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Time and the Exile: Poli Délano's "Blowing in the Wind"

The twentieth century, as Joseph Brodsky reminds us, was more than any of its predecessors one of constant displacement and misplacement.¹ It produced, in the words of George Steiner, a literature of extraterritoriality, that is, a literature by and about exiles.² In his seminal work on the theme of exile Andrew Gurr has compared the exiled writer to a rag tied to the middle of a rope that is used in a tug of war.³ The image is an undeniably powerful one because it underscores the antagonistic forces tugging at writers who, because of having incurred the wrath of some government or state bureaucracy, are forced to live outside their homeland. At one end they are pulled by memory and emotional attachment to the past, while at the other they are obliged to confront the unknown and adapt to the world of the present, despite the instability and insecurity they may experience living in a culture that is not theirs. The intensity of the imbalance they experience increases dramatically when the language of their new locus differs from that of "home."

For exiled writers the act of writing provides a healthy outlet for the frustration and insecurity they feel at not being able to reconcile the differences between their past and present. Their new status as outcasts becomes a linguistic event. The word becomes a shield, and through it they are able to give form and meaning to the chaos experienced by being caught within two different temporal and spatial realms, between the "here" and "there," between today and yesterday. In putting word to paper exiled writers attempt, for the most part unconsciously, to create a kind of stasis to offset the tension of opposites in their existential tug of war. Normally, if little time has elapsed between the initial experience of exile and the attempt to capture this new status through writing, the text produced reflects a strong autobiographical flavor with a predominance of

¹ Joseph Brodsky, "The Condition We Call Exile," *Altogether Elsewhere*, ed. Marc Robinson (Boston and London: Faber & Faber, 1994), 4.

² Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," *Altogether Elsewhere*, ed. Marc Robinson (Boston and London: Faber & Faber, 1994), 137.

³ Andrew Gurr, *Writers in Exile: The Creative Use of Home in Modern Literature* (Sussex: The Harvester Press; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1981), 33.

first person protagonists.⁴ Because of the tensions created by this world of opposites, many of these protagonists exist in a kind of limbo whose principal features include rootlessness, unpredictability and a loss of personal and cultural identity, which slowly but surely manifests itself in their reflections. In such texts these protagonists will immerse themselves in a safe world of memories which subverts the ability to distinguish clearly between the different times and spaces of their lives. Even the most innocent element of the present is capable in these cases of setting off a chain reaction in their unconscious, jettisoning them deeper and deeper into the world of the past. This nostalgic immersion into a world of memories brings with it, as Andrés Avellaneda points out, certain consequences that are common to the literature of exile: the connection to the past may finally lead to an opening up on the part of such protagonists to a productive self-criticism which will eventually allow them to go on with their lives, or they may assume a defensive posture toward the changes imposed upon them, engaging in a type of self-withdrawal, making any reconciliation with the present an impossibility. In this latter case, the inability to integrate themselves in the "now," to become at last whole, only exacerbates their sense of loss and fragmentation and is often portrayed metaphorically in the literature of exile through the theme of death.⁵

Like many of his Latin American contemporaries during a century of cruel, totalitarian regimes, Chilean writer Poli Délano⁶ found himself forced to leave his homeland in 1974, shortly after the military coup in September of 1973. Delano was always an inveterate traveler whose novels and short stories written prior to 1974 had displayed a certain nostalgia for the people and places encountered in his journeys. This sentiment intensifies noticeably, however, as a result of more than ten years spent in Mexico before he was permitted to return to his native country.⁷ And while the birth, growth and death of romance as well as the role played by fate as life's ultimate arbiter constituted the principal

⁴ Andrés Avellaneda, "Exilio y literatura latinoamericana," *Punto de Contacto* 2 (Winter 1981): 81-92.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

⁶ Délano's literary career began in 1960 with the publication of a collection of short stories entitled *Gente solitaria* (Lonely People). He is the author of ten novels and more than a dozen short story collections. Winner of the Municipal Prize for Literature (Chile), the Casa de las Américas Prize (Cuba) and the International Short Story Prize (Mexico), he has been one of the leading literary figures of Chile's Generation of 1960.

