

Textual Silence and (Male) Homosexual Panic in Nuria Amat's *La intimidación* (1997)

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Pánico homosexual: Miedo profundo, interiorizado, de la homosexualidad que se produce al reconocer el individuo en sí mismo la clase de deseos que le están vedados por el sistema social. En ocasiones la reacción es la violencia homofóbica contra los homosexuales, con el fin de afirmar la propia virilidad. En otros casos, la culpa se interioriza y da lugar a síntomas físicos similares a otros casos de paranoia. [...] el pánico homosexual presupone homosexualidad y en ocasiones aparece junto a manifestaciones no reprimidas de la misma: el relato de Henry James *La bestia de la selva* es un ejemplo de pánico homosexual, y en obras como *El público*, de Federico García Lorca encontramos esta relación de horror e identificación que se relaciona con este concepto. (Mira 1999: 550-1)

As Kosofsky Sedgwick asserts in the textual analyses undertaken in *Between Men* (1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), the presence of homosexual panic in literature is very much related to processes of interiorisation. The narration of the "síntomas físicos" that Mira mentions in the definition taken from *Para entendernos. Diccionario de cultura homosexual, gay y lesbica* (1999) is part of the textual manifestation of the panic, a manifestation that demands decoding for it lies in textual silence, in the same way that it can be hidden in the closet. Anxiety and melancholy are two symptoms that Melanie Klein associated with paranoia itself. For Freud, paranoia in men resulted from the repression of homosexual desire. Since the mentally healthy man had to repress homosexual desire, that is to say, turn it into an illusion, paranoia could be expected. The virility of the main masculine character of Nuria Amat's *La intimidación*, the father, is never asserted by his daughter, the androgynous narrator of this *bildungsroman*. What she will repeatedly assert is his melancholy and his ambiguity, an ambiguity that mirrors hers.

This article deals with a process of literarisation, a novel, written in the first person by a female voice that, being herself problematically gendered, will write a text that renders gender problematic. Amat's text obsessively elaborates on the melancholy of the father and on the influence that the death of the mother has had on the identity of both the father and the daughter, and on the almost inevitable genderisation that narrative characters are supposed to undergo. The mother's death has not implied a death of femininity but seems to have enhanced the femininity in the father and has textually rendered his own masculinity problematic at the level of the social. He is the character that tries, and fails, to

teach the narrator to be a girl. Characteristics culturally associated with the feminine belong to him.

The relationship between textual silence and male homosexual panic that I am going to explore can be read in a text, in this case in the novel *La intimidación*, where homosexuality is indeed repressed. Although Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle" can and must be read as an unrepressed manifestation, this reading in fact implies the teasing out of homosexual panic from the text, as Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests in her interpretation of James's piece in the chapter "The Beast in the Closet" of her already classic *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) to which Mira refers in the prologue of his dictionary. This conceptual act of teasing out homosexual panic from within the politics of representation of a text and of a male character is required in order to analyse the narrator's view of the father as a closeted subject. In doing so, my aim is to make sense of the problematic relationship existing between the two protagonists of *La intimidación*, a relationship meaningfully recreated by Amat elsewhere, as will be discussed.

The father's permanent state of mourning is always linked by the narrator to his having failed to fulfil the role of husband rather than to his having lost this role because of his wife's death. Additionally, his more feminine traits make the house look as if there is a woman still living in it. Through these features, the narrator suggests the idea that being a man is not unproblematic. I will refer to an unpublished text written by the author before her first novel *Pan de boda*, which appeared in 1979. It was to this text, entitled *Cuerpo desnudo blanco*, that Amat returned when writing *La intimidación*.¹ The similarities and discrepancies between these two texts are more than just formal or thematic. There is in fact an epistemological relationship between the two books insofar as the formal or thematic gap between the texts signifies. *Cuerpo desnudo blanco* works as a closeted text for *La intimidación*. In order to know more about *La intimidación*, to analyse it and understand it better, it is possible to use *Cuerpo desnudo blanco* as an epistemological tool. Both texts present a female narrator living in similar family structures, both narrators become privileged observers of "el trasfondo del armario del padre" (*Cuerpo desnudo blanco*: 6).

