

Eduardo de Gortari and Contemporary Nostalgia

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ABSTRACT: Although it may seem strange that an unknown and young poet like Eduardo de Gortari builds his poetics from reminiscences, the fact is that in the time we are living it does not seem so. His poetry is about the intention to rebuild past memories from cultural objects, but this is not unusual because nowadays our environment is so dynamic that the world, just a decade ago, hardly resembles the one we are living in right now. In the present study we argue that a compelling reason of why nostalgia occurs in the poems written by such a young poet is because of the speed with which certain artifacts, like a Walkman or a cassette, and cultural objects, like old television series, become obsolete. We will argue that the ontological security derived from transitional objects explained by Anthony Giddens and Donald Winnicott is one of the reasons for this nostalgia. Thus, we will observe two poems in which this kind of objects are linked to the past and to that place in which the poet was sheltered by them.

KEYWORDS: Mexican studies, mass-media, Eduardo de Gortari, nostalgia, Mexican contemporary poetry, digital revolution

Eduardo de Gortari is a young Mexican poet and narrator born in 1989, whose poetic work has been categorized as a precocious longing for preadolescence. From his first book, *Singles //2005/2008//*, in which he poetically explores his early days in Veracruz, to his latest, *Himnos*, a collection of short stories, some of them futuristic, nostalgia seems to be the key element in his creative process. The poet Luis Felipe Fabre observes with surprise how nostalgia can come from such a young poet. When referring to the group of poets where Gortari belonged, Devrayativa, Fabre perceives nostalgia within this poetic group as a curiosity: "Lo curioso es que los devras parecen sentir nostalgia de su propia juventud en el preciso momento de su juventud. Porque son jovencísimos. Todos ellos nacidos entre 1984 y 1990 y ya se miran a la distancia" ("Aproximación a los devras").

Though what Fabre sees in Gortari may seem like nonsense, nostalgia is a recurring topic in artists and writers from the 21st century, as Andreas Huyssen has posited in his group of essays published in Spain under the title *Modernismo después de la Posmodernidad*. In this work Andreas Huyssen argues that one of the reasons for nostalgia in ruins occurs in present days is because there is a longing for a moment in history prior to the catastrophe during Second World War. It is, then, the longing for modernity and its promise of progress which projected mankind as an entity that, by the use of reason, could achieve the social welfare of humankind: "esta obsesión con las ruinas encubre la nostalgia por una etapa temprana de la modernidad, cuando todavía no se había desvanecido la posibilidad de imaginar otros futuros" (Huyssen 247). Under this premise nostalgia is seen as an inverted utopia because it is not towards the future where the utopian dream is projected, but towards the past promise of modernity. Beyond coinciding totally with the Ger-

man philologist, what we want to achieve in the present study is the fact that in the 21st century nostalgia has become a recurring theme in art and literature. Nostalgia for ruins seems to reveal a position against postmodernity, whose main characteristic was to give an ironic account of the utopian impossibility promised by the modern scientific-technical history. The title of Huyssen's work gives us a clear idea of this modern return through what he considers an inverted utopia: nostalgia for the promise of progress, and its failure.

But not in all cases nostalgia from 21st century is manifested as longing for ruins. Nostalgia has emerged also because of the same late modernity conditions that we are living. These conditions have to do with the accelerated rhythms in our way of living. That is when Eduardo de Gortari's poetic pieces become relevant in the contemporary context.

In this sense, Svetlana Boym situates nostalgia as a resistance to progress. Boym observes that nostalgia, as in Huyssen, is a form of utopia that goes to the past. However, she sees nostalgia as a condition that arises from the crisis of technological progress and its consequences in social life: "Nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals" (Boym xiv). In Gortari's poems, these accelerated rhythms can be materialized in products, such as cassettes, videogames or even television series. These products were substituted with MP3 devices and newer videogame consoles. So, what we observe is the fact that changes in such products hinder a stable place on which the existence of the contemporary lyric voice's ego is settled. For this reason, we perceive that nostalgia is one of the mechanisms to find and rebuild the experience of the ego in the ever-changing reality.

Identified by historian Charles Maier (qtd. in Boym xiv) as a

kitsch phenomenon that denies the inherent historicity of society, and seen as an aesthetic and ethical failure, nostalgia was considered a suspicious emotion. Nonetheless, with the advent of post-modernity, the crisis of what we call progress allowed a reevaluation of nostalgia as a reflexive exercise, as we intend to demonstrate through the works of Eduardo de Gortari.