⁷ Délano did not go to Mexico from Chile directly. He spent approximately five months in Stockholm and then decided to live in a Spanish-speaking country. Mexico was a logical choice for him since he had spent a memorable part of his childhood there.

thematic concerns of his fiction prior to the coup, these tend to be subsumed under the larger issues of exile, the nature of fascism and the yearning for home in the majority of his works written after 1973.⁸

One of the most powerful and structurally complex narrative pieces he has written on the theme of exile is unquestionably his story "Blowing in the Wind." While it first appeared in 1983 under the title "¿Dónde están todas las flores?"⁹ ("Where Have All the Flowers Gone?"), there is little resemblance between the initial version and a second published in Délanó's most recent collection of stories entitled *Solo de saxo* (1998, *A Sax Solo*). In this revised version he offers his readers a narration that manifests a far greater mastery of narrative technique and a more profound understanding of the interrelationship of form and content. The end result is a short story that makes increasing demands upon the reader's ability to follow the narrator-protagonist's abrupt temporal and spatial shifts as he attempts to understand his perplexing present in light of past events.

Kiko Falcone¹⁰ is a middle-aged writer of novels and short stories who, together with his second wife Carla, is compelled to leave Chile for political reasons when a military coup occurs there in the early seventies. His ten years as an exile in Mexico, during which his persistent requests for permission to return home have been consistently rejected by the Chilean embassy, have witnessed not only a difficult separation from his two daughters but also the deterioration and eventual breakup of his marriage, together with the death of friends and acquaintances in the exile community of Mexico's capital. Unfortunately, at the end of this ten-year period he is no closer to returning home than he was at the outset of his exile.

Délanó captures beautifully the existential dilemma of his protagonist through the narrative structure he employs in showing his character as a prisoner of time, which is reminiscent of the metaphor used by Gurr in describing the plight of the writer in exile. The story is divided into eight distinct narrative sequences that open upon a present—the art gallery exhibition—with the words "¿Te acuerdas del Búker?" ("Do you remember Búker?") and that close in the present in the company of the same person—Sonia—posing the same question heard at the beginning of the story. What occurs between these two temporal poles is an ongoing interruption

⁸ See Lucía Guerra-Cunningham, "Entrevista: Poli Délanó," *Hispanérica* 14: 41 (August 1985): 29–42.

⁹ See "¿Dónde están todas las flores?," *Chile en todas partes* (México: Casa de Chile, 1983), 34–43.

¹⁰ Curiously, the name of his protagonist corresponds to a pseudonym, Enrique Falcone, that Délanó has used in the past. See, for example, his *La muerte de una ninfómana* (The Death of a Nymphomaniac).

and consumption of the present by an endless stream of memories as Kiko Falcone struggles to identify the person asking the question as well as the context to which it refers. As Bob Dylan's lyrics, which serve as an important leitmotif in the story, suggest, the question posed and the answer given are far more complex than would appear at first glance, and they will take the reader on a journey across the time and space of the narrator-protagonist's past.

This journey begins in the second sequence with the abrupt insertion of the name Carla. Suddenly the reader is transported back in time, back into the past as Kiko Falcone recalls his romance in Chile with a young divorcee, their marriage and subsequent exile, their early days of economic struggle trying to survive in their adopted country, the increasing estrangement the once-called "super couple" begins to feel toward one another and the ultimate deterioration of their relationship. Délano keeps us locked in his character's thoughts as the latter reviews his life and reflects on what went wrong. Time and distance are the culprits in this case. Life becomes an endless struggle between the "then" and "now," between the "here" and "there." Kiko Falcone finds himself caught within a kind of limbo, far from what is most familiar to him. Similar to every exile unable to let go of the past or to at least give the present equal billing, he allows the past to erode the legitimacy of the current moment. Carla's indifference towards returning "home" creates an insurmountable barrier between the two that will never be overcome. As the section closes with Dylan's lyrics echoing in the background, the reader realizes that Carla is one more of the many flowers of Kiko's life that have been lost to him.

Separation and loss continue as the principal motifs in the story's third sequence. An automobile accident and the death of two teenagers, friends of the exile community, only serve to reinforce the narrator's suspicion that human beings exercise little or no control over their lives, that fate is the ultimate dealer in the game of life, and that the deck of cards is heavily stacked against us. Kiko's response to this tragic occurrence is to write, to give some form of order and expression to the world of chaos that surrounds him, to preserve in time and against the onslaught of oblivion those who have disappeared from his everyday life.

Just as abruptly as Délano immerses us in the remote past in sequences 2 and 3, he next shifts in the sequence that follows to the present, once again signaled by the name Sonia. Kiko's ruminations contrast the young, spontaneous, sensual woman to whom he felt attracted in the past with the tentative, sad-looking, almost defeated figure he encounters ten years later at the gallery. The passage of years leaves its mark on both of them, and the reader cannot help but be affected by Délano's masterful yet understated characterization of time's insidious ability to erode memory and youth.