Cuerpo desnudo blanco is silenced in *La intimidación* and *La intimidación* has silenced *Cuerpo desnudo blanco*. The notions of textual silence and of homosexual panic and the relationship between them emerge all the more clearly when the two texts are juxtaposed and commented on together. From this perspective, the figures of the father and the daughter in both *Cuerpo desnudo blanco* and *La intimidación* can be read as two single organisms expanding over two texts and also subliminally present in other works of Amat. The relationship between father and daughter, a very problematic one, can be explained further by referring to the unpublished text. There are instances in both *Cuerpo desnudo blanco* and *La intimidación* in which the gap between what the narrator is telling and what she is not disclosing can only be understood by appealing to the notion of textual silence, homosexual panic, the relationship between both concepts and the relationship between the two texts.

La intimidación marks a significant juncture in Amat's authorial evolution. Published by Alfaguara in 1997, this novel introduced Amat to a wider audience. Her first two published texts, *Pan de boda* (1979) and *Narciso y Armonía*

(1982), were novels, a genre Amat subsequently abandoned until the publication of *La intimidación*. Both homosexual and heterosexual love, along with the problematisation of gender identity, are aspects Nuria Amat explores in her books written between 1982 and 1997. While challenging gender expectations, these texts also challenge expectations relating to genre. *El ladrón de libros y otras bibliomanías* (1988), *Amor breve* (1990), *Monstruos* (1991 [1990]), *Todos somos Kafka* (1993) and *Viajar es muy difícil. Manual de ruta para lectores periféricos* (1995) are generically original texts, situated halfway between the language of theory and the strategies of fiction, hence the author's denomination of these books as "libros inclasificables" or "libros sin voz".² In 1997 *La intimidación* appeared as Amat's first "libro con voz", as it were, in 15 years.

The melancholic relationship between father and daughter is strange and estranged, loaded with silences and marked by the imaginary dialogue that both of them maintain with the literary canon that dwells in their respective libraries. The female voice that is going to lead us to the father therefore shares with him a common sphere of endless representation: literature. Both characters continuously read themselves into books. Their lives are acts of reading, and reading defines them. In this way, the highly metaliterary tissue that constructs the texts published before *La intimidación* is also present in the novel. In *La intimidación*, however, it serves a somewhat synthetic function, for *La intimidación* condenses themes recurrently treated in Amat's previous books while expanding them within a narrative frame. Amat privileges the figures of androgynous female subjects and makes them spectators of males whose gender identity is as problematic, paradoxical and contradictory as that of the voice which narrates.

In *Viajar es muy difícil. Manual de ruta para lectores periféricos*, Amat communicates the critical and hermeneutic potentiality of looking for the textual silences of the history of literature. Writers are then given narrative voice to tell the silences of their canonical biographies. Following this logic, a fictitious encounter between Constantine Cavafi and Paul Bowles is narrated. The eyes of the old poet Cavafi meet the curious glance of young Bowles in a Turkish bath. They do not talk. Cavafi is leaving and Bowles is staying, the former is old and the latter is young. As Mark Lilly (1993) points out, in Cavafi's poetry "it is not merely that the most excited and impassioned relationships are brief: we also see that their end can be poignantly sudden" (Lilly 1993: 43) and, as the poem included in Amat's book shows, the end may actually prevent the beginning of a love relationship which Amat imbues with literature. Cavafi, literary father of Bowles, is symbolically abandoning the living landscape of literature. The end of his life is near but not the death of his voice, for he passes his words to the young author. A piece of paper with verses composed by the old poet for the then young novelist reaches him via the hands of Turkish men. The poem reads,

Bajando por aquella escalera,
 junto a la puerta nos cruzamos, y por un instante
 vi tu cara desconocida y tú me viste.
 Yo me oculté en las sombras, y
 pasaste rápidamente, alejándote,
 y te perdiste en aquella casa vulgar
 donde no encontrarías el placer, como tampoco yo habría de hallarlo.

Y sin embargo el amor que deseabas yo lo tenía para dártelo
el amor que yo deseaba, tus ojos me lo ofrecían
con su ambigüedad y abandono.
Los cuerpos se sentían y se buscaban;
la sangre y la piel comprendían.