In the present study we have Eduardo de Gortari, a nostalgic young poet who was part of a group called *Devrayativa*, and whose poetic and incipient work—as we mentioned before—explores the past to configure himself in the always-changing actuality. This can be seen throughout his writings. His second book of poetry, *La radio en el pecho*, searches the past through images evoked by songs, lyrics, and musical videos. In his first published novel, *Los suburbios*, he explores his early years in Veracruz, describing his adolescence and trying to build himself from there. That is why he uses a plot based on videogames with stages to overcome during the story, which makes it a sort of contemporary *Bildung Roman*.

That brings us to the role that game consoles play in his poetics. They work as anchors of his memories, as other technological devices do in his writings. These artifacts appear in poems like “Star Fox”, “Cassette” or “Parque Jurásico”, all of them included in *Singles //2005/2008//*. In them, movies, songs, and games become objects of value and resistance against the speed of change in current times.

Utopian nostalgia appears throughout his creative works. It is not by chance that remembrance and time are recurring in his first poetry book, *Singles //2005/2008//*, where poems were shaped by the use of simple language, the construction of anecdotes, the configuration of allegorical children’s worlds, as well as the recurrence of childhood. Luis Felipe Fabre prologues *Singles //2005/2008//* and defines Gortari’s voice as a kind of “precocious nostalgia” because, as a young poet, he feels alien and distant to his own youth and childhood. In other words, this book speaks about a lyric voice who visits, from his present, the idyllic and unattainable past.

We will observe in the following analysis of two poems from *Singles //2005/2008//*, “Las Dunas” and “Cassette”, that the lyrical self understands the impossibility of using technological and cultural objects as means to lessen his present reality which is not always pleasant; that is to say, nostalgia is overcome by the tireless reality manifested in the changes of the city in the poem “Las Dunas”, or by the impossibility of reliving the memories brought by the songs in “Cassette”. That is why we consider this nostalgia reflective in the same sense that Svetlana Boym understands the term: “Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt” (xviii). This reflective form of nostalgia is what we are going to highlight in the following study.

The first verses of “Las Dunas” begin “Surfeábamos en las dunas frente al mar / en las tablas de nuestras patinetas”, the plural pronoun in the first person establishes the past self as the collec-

tive, a gregarious subject whose existence is assured by the group sentiment. This collective voice is what will constitute the lyric voice of the poem. From now on, the verses will be formed as a list of the different activities of this tribe of preadolescents like swimming, throwing eggs at the houses, and skateboarding in the streets. All of them represent a sense of tribe and community. The community is a fundamental part of nostalgia and is distinguished, as such, from melancholy, according to Boym (xvi), by such gregarious condition. That is why the poem highlights the plural verbs because it wants to give us a sense of communal nostalgia. Verbs like “éramos capaces ... ya deséabamos ... conocíamos” appeared in the poem, insist on a past that does not end up being realized, and reflect the sense of longing. The activities carried out in “el último año de primaria” are manifested—in addition to illustrate that youthful impetus—as innocence.

The city space offers itself to us as a hybrid territory that coexists with nature, and this is when nostalgia becomes materialized in the poem, when we can see how things will change:

Conocíamos el mundo de memoria
 porque empezaba en el manglar indómito
 detrás de la colonia y terminaba en el mar
 Muchas veces entramos a sus aguas a la media noche
 creyendo secretamente que la Tierra era cuadrada
 y que de ir muy lejos
 encontraríamos el filo de los océanos
 por donde se van las cosas //empezando por la arena//
 y ya sabíamos de antemano la sentencia
 de que algún día habríamos de caer por ese borde

Pero hicimos el esfuerzo de descuadrar la Tierra
 como las ruedas de nuestras patinetas
 al ir por la calle creando los conjuros necesarios
 para hacer un *ollie* o un *flip*
 y después fumábamos cigarrillos a escondidas
 en los lotes baldíos (Gortari)

The activities of the juvenile gregarious and exploratory stage are condensed in the space of the young city as well, since the mangroves are near to the neighborhood. The known and unknown world is reduced to the limits of this childhood, full of dreams and superstitions. It starts with the neighborhood and ends in the sea. The empty lots, in the last verse of the stanza, not only reflect the hybrid territory, but also that of an emerging city suburb. In this space, innocence echoes with the city. Gortari, by establishing a dialogue between the children’s collective life and the notorious growth of the city, shows us two ways of the becoming: one that pushes towards the new, that makes the effort to change the world, to “descuadrar la Tierra”, to overcome the limits imposed by the adults; and another that advances towards the inevitable urban development.

