

Ficciones de verdad. Archivo y narrativas de vida

[In English: True Fictions from Spain. Life-Writing and the Archive], by Patricia López-Gay, Madrid/Frankfurt, Iberoamericana/Vervuert, 2020, 244 pp., ISBN: 9783968690513

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BOOK REVIEW

Ficciones de verdad. Archivo y narrativas de vida [In English: True Fictions from Spain. Life-Writing and the Archive], by Patricia López-Gay, Madrid/Frankfurt, Iberoamericana/Verduert, 2020, 244 pp., ISBN: 9783968690513



In this highly sophisticated and theoretically well-informed study, Patricia López-Gay examines how the contemporary impulse to archive has a bearing on biographical narratives, especially those which do not aspire towards a totalising and absolute register. The autofictional narratives analysed in *Ficciones de verdad* [True fictions] have in common a questioning of the real, always departing from the archival trace. The oxymoron embedded in the title of the study –true fictions– reflects the transgenericity of autofiction, a genre which, according to López-Gay, cannot be reduced to the conventional categories of autobiography and novel. The title also refers to the epistemological interrogation of the relationship between the fictional and the factual as well as the visual and the textual that the analysed novels undertake.

After two introductory sections where the author in detail convincingly traces out the theoretical underpinnings, the research questions and the purpose, as well as a critical approach to the state of the art, the case studies of four Spanish authors are introduced in two units, divided into a series of brief chapters that perhaps could be labelled sketches. The first one is dedicated to Spanish author Jorge Semprún who is considered an early founder of the autofictional mode in Spain. The second one, divided into four chapters, approaches three central contemporary Spanish writers: Javier Marías, Enrique Vila-Matas and Marta Sanz.

The opening section, ‘Umbral de entrada’ [Entry threshold],¹ contains a first introduction to key concepts, a formulation of the purpose of the study and its relevance. Furthermore López-Gay presents a preliminary overview of the field of study and presents the disposition of the book. Departing from the idea, established in the opening pages, that ‘Archive fever is a way of looking’ (p. 37), in the second section of the book, entitled ‘Panorámica: Fiebre de archivo y autoficción’ [Panorama: Archive Fever and Autofiction], López-Gay presents an historical overview of the development of what she, drawing on Derrida, calls archive fever. Connecting the modern paradigm of the archive to the invention of photography in the nineteenth century, as well as to the positivist paradigm, López-Gay compellingly shows how the ‘photographic gaze’ was transferred to literature. That is, Realist authors worked from a belief in a transparent and immediate representation of the referent, in analogy with the indexicality of photography. It is this paradigm –‘the probatory optic of the archive’ (p. 63) and its evidentiary claims– which, according to the author, contemporary autofiction subverts. In the detailed historical outline presented in the book, López-Gay associates this change of paradigm to the theoretical overthrow carried out by French post-structuralism, postmodernist relativism and the subjective turn, as well as to the impact of recent technological innovations (the internet and social media). Archive is no longer considered a source, she maintains, instead it is a matter or subject in its own right (p. 71). Just as the archive is a construction, so is the author of the autofictional narrative, who

fictionalises him/herself in the act of writing. In this way the probatory value of the archive, and the figure of the author, are put in doubt. Finally, this second ‘panoramic’ section of the book presents a brief lookback at the continued influence of *Don Quixote* on the comprehension of the relationship between life and fiction. Diving into the genealogy of first-person narratives and the literary exploration of the limits between fact and fiction, López-Gay succinctly reminds us how *Don Quixote* is intradiegetically presented as based on an archive, that is, the historical document on the live of the protagonist which comes into the possession the narrator. However, the originality of *Don Quixote* is not, asserts López-Gay, the setting around the found manuscript, nor the metanarrative structure but the way in which these two devices are purposefully employed in order to enhance the fact that the narrator does not create but *recreates*, playing with the borders between fact and fiction:

Retrospectivamente, ratificando el juego cervantino de la ficción, el lector identifica al narrador con el prologuista, autodesignado padraastro, cuyo nombre coincide con el de Cervantes. Dilatando los bordes de la ficción, este se presenta como creativo copista del documento ajeno que consigna a *un nuevo espacio textual*’ [Retrospectively, confirming the Cervantine play with fiction, the reader identifies the narrator as the writer of the prologue, self-appointed stepfather, whose name coincides with that of Cervantes. Dilating the borders of the fiction, he is presented as the creative copyist of a foreign document which outlines a new textual space. (p. 97, my emphasis)]

According to López-Gay, in this new textual space, the objectivity of the narrator as well as the veracity of the document are questioned, two characteristics which we today associate with the genre of autofiction, along with the pronounced indistinction between the imaginary world and the empirical one. Indeed, there seems to be nothing new under the sun. Quoting Nora Catelli, Marc Augé and Josefina Ludmer, among others, López-Gay highlights, in relation to Cervantes’ genius, how the concept of the real at present undergoes a redefinition, becoming progressively more porous with regard to fiction. However, she contends, writing today in the postmodernist fluid and relativist paradigm, the author-narrator does not need to call to mind his craziness, as did *Don Quixote*.