But Kiko's thoughts of time's deceptive passing take a different tack in sequence 5 as he recreates two incidents that, at first sight, appear to have little in common with one another. On the one hand, his thoughts turn to the tragic death of Clarisa and Walter, the teenagers killed in the automobile crash and, on the other, he reflects on the changes he has noticed in his wife, particularly her new hairstyle, and her continuing reluctance to apply for permission to return to Chile. Délano juxtaposes here two images that have to do with the powerful forces of fate, both of which result in death, one literal, the death of the crash victims, the other figurative, the end of Kiko's marriage. The latter intuits that Carla's indifference to returning "home" sealed the fate of their relationship just as Clarisa's and Walter's decision to take their weekend excursion had determined theirs. Whether our destinies are already predetermined or whether our decisions merely set them in motion is something he cannot answer. Nonetheless, the outcome, as he examines his past, seems to him to be the same.

The story's final three sequences emanate from the present and link directly with sequences 1 and 4. Together they present a powerful and moving characterization of the limbo in which Délano's exiles survive. First, through the use of narrative summary, the protagonist tells us of his rendezvous with Sonia, the woman previously met in the story's opening scene. Without plunging us into his thought processes, he recounts what takes place in their conversation and what has happened to each one of them during the previous ten years. In Kiko's case much has occurred during this time frame: a marriage gone sour, a series of short-lived love affairs, the increasing success he has achieved as a writer and an overwhelming feeling of weariness that never leaves him. Sonia, too, has a story to tell which explains the origins of the sadness around her eyes and the disappearance of her once vivid and sparkling countenance. She, like Kiko, is the victim of exile, in her case, the victim of loving an exile named Búker, who, pursued by memories of "home," finds his only escape in the whiskey bottle that is his constant companion.

Kiko and Sonia share their stories and discover solace in each other's arms. Their embrace and subsequent kiss, however, instead of grounding Kiko in the present, simply unleash an endless eruption of images from the past. Images of his family, of Carla and their growing alienation from one another, of his search for love in the arms of others, and of the continual rejection of his application to return "home" inundate his thoughts as he ponders a series of "what ifs" that might have made his life very different.

In the final sequence Sonia's question, *Do you remember Búker?*, suddenly pulls Kiko and the reader back to the present, but only momentarily. It is this same question that initiates a new retrospective journey and places before us the image of Búker wandering the streets of Mexico

City, battling the demons of exile through his alcoholism and attaining his final release from a world to which he could never adapt. The story comes to a close with Kiko's realization that he and Sonia desperately need each other but, like every exile, life has taught him to entertain few illusions about the duration of their relationship. Curiously, as he continues to make love to her it is Carla's face he sees, she is the one he makes love to, as, once again entrapped in the past, he recalls the sadness of her face the day of their separation and the sound of Dylan's haunting lyrics coming from their daughters' room, posing a question for which he still has no answer.

Délano portrays exile in this story as the total absence of future possibilities. The past and the scars that it has left dominate the present to such a degree that his protagonist is incapable of contemplating time beyond what he has already experienced. In Spanish the word *destierro* refers to a state in which human beings have been stripped of their homeland, a place. In other words, the reality embraced by the term is spatial in its implications. It was Joseph Wittlin who looked at this phenomenon from a different perspective, coining a new term, *destiempo*, by which he described a state in which human beings are stripped of their time. In other words the victims of exile, by living outside, are deprived of the time that elapses within their country. For Wittlin exiles live in two different temporal realms simultaneously, namely, the past and the present.¹¹ This temporal duality characterizes the predicament of Délano's protagonist. For Kiko Falcone life in the past assumes greater reality and intensity than life in the present. He spends the major part of his time looking backwards, at the expense of any future he might create for himself. He lives in what Breytenbach calls an "absent presence, a state of instant reminiscence."¹² His obsession with a "paradise lost" tyrannizes his psychology to such a degree that his imagination fills up with images of a dead or dying world, the flowers of his past left blowing in the wind.

¹¹ Joseph Wittlin, "Sorrow and Grandeur of Exile," *The Polish Review* 2: 2-3 (1957): 105-06.

¹² Breyten Breytenbach, "A Letter from Exile, to Don Espejuelo," *Altogether Elsewhere*, ed. Marc Robinson (Boston and London: Faber & Faber, 1994), 16.