Pero turbados los dos nos escondíamos. (Amat 1995: 109–10)

This poem illustrates the role of male writers in the configuration of Amat's narrative poetics of which *La intimidad* is, as has already been noted, a decisive exponent. The fictionalisation of literary figures is a recurrent theme for Amat, of which Bowles and Cavafi are just two examples.³ Kafka, Joyce, Calvino, Borges, Proust and Foucault are some of the literary fathers appearing in Amat's prose. Her reading of the predominantly male literary canon is a constant search for the ambiguous, the unorthodox, the silent and the undefined. It is there, in destabilisation, that she wants to read the canon, the home of the literary fathers. "Los padres literarios", recurrently referred to in *La intimidad*, are an entity that needs clarification. Nowhere is the presence of fictionalised male writers more influential than in the plot of *La intimidad*, although this tendency recurs in Amat's other texts. The narrator's rendering of the melancholy of the father can only be fully understood by appealing to her treatment of genderisation and to her view of the family structure that they are both part of. The concept of homosexual panic becomes decisive in order to understand the characterisation of both father and daughter and also the epistemological distance between the unpublished text *Cuerpo desnudo blanco* and the published novel. The presence of homosexual panic in literature, i.e. the writing of homosexual panic, is very much embedded in the silences of discourse, being furthermore by definition a silent writing that is interior.

In the characterisation of his role, literary or real, the father emerges as a silent bohemian subject. Bohemia and melancholia define the central male character in *La intimidad*, and also define the male literary authors appearing in *Todos somos Kafka*, *Viajar es muy difícil* and *Letra herida*. In her *Epistemology of the Closet* Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests the accuracy of regarding the flux of bohemia as "the temporal space where the young, male bourgeois literary subject was required to navigate his way through his 'homosexual panic'—seen here as a *developmental* stage—toward the more repressive, self-ignorant, and apparently consolidated status of the mature bourgeois paterfamilias" (Kosofsky 1990: 193). Against this profile, the figure of the literary father appears and mirrors the characterisation of the bachelor outlined by Kosofsky. The flux of bohemia runs through Amat's texts and the only concrete temporal and social references found in *La intimidad* and *Cuerpo desnudo blanco* are related not to the narrator's life but to the father's youth before and after the Spanish Civil War. This was an event that moved him to accept frustration and repression as a way of life, and at which point his self-exploration stopped. He becomes a "huérfano de la vida" (1997: 147) in the same way that his daughter is orphaned due to the mother's death. He is not the first self-marginalising and self-centred widower whose sexual identity has appeared problematised through fiction, as Kosofsky proves in her analysis of Thackeray's *Lovel, the Widower*.

The “mature bourgeois paterfamilias” (Kosofsky 1990: 193) is never embodied by the father in Amat’s texts, but by the father of the father, the grandfather of the female narrators whom Amat privileges as main narrative voices.⁴ Just as important as the father, young widower and bachelor, is the appearance of motherless female narrative voices in Amat’s texts, preferential observers of the widower/bachelor and main narrators. The absence of a maternal figure inaugurates the androgynous characterisation of these voices, whose bodies are never essentialised; they are bodies in absence and therefore lack genderisation, hence the androgyny. The narrator of *La intimidad* is one of these. Having already stated that the figure of the father recurrently merges with the figure of the canonical male writer, it is appropriate to bear in mind that the agent of the union is the androgynous female voice which is endowed with authorial power by the use of narrative. The writing she generates is also the writing that generates her. It is not solipsistic because it blends and unites the double characterisation of the male writer and the father.

La intimidad has suppressed the relationship between the father and the son, significantly explored in *Cuerpo desnudo blanco*. The two sons are really not important characters in *La intimidad*. They never speak and the narrator pays virtually no attention to them. However, in *Cuerpo desnudo blanco* the brother is homosexual and the narrator, as a child, identifies him with the father. They are equals, they are alike. The unusual family structure is the sphere of representation against which characterisation occurs. In neither of these texts does the reader get a portrait of a society, or of an epoch, but of an unusual family structure that determines the genderisation of characters and works as a fissure through which sexual identity is explored on the grounds of its instability.