In ‘Enfoque preliminar: Jorge Semprún, la autoficción, de Francia a España’ [Preliminary approach: Jorge Semprún, from France to Spain], López-Gay analyses the influence of Jorge Semprún’s autofiction, presenting his *Autobiografía de Federico Sánchez* (1977) as the precursor of the genre in Spain. Perhaps Semprún’s texts, originally published in French, on his memories of the time he spent as a political prisoner at Buchenwald (during World War II) are more widely known to the international public. However, in *Ficciones de verdad*, López-Gay turns to his autobiography/political memories, explaining that Federico Sánchez was Semprún’s alias as a clandestine militant fighting Francoism, and that to him ‘lo vivido es novela sin dejar de ser realidad’ [The lived is a novel without stopping being real] (p. 109). According to López Gay, Semprún’s narrative combines personal and historical sources, and in an autofictional mode he openly reflects on the archival traces of his texts, without giving away to relativism. When Semprún two decades later recurs to his political memoirs in *Federico Sánchez se despide de ustedes* (1992) [*Federico Sánchez bids farewell*] the author reaffirms the indistinction between the fictional and the factual, reclaiming his texts to be simultaneously novel and autobiography. López-Gay’s reading of Semprún particularly underlines the intrinsically articulated political message of Semprún’s constant narrative interrogation of the veracity of the archival traces, and she asserts that the aesthetic project of Semprún is, above all, about the ‘infiltration of the political’ (p.115). Perhaps more attention could have been given in the analysis of Semprún’s work to the actual narrative devices employed in this early example of Spanish autofiction, an aspect that in *Ficciones de verdad* seems to be overshadowed by a series of slightly repetitive theoretical conundrums.

In 'Primeros planos: la autoficción de Javier Marías, Enrique Vila-Matas y Marta Sanz' [Close-ups: the autofiction of Javier Marías, Enrique Vila-Matas y Marta Sanz], López-Gay explores three contemporary and well-known Spanish autofictional writers. Departing from Foucault's concept of 'technologies of the self', the author looks into how the literary panorama in general has changed since Walter Benjamin talked about the age of mechanical reproduction. In the age of digital reproduction, she maintains, writers expose the uncertainty of the archival traces they use, and readers are expected to continue the process of epistemological doubt on what is real and what is not. The quite brief analysis of Marías, Vila-Matas and Sanz' work move perhaps too quickly to its conclusions, providing quite quick looks at each author's work. Even though the analysis is convincing, I believe that giving more literary examples in combination with an increased comparative approach could have strengthened the argumentation even more.

Finally, *Ficciones de verdad* presents a concluding chapter in which López-Gay underscores the contemporary literary interrogation of the modern archival paradigm and its unbelief in totality and transparency. Instead, fragmentation and opacity characterise the autofictional archival mode explored by López-Gay. In this final section of the book, entitled 'Autoficción y archivo: un deseo incontenible de *bios*' [Autofiction and archive: an uncontainable desire for *bios*], López-Gay proposes a renewed conception of the archive as something vivid that changes in relation to the recipients. Beyond the desire of analogue photography to capture and arrest time and the modern archival desire towards totality, the autofiction examined by López-Gay rejects the idea of life narrative as evidence, and instead expresses a desire for life. As stated by López-Gay, the narratives without closure of Marías, Vila-Matas and Sanz are experiential and they develop by means of what she calls an unreliable interconnection of fragments (p. 208), reflecting in this way upon the continuity of time, and suggesting the existential permanence of the first-person author beyond his/her physical presence. In this manner, López-Gay suggests, autofiction is to be conceptualised as an *opening*, as a promise of future readings of the reiterate but fragmented archive, and a promise of a continuation of *bios*. This closure of *Ficciones de verdad* is highly suggestive, but at the same time it strikes me as slightly contradictory given the fact that along her study, López-Gay maintains that the genre of autofiction is not to be understood as derived from the 'narcissist turn', but instead it is to be read as an ethical and aesthetical consequence of the 'death of the author' in the realm of life writing. Without doubt, *Ficciones de verdad* resurrects a series of complex perennial theoretical issues that are pertinent to every researcher interested in the ethics and aesthetics of life writing in general, and of autofiction in particular.


With authority and erudition, López-Gay interconnects the different visual and verbal registers of the archive with the development of the autobiographic mode, moving gracefully from incipient photography's connection to the development of realism, from conventional autobiography to autofictional dislocations of archival/historical evidence, as well as authorship/authority. Perhaps some of the concepts employed could be discussed more in detail, such as 'the real' and, as noted above, the comparative perspective could be more elaborated. Nevertheless, the well-developed historical grounding of López-Gay's study, the theoretical refinement and the abundance of literary as well as visual examples, makes the reading of this solid and original study very enjoyable and enriching. Undoubtedly this volume will be a *sine qua non* in any future study on autofiction, in the Spanish literary field and beyond. Hopefully it soon will be translated into English in order to reach a wider public.

Note

1. All translations are mine.

Notes on contributor

Anna Forné is a Full Professor of Hispanic Literature and Culture at the University of Gothenburg. She has published extensively in the field of memory studies and Latin American literature and culture, focusing primarily on the narrative configurations of memories of dictatorship in Argentina and Uruguay. She is currently doing research on the conformation of the testimonial genre in relation to the literary prize of Casa de las Américas.

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