In the fragment above, innocence is materialized both in the city and the activities that were done by the kids. Nonetheless, there is one particular activity covered by the poet that, as symbols do, will provide him a set of experiences and connections to rebuild the memory. In the next verses a television series, *Dragon Ball*, is recalled as a childhood activity. Watching *Dragon Ball* is not just an activity, but also a ritual, as we will see. This popular anime will show us how the television series is recalled as a myth that provided—in Giddens words—ontological security to the poet.

No sentíamos pudor
al traer playeras y dijes de *Dragon Ball*
porque Gokú siempre salvaba el mundo
cada 20 capítulos
no como aquellos mesías
que a nuestro parecer sólo causaban guerras
o el tedio de una clase de catecismo (Gortari)

As we said, the method of invoking the cultural myth has the quality of bringing to the reader the derived experiences that the name carries with it—a television series, a hero that saves the world every 20 episodes—and also allows it to bring alive the memories of a time marked by an ontological security derived from ritual and routine. Here it is when Giddens' theory becomes relevant to place the nostalgic feeling for the self to return to the secure place where he comes from. In order to understand this concept, we need to link first Winnicott's transitional object definition to Giddens' ontological security.

In the poem, both *Dragon Ball* and *Goku* are erected as symbols of value due to what Winnicott (1953) understands as transitional objects. For the English psychoanalyst the transfer of a moment of the child known as not-me—because he still does not establish a distinction between his subjectivity and that of others—to the constitution of the self is given by transitional objects that replace its first link with the mother; in this way, a teddy bear or Linus's well-known blanket, from *Peanuts* comic series, serves as an object that slows down the transition to the subjective experience of external reality. Anthony Giddens adds routines to these transitional objects, as they draw stability to the human existence: "Estos primeros 'objetos no yo', al igual que las rutinas a las que están unidos prácticamente siempre, son al mismo tiempo defensas contra la angustia y vínculos con una naciente experiencia de un mundo estabilizado de objetos y personas" (Giddens 56). This defense against anguish through these objects and routines is defined as "ontological security" of the subject. Under this line of reasoning, Roger Silverstone (34) associates television with this type of security. For him, television plays the role of routine, but also of transitional object from Winnicott's definition. In this sense *Goku*, besides being related to infancy, evokes an existential condition for the lyric voice where he felt safe. This is evident by juxtaposing the heroism of *Goku* with the catechism. It is not by chance that there is an analogy between *Goku*

and the 'messiah' because, according to the verses of the poem, the series of anime replaced the role of religion. And there is no need to say that both share this sort of ritual and routine features.

Henceforth the poem will continue the exercise of enlisting different activities related to childhood: "un disco que ahora escuchamos con nostalgia" "las horas interminables en la dirección / las dos veces que nos detuvo la policía", exercise that will serve to accentuate a fragmentary memory and will work, as well, to reach the final verses that precisely close the incomplete reminiscences and make use of that reflective nostalgia that is known to be of an unfinished utopia: "Mas fuimos gigantes / trepando dunas que bajábamos en patineta / donde ahora sólo hay edificios departamentales". These last verses show us the way in which nostalgia remains incomplete. The poem highlights the memory, manifests the exploratory innocence; the verbs in imperfect tense give a sense of events without time, unfinished and fragmentary; finally, it ends with the impossibility that prevents a return to the past and childhood through the "edificios departamentales" opposed, in this case, to "las dunas". The growth of the city becomes a symbol of that change and of that place where return to it is impossible. It is both a symbol and a warning, and here it is appropriate to recall that aspect of nostalgia as a resistance to progress. The poem warns us that it is not only childhood that is irretrievable but as well it will never be the same for other generations, since the city where those experiences took place has changed.

Svetlana Boym describes a sort of modern Baudelairean nostalgia in its reflective form. She explains that in Baudelaire's sonnet, "To a passerby", modernity and tradition converge into a single image, the one of a woman in veil passing among the crowd. Boym argues that Baudelaire's project is to "represent the present", but this present creates a contrast with the past. In Boym's words "For Baudelaire the chance of happiness is revealed in a flash [the exact moment when he sees a beautiful woman] and the rest of the poem is a nostalgia of what could have been" (21). The beauty of the woman represents the eternal, but the fact that she vanishes again into the crowded street, signifies the transience of time. This kind of representation of time has a new approach in the 21st century; it is not a single present moment what makes the object appear as a revelation like in Baudelaire's poem. In "Las Dunas", as we have seen, *Dragon Ball*, for example, is evoked as cultural myth, and it serves as sign of transience. This character appears in Gortari's poem because in our present days a particular television series gets older faster than it used to do. In a way, *Goku* could be seen as a passerby in the stream of mass media culture.