In *Cuerpo desnudo blanco*, Esther, the narrator, seems to be aware from a very early age that there is something going on *between men*, to borrow Kosofsky’s title, something that excludes her, something that her brother has and the father sees and something that the brother will repress as he grows older. Esther directly addresses this issue when, as a young woman, she passes the following judgement on him: “[...] tu verdad abandonó las alas de la imaginación, se volvió miserable y terrena, instrumentó su lenguaje” (*Cuerpo desnudo blanco*: 126). It is not that sexuality is rendered problematic but that sexuality, as a textual construct, is often signified through silence or through absence. The abnormal family structure and the absence of a stable female figure influence the genderisation of the main narrative voice. The expression of a politics of representation is related to the existence of a politics of difference that Amat’s main narrative voices (always female) subtextually communicate. Textual silence and the expression of sexual difference go together. In the case of *Cuerpo desnudo blanco*, what differentiates and is not spoken remains in the closet for both female narrator and father. What differentiates and is not spoken marks what is or is not (ambiguously) inscribed upon the body of the brother, of the father, of the imagined mother and of Esther herself. From a very early age, Esther seems to be an observer of her brother’s state of estrangement. As a young woman, she passes judgement on the voice of the brother: “Tu voz no casa con tu figura. Te avergüenzas y la escondes” (*Cuerpo desnudo blanco*: 114).

The male homosexual desire that Esther sees in her brother from early childhood, and that she appears to perceive easily, makes her, through a logical process of identification, assign the same type of desire to the father. What Esther witnesses as she and her brother grow older is the brother's assimilation of the closet. And she sees how his own subject position is being constructed as a closeted one, because it mirrors the father's. She wonders whether the father is or is not like the son. As an adult narrator, she sees how the father is worried about his own inability to make the children "do" their gender correctly:

Papá seguía preocupado por nosotros, [...] por mis modales impulsivos y excesivamente agresivos en contraste con tu finura, con tus gestos delicados que parecían languidecer antes de finalizar sus actos; por mi idioma ya imposible de contestar en su idioma; por tu soñadora pereza; por mi vicio del insomnio; por tus notas; por mi amor; por nuestra poca avenencia—tú a lo tuyo y yo a lo mío—que sin querer cultivaba hablándonos por separado, mandándonos sobre secretos que a ti te hablaban de mí y a mí me confirmaban que tú eras diferente [...]. (*Cuerpo desnudo blanco*: 70)

The two children fail to perform genderisation correctly and although that does not imply homosexuality, it does cause the father panic. The boy is not masculine and the girl is not feminine and their ambiguity increases as the years go by. The world will not read them straight. He cannot read them straight and his preoccupation can be interpreted as his own homosexual panic, a panic not shared by the children. Homosexual panic has to be teased out from the obsessive silences of the father and from the recognition of the homosexuality of his own son in *Cuerpo desnudo blanco*, from the androgyny of the female narrators of the two texts and from the silences of the deceased wife who will never return. It is a remarkably important textual contrast that in *La intimidación* the process of closeting sexual identity which the brother was undergoing has been omitted, and the focus placed on the male character that is definitely closeted, is not in the process of coming in, and will definitely never come out.

The absence of a female and feminine character haunts both texts and inaugurates the destabilisation of gender patterns. However, in *La intimidación*, the narrator, rather than refusing to read or write the father straight, narrates how she cannot construct the vision of a straight male. Thus, she states that the melancholy of the father is "[...] un dolor que mi padre llevaba arrastrando desde su primera hasta su segunda boda" (Amat 1997: 173) This melancholic pain, initially linked to the early death of his wife, the narrator's mother, actually surpasses it and remains, and is tied to matrimony. The main narrative voice of *La intimidación* is very similar to Esther, although she is called Nuria and her name is only revealed at the end. The interesting feature of these female narrators is that neither Esther nor Nuria characterise their own body as heterosexually correct and that their own sexuality stops being an issue. In *La intimidación*, this first-person female voice, very close to androgyny and obsessed by the silences contained in literary texts, subliminally problematises the masculinity of the father, narrating it at the same time as she reiterates the sadness of this character and the decisive importance of the books of his library.

