read aloud: such a reading would expose the functional nature of prose that simply exists to service a plot, the frequent clumsiness of expression

and drastic violence inflicted on syntax—only the beauty of the final creation can ever justify such “violations.” In contrast, others achieve their full aesthetic impact when read aloud: they are at once poetry and prose, like Octavio Paz’s beautiful *Monkey Grammarian*.

If the invention of the printing press curbed orality and allied gestures in Europe and then throughout the world, an underlying vein was nevertheless nourished by a minority of authors whose spectacular roll call includes the leading novelists of the twentieth century. What better way to appreciate the originality of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Céline’s *Voyage to the End of the Night*, Carlo Emilio Gadda’s *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*, or Cabrera Infante’s *Three Trapped Tigers* than to hear these works read aloud? To hear a cassette with the voice of Lezama Lima reading is a riveting experience that blurs the boundaries between the genres. Is it poetry or is it prose? The reader-listener sees no dilemma, entranced as he is by the music of the words, discovering human language in its purest expression.

The three fragments of *Space* by Juan Ramón Jiménez, in that phase of his mature work marked by *Animal in Depth*, can be read both as an internal monologue and as one of his most liquid, intense poems: “I saw a stump, on the shores of a neutral sea; wrenched from the soil like a dead animal, death lent its stillness the certainty it had once lived; its arteries, cut by the axe, still bled.” Something similar happens with *Residence in London*, Wordsworth’s long urban poem, in which the reader-listener strolls through the colorful, exuberant life of London’s poor neighborhoods exercising all his five senses, an experience that anticipates my *Reading of the Space in Djemaa-el-Fna*. The best way to re-create the oral dimension of these texts, the latent orality structuring the narrative, is to read them aloud.

Narrators in Spanish should read more poetry: not the prose that poses as such, but poetry that is really poetry. That might help them avoid the patchy, cliché-ridden prose that so abounds in the media universe of the best-selling novel where only plot counts: the fiction of intrigue, crime, or historical novel together with other bargain-basement materials that marketing experts claim “grab the reader,” though they never specify quite where. It is a sad fact that those who create literary work are ignored and are invisible in the media, struggle to find a publisher in these times of crisis, and go unnoticed by the

average reader. This is in stark contrast to the promotion of writers who pen thousands of pages of stodge praised by individuals responsible for the backward state of education and culture in Spain (the most backward in Europe, both have been in continuous retreat for the last twenty or thirty years). Careful reading of the best poetry would help fine-tune the ears of writers and readers alike. The representatives of Spain's literary institutions should be advocating this rather than marginalizing the forlorn efforts of true creators.

### DEATH OF THE NOVEL?

**T**HE RECENT DEBATE about the impact of new technologies and the possible extinction of printed books has in some quarters become a debate about the uncertain future of the novel. For some, its lifespan, as we know it, will come to an end alongside the era begun with Gutenberg. These somber prophecies have no substance whatsoever. The novel can metamorphose a thousand ways, as it did throughout the last century; it will survive and may resurge even more strongly.

Almost a century ago many claimed the cinema would lead to the demise of the novel. Why waste dozens of pages on minute descriptions of people and things when a single cinematic image registers them in a moment? The argument seemed irrefutable and was relevant, naturally, to a certain type of narrative. It is equally true that many novelists' lack of inventiveness and the lazy reading habits of many readers have enabled repetitive, exhausted narrative forms to survive and achieve commercial success. One has only to glance at the bestseller lists throughout the world to see that. Even so, a good number of writers have picked up the gauntlet and accepted the challenge of confronting new terrains. There were a thousand ways to do that, and they did it. The cinema was a turning point for the great creators of fiction in the twentieth century: they conceded the territory that film occupied and focused on creativity in language that is concentrated, discontinuous, fragmentary, and poetic: from Joyce's stream of consciousness to Proust's snaking sentences, from Céline's breathless rhythms to Biely's imaginative arabesques. In a few cases, poetry, fiction, and cinema became entangled and forged a higher aesthetic reality. Some writers took the demolition of narrative to its conclusion and stripped fiction down to

the backbone of language, as in *Finnegans Wake* or the unfinished and unfinishable work of Arno Schmidt. Kundera has pointed to the specificity of a work of art: in contrast to what happens in the field of science, a new discovery doesn't render null what previously existed, it simply extends the area of creation to unknown, unexplored territory. It adds to the long line of works that demonstrate how foolish it is to prophesy the death of the novel.

Over the last ten years, constant developments in cutting-edge technology haven't augured this demise. On the contrary, they have led it to adapt to new forms in which Internet, mobile phones, and social networks play an important role. The value of today's narrative will depend finally on the artistry and seriousness of those creating it. There will always be artists of startling originality and others content to go with the tide, as was the case a hundred years ago when cinema erupted onto the scene. Personally I feel that ill-omened obituaries are out of place and simply bring to mind the old proverb "The dead you kill off enjoy the best of health." Nevertheless, to that end we must resist the ubiquitous culture of entertainment and zapping and the growing dissatisfaction in society with an awareness that sails against the stream; as it was yesterday, so it is today, and will be tomorrow.



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