

Ileana Rodríguez Review. "Being with myself. Never abandoning myself, even for a moment or by chance. Memory, history: *A Single Numberless Death*."

Translated by Margaret Posner

I know a woman who was in the same death camp as her brother, at the very same time. She survived, her brother didn't. As long as she lives she's going to ask herself, why didn't they grant us one final embrace? I hope that question remains alive for many generations to come (*Una sola muerte numerosa*, University of Miami, 1997, p. 189)

I wish to begin my review of a book that I read by chance, *Una sola muerte numerosa* (*A Single Numberless Death*) by Nora Strejilevich, awarded with the Letras de Oro Literary Price for Hispanic Literature in the US in January 1996. Reading it was one of those magical coincidences, an Argentinean expression.

This is an infinitely gentle text about concentration camps for the people that disappeared in Argentina during the period known as the Dirty War. Opposites get entangled and disentangled in it, just as words get entwined and unwound, the "not wanting to tell" with the "wanting to tell," memory with amnesia. What to forget and what to remember, when?

At the detention, and many times thereafter, as one of the voices says,

I don't feel like talking. I don't know what I could talk about with three policemen. I don't answer. At the door of my house two pairs of arms lift me up. I smile feeling safe, and flutter endlessly, like the butterfly on my globe lamp. (108)

At the moment of the family reunion after her disappearance, a voice says,

Mama stays right by me and notices the scars that will not be sponged off. I recall the feel of her hands on the welts of my skin. My skin is the only thing that has changed in these days. (108)

The pleasant childhood is revived with tenderness and comfort in the "water-nest" that they prepare at home for one of the detainees who, on leaving the detention center, immerses into "the warmth of the bathtub and of her words," (108) the words of her mother-- one language against the other.

*A Single Numberless Death* is really a single countless death. That is, the tale, fragmented, broken up by numerous voices that through both, oral and written testimony, recall an unforgettable time in the history of a country, Argentina, in which State Terror, by means of Special Task Forces, caused intense damage to all the living as well as the living dead. There is no singular "I" in this story, but rather a collective one, the "we" of this one death, this one torture, this one pain, and this one emotion, one everything. The "I" is a "we" confused in history and narratives in which all individual story is lost, in which the individual identity is that of the collective.

The story is told in narrative fragments, in testimonies, in newspaper articles, popular sayings, police reports, trial reports, immigration documents, books such as *Nunca Más*, *Secret Dossier*, *Rebeldía y esperanza*. They are all there, Jews and Christians, young and old, men and women, married and single.

There is no lineal story in this tale. A series of fragments are interspersed to tell the same story; they do not contradict each other but rather continue and come together in the narrative, that intertwines, twists and wins in and out, interrupting as well, constantly, so that the reader gets used to an endless story that goes on and on, from the children to the mothers, from the mothers to the grandchildren, in a thread that fades off over time, in which a life that was presence becomes absence and then remembrance and then even oblivion –history and not memory.

There is no coherence, only fragments, tatters, remnants, pieces: a dismembered textual body. There is no way to identify with a single protagonist, of figuring a character out of that one who is being interrogated, of following the path of even one character from the first incident all the way to the end and thus pursue or assemble the coherency of individuality.

All is lost in the no identity, the anonymity of the disappeared, which is the descriptive and proscriptive condition of the Police State. Even if the names of her close ones –Gerardo, Abel, Hugo, Kerrie, Olga; and of the others, the torturers, –Pocavida, Alacrán, Ratón, Patán, Candado, Chacal, Angelito– are not missing.

The possibility of mimetic readings, of living through other fictional beings, made of paper and printed ink, is made impossible. One cannot fantasize anything with this literature; one cannot try to be what one is not, live through an intermediary, experiential catharsis. This story breaks, then, with the very notion of story, as much as or at the same time that it breaks with the illusion of a collective meaning originating with the main character –fictional, as in the novel, testimonial, as in testimony.

Everything remains entangled, woven together but at the same time broken into pieces. All becomes one thing: infancy, youth, maturity, the family and loneliness, children's rhymes and interrogations, patriotic and personal poems, parents and children, friends and torturers, all at the same converging level. Laughter and pain, trust and suspicion, the miraculous and the mundane, the hospital and the detention center, leaving and entering and leaving again, some leaving and others entering, which is precisely the idea of a single collective. In addition, this book's greatest virtue is that everything is said with moderation, without theatricality, without exaggeration; all in proper proportion. The testimonies of this testimony are narrated with composure. Even the reader's deep emotions ought to be measured; weeping ought to be controlled.