So far, we have seen that reflective nostalgia lies in the notion that past memories are unachievable when transience becomes visible in the poem. The perished games, and television series, become objects that define a period in time. In contrast, the growth of a city makes them impossible to be relived.

In the next poem, we will see how reflective nostalgia can be revealed through another strategy, the anacoluthon. This figure of

speech shows us the interrupted and fragmentary memories generated by a playlist recorded in a cassette: a device used for creating playlists called mix tapes, during the 80s and less so in the 90s, now obsolete. The fact that it is not a CD, or an Mp3 device makes it an object of personal value, with a specific place in time.

Cassette

Este cassette es un DeLorean (sic)
Es una máquina del tiempo

De repente es una tarde lluviosa
una canción que del destierro nace
la construcción de una ola
donde el pasado se forma como burbujas

Este cassette fotografía
//Un techo lleno de palomas//
O piedras a medianoche
golpeando en la ventana
del cuarto de una chica
La ventana que nunca se abrió
A veces este cassette corre como Tsuru 98
//re-wind de golondrina blanca//
y pinta las paredes
con los colores de una casa vieja
donde nada cambió con los años (Gortari)

Towards the last section of "Sobre algunos temas en Baude-laire", Walter Benjamin begins by defining the aura of the objects as the following:

Si llamamos aura a las representaciones que, asentadas en la memoria involuntaria, pugnan por agruparse en torno a un objeto sensible, esa aura corresponderá a la experiencia que como ejercicio se deposita en un objeto utilitario (161)

Thus, from the gaze on the object, the aura emerges as a distance between the poet and the time in which the experiences with that object were lived. However, an immaterial object such as the piece of music can also contain the representations of involuntary memory, though not directly, as happens with a photograph, but suggestively; hence the metaphor "Este cassette fotografía" appeared in the seventh verse. Music, we observe in the poem, is proposed as a vehicle, which will lead us not to relive experiences, but to evoke them through brief and isolated images.

Can the songs be those representations that are assembled in the old cassette? Can the mixtape be constituted as a utilitarian object? The cassette is, in fact, the material aspect of the memory indicators, but what really triggers the images of the memory is the list

of songs. Therefore, the aura carried by the object lacks materiality. The cassette is only a vehicle, and for Gortari there is no other way to see it, but as a time machine. However, not any time machine and not any vehicle, Gortari uses the metonymy of the automobile that was, at least during the eighties, the iconic time machine among young people: the DeLorean, the car used as a time machine in the movie *Back to the future*. The DeLorean allows Gortari to materialize a generic image of a time machine into a utilitarian object like a cassette, converting it into a sensitive object, an auratic object whose presence in the poem signifies the velocity of time. It was not long ago that this object along with the Walkman was the most popular device for storing songs among people. Now it seems prehistoric to the new generations. This is not particular of Gortari's poetry, it is also manifested in other writers, as studied by Fernández Porta in his book *Afterpop*. In it he explains, exemplified with a short story, how the conception of time has change in recent years:

La especificidad cronológica del texto de Litt (la década de los ochenta contemplada como 'pasado remoto' diez años más tarde) es indicativa, a mi entender, de una aceleración en la concepción del tiempo histórico y de sus objetos técnicos distintivos ... que debe ser estudiada a la luz de otros criterios (195)

The cassette, in Gortari's case, is a time machine, but ironically a very old-time machine.

We stated that Gortari's nostalgia is not about reliving the experiences, but about showing them in their fragmentary nature, unattainable as a whole: "// de repente [...] / Un techo lleno de palomas / O piedras a media noche / golpeando en la ventana / del cuarto de una chica". They are memories of a window, of a car, or of an old house, but they do not come to be completed. The cassette can be a vehicle for bringing up memories, but, as the poem seems to affirm, the sounds of its songs will only show us remnants of the experiences denoted by the music contained in it, never the full experience. Anacoluthon then becomes relevant in this poem in a media culture environment, which highly stimulates present experiences. So, in contrast the reminiscences are shown incomplete. According to Cruz Arzabal: "en una época en la que las emociones son producidas masivamente mediante las experiencias de consumo, en el espacio del poema son modificadas mediante una puesta en ausencia que no las muestra como una realización sino como una potencia" ("Los gestos del poema o la escritura de la insuficiencia."). That is why memories appear like bubbles to the poet, fragile and ephemeral. However, we must consider that for the poet a fragment can be constituted as a whole. In another of his poems, "Star Fox", Gortari describes the life of a child forced to live in a hospital room, whose only bridges to the world are a window where he can see the sky, a videogame called Star Fox, and an astronomy book. This kid knows the world through pieces of it, but for him the fragments can be the whole; he says in one of the verses: "Ahí supo el nombre de la única