The perception of one's own otherness achieved through literature, through the written word, is particularly determinant in *La intimidación*. Here the dialogue

with the brother is no longer present. But in *Cuerpo desnudo blanco* it is very meaningful. The adult narrator suggests that she was already able to see the brother's homosexuality in childhood and that the reason she could do so was that she was ambiguous herself. As an adult, she has accepted ambiguity as a way of life. Esther becomes a "fémina adulterada por sombras algo viriles" (*Cuerpo desnudo blanco*: 82-3) and the narrator of *La intimidación* evolves from being "una bruja encorsetada" (*Cuerpo desnudo blanco*: 16)—that is the way she remembers herself as a child—to being an adult woman without a sex. With respect to *Cuerpo desnudo blanco*, *La intimidación* suppresses the relationship between the father and the son or sons. The main narrative voice absorbs the ambiguity she had shared with the brother in *Cuerpo desnudo blanco* and sees her body as follows: "Mi cuerpo, creo, fue siempre una especie de huella o cicatriz dejada por la ausencia de sexo. Las sombras no tienen sexo" (Amat 1997: 267).

This absence of sex has to be interpreted as an absence of coherent sexualisation, a recognisable union between biological and generic sex. The narrator cannot read coherency in sex. Sexual identity is always in a paradoxical or contradictory relationship with reality, with the Real. This is the same relationship her text establishes between the reality she offers tangential glimpses of—Barcelona, the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s—and the representational power of literature, to which both father and daughter resort, thus displacing the social.

In order to reach the figure of the father and the notion of male homosexual panic as part of his characterisation, it has been necessary to approach the character by moving from the narrator's self-portrait through her rendering of the fact father and daughter share, namely the absence of the female figure (mother and wife). In this way, the melancholic silence surrounding the father has been filled with signification. The absence of the mother is epistemological, ontological. Gender structures are never stabilised, they do not have a chance to become so. This explains the narrator's ability to search for something in the father that can be interpreted as homosexual panic. It has to remain hidden in order to exist, prior to the advent and narration of the homosexual subject. The panic is one of the aspects related to sexuality and gender identity that can be read in the silence by which the text communicates sex and genderisation. Other aspects are the characterisation of the narrator as a female dandy, the mirage of stability offered by matrimony and the referential presence of literature in the text. These issues have been solved in other works by Amat and have found a place in her texts.

The father is first and foremost a literary father, a frustrated writer and, like his daughter, a compulsive reader. But he does not want her to read the silences in the text of his life and she, a character also defined by literature, is unavoidably inclined to make sense of the father's silence and melancholy, and read them further, beyond the absence of the mysterious woman that was the mother. The narrator not only characterises the father as a sad widower and sad paternal figure, but he is also, in a way, her "padre literario". The presence of the father and the absence of the mother condition the narrator's relationship with literature and with the act of reading. Throughout the whole text, the absence of the mother cannot be separated from the absence of genderisation in the self-development of the narrator and also from the rendering she makes of

the father. As a *bildungsroman*, *La intimidación* invites many readings: one is metaliterary, another could focus on the psychoanalytical plot of the text, another one could deal with the relationship between gender and genre that the narrator explores as she writes. Additionally, instead of reading backwards and tracing the melancholy of the father back into Amat's unpublished novel, one could read forward and analyse the figure of the dead mother in *La intimidación*, relating it to Amat's most recent novel *El país del alma* (1999). But my aim on this occasion has been to read the melancholic silence of the male protagonist as the most haunting feature of this novel and therefore the one the reader should desire to understand most.

Notes

- ¹ Special thanks are due to Nuria Amat for allowing me to use her unpublished text.
- ² From personal conversation with the author.
- ³ For Woods, Cavafi's poetry deals so explicitly with sexual desire that "his insistence on visual beauty is entirely consistent with every level of his thought" (1999: 189). This view gains the most extreme of representations when Cavafi's poem is placed precisely on a moment that invents his thoughts on the beauty of Bowles and on the desire that Bowles inspires in him, a desire that mirrors the ones that, according to Woods and Lily, would make Cavafi write because Cavafi ultimately "is insistent that desire should lead to action" (Woods 1999: 188). In Amat's text, the action to which desire leads is writing, and writing is also rooted in the panic. Both Cavafi and Bowles remain "turbados" and, as a consequence, also "escondidos", closeted.
- ⁴ The character of the grandfather in the short story "Casa de verano" (Amat 1999: 24–41) can be considered the cruelest depiction of the dictatorial father ever written by Amat.

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