But suddenly the reader, accustomed now, begins to ask for more; demands more of the narrators, of those narrating. More torture or more about the family? More emotion or more detachment? More sadism or more love? More. We don't want the flow to be interrupted. We

want them to tell us more; that at least one of the narrative threads be carried through to the end. But that cannot be, just as the words can't be spoken in the interrogation- always threads of a non-linear, truncated life. Because the story of a safe bourgeois individual, of daily life, was interrupted. And for that very reason, in Argentina, the break remains a fissure with palpable presence.

Another notable thing: there is no exact location. The names of streets and places are there, but we don't know exactly where we are, not in what house, which bus, which downtown they took someone from. The sense of direction is lost, as it is lost for the person whose eyes are blindfolded and whose legs are shackled; as it is lost for the national history canceling out national history; as it is lost for those recounting moments in successions without time. The detained person is always with herself, her shadow accompanies her. "I pledge that I will stay with myself, always. I will not leave myself alone even by chance. I will stick close to my shadow even if I can't see it." (49) The opposites "not to remember anything" (48) and recalling everything are also rules.

The overlapping of history and memory so that childhood punishment or frustration are connected with torture, reveal feelings accurately and place each stage in its proper dimension: the child's resentment against her parents is silent; she is silent in the cell. One can choose which emotion stands out, which one wished to reveal and relive. For example, physical torture, the case of the prisoner and the ferret:

Those bastards even had a ferret, a really nasty little beast. It's similar to the weasel, which feeds on rats and other small rodents, but when it gets hungry it will attach human in places like the earlobe or the nose. That ferret really messed up my nose, nibbling on it whenever I dozed off." (87)

The woman that is giving birth in the hallway because they don't want to assist her and they tell her to walk and

I tell her... that the baby is coming fast, but she insists she is not going to help me have the baby there. So I get up with my legs spread wide my hand on my son's head, which is coming right out, and I walk this way through a path that I can't recall, to the delivery room... My son is born with the cord wrapped twice around his neck, without a cry or even a whimper." (76)

The injured patient that is carried like a sack of potatoes into the hospital. They would put the infirm onto the stretchers without being careful. It wasn't the father, or the son or the brother that was carrying his father or mother who tried to accommodate them so their legs didn't hang out of the stretcher or so that the head is in the right place. They would carry someone like he or she was a bag of potatoes, dripping blood on the floor. Not that everyone is the same, but everyone is important and everyone has a relationship, an affection or an agony. The brother who shared the uterus or who shared a house, an idea, a prison, but not death. The gentle father unto despair and lack of faith. My affections, yours and the other person's. The official story and the unofficial story speak reconstructed books within these

affections, of wanting to retain, even if just in memory, something of the person who existed, of the person who existed, of the tortured and exiled.

It's worth emphasizing the themes and the organization of the material, how it is narrated, of what is narrated, of what parts are selected for narration. Of how these moments counteract and affect each other, of how they are articulated by the authorities and of how they are considered by the public in the office, the home, the hospital and the mechanic shop, and the club. One also needs to highlight the rigidity of the body, the dead stare of the eyes. Topographies and types: the types of letters show the voices, the subordinates, the collated, the printed, the oral. The use of possessives, me/I, make death unique and without connections; the historical confrontation through the affection of the mistreated makes us be on their side. There is a de-contextualization: everything happens simultaneously. No paragraph justifies the order of things. One constructs it, if one can: or if one wants. The context exists in the manner in which it is written and read.

The book has three parts. The first part takes place in Argentina. The second outside of Argentina, in Europe, Israel, Canada. The third part takes place in the return to Argentina. The first part establishes all the parameters of all the patriotic actions que contribute to the de-patriotization. The second part is a wandering, a type of new skin, where one of the mothers' illness is highlighted and the suicide of one of the fathers who got tired of pretending to be "superman, of that tedious process of always being reasonable and level-minded." (120). The third part starts during the returning and revisiting of the places, the Athletic Club, being present in the re-writing of the testimonial writing in the newspapers.

In this extraordinary testimonial text, the history is collective because my brother was murdered as was yours and hers and our sons, girlfriends, mothers, grandmothers "us, all of us" (200). As a reader, I want to know more about their personal stories, of their daily dramas; it moves me to see them grow and then be killed in their youth; it surprises my conscience that they were surprised while playing in a utopia, their lack of suspicion, their lack of knowledge about their own strengths and their accumulation of bodily strength. This is my generation and this is my same history, but as a different character; with the same books, the same passions and thoughts, the same enthusiasm and the same ignorance of how the powers that be work and function; of how this experience was thrown upon us.