constelación / que cabía en su ventana mas no le importaba / porque esa constelación era todas las constelaciones". In that way a glance to the past through the old-time machine could provide us the same explanation: bubbles of memory do not affect Gortari's perception about time and memory because that fragment is enough to recreate the experience as a potential totality.

The last verse of "Cassette" explains the reasons of the time motif in his poems: "donde nada ha cambiado con los años" could recall the notion that technology changes, yes, but we do not. We can argue that Gortari, when he wrote *Singles //2005/2008//*, explores nostalgia through television series and particular objects derived from technology because they get older faster than they used to do. Ironically, we do not change at the same speed, so those objects that provided ontological security in the poet's preadolescence and childhood are also obsolete, that is why he finds himself lost in time, and why he needs to resort to memorabilia as a charm.

The poetry of Gortari coincides partially with the ontological security described by Giddens because it is true that certain devices—a car or a cassette—become amulets when they are invoked through the nostalgic procedure. When they work like this, memories comprise a sense of order and security from a childhood and adolescence sheltered by friendships, routines, music and cars. In this sense memory is manifested as a safe place for the poetic voice. However, in the poem "Las Dunas", the invocation of Goku or the skateboard tricks are not enough to maintain the ontological security. The inevitable changes of the city do not allow this order to be fulfilled. Its place in the poem is to move against longing for childhood, turning nostalgia into a thoughtful engine over the irretrievable hope of the changing world. "Cassette", in the other hand, uses the cultural myth to add value to a utilitarian object, transforming the cassette into a reliquary, a piece of value. This piece contains the spells and conjures to go back in time, but fail to rescue a complete experience, only provides fragments of memories. There is when nostalgia becomes reflexive, because it could never be fulfilled as a complete experience. And yet the impotence of such intent is the experience left in the studied poems.

One can argue with Fabre's idea that nostalgia in Gortari is rare or nonsense. Instead we see it as a natural response to his contemporary context. Mass media culture and technological devices are

changing almost every year in present days. Now there is no ritual to follow in television series because these are subject to demand on platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime or YouTube Originals. Kids do not have to wait one week to watch their favorite series' new episode, they can see them any time they want it at any moment. Technological devices, on the other hand, are so ephemeral that even the concept of new has no longer the meaning it used to do when Gortari was a little kid. The Walkman lasted for almost two decades before Mp3 devices were globally used. Also, for decades people used to consume music by buying music albums, now music is listened through demand platforms like Spotify or Deezer. The way we consume products and relate to them is now different.

The digital revolution produced almost the same conditions that modernity did in a poet like Baudelaire. Gortari saw an acceleration of the conception of time at the same moment of his passage through adolescence. Furthermore, Veracruz, the city where he lived his infancy, became one of the most dangerous cities in Mexico. When he reached adolescence, things were so different that he immediately felt alien in his own environment. Thus, Gortari tries to find himself in a secure place through his poems, but it is unreachable. Giddens' ontological security will manifest itself as an unfinished and ungraspable fragment of past experience. Also, transitional objects will remain as objects of personal value for they reflect a transience of time impossible to return. From this principle, the constitution of the subjective experience of the external reality is the base that allows us to observe an "anxiety for the retro" in Eduardo de Gortari's poetry.

We now come to observe that the return of nostalgia in a contemporary poet like Eduardo de Gortari is manifested as a resistance to the obsolescence of technological objects, because of the ontological security they provided in his infancy. This leads us to observe and conclude that such artifacts serve the poet in two main ways. One is to see them as objects of value that are materialized in the nostalgic longing. And the other to show us the impossibility that these objects represent to the lyric voice of reliving the memories. This last aspect of Gortari's poetry tells us that nostalgia can only be fragmentary and incomplete, which leads us to assume that Gortari comes to these memories to reconstruct his own fragmentary self.

NOTES

¹ From now on all the poems will be referred to this book. It has no numbered pages, that is why we only refer the author of the book. No permissions were requested since the book was published with a Creative Commons 2.5 license.

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