

VENTANAS DE MANHATTAN: ANTONIO MUÑOZ MOLINA'S
SYMBOLIC TEXT

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Every man's work, whether it be literature or music or pictures or architecture or anything else, is always a portrait of himself, and the more he tries to conceal himself the more clearly will his character appear in spite of him.

Samuel Butler, *The Way of All Flesh*

A la larga todo se convierte en ficción. Todos nos convertimos en ficción.

Antonio Muñoz Molina,
Interview with Nuria Morgado

Antonio Muñoz Molina's *Ventanas de Manhattan* is one of the most recent of several works written by Spaniards that take place in New York City and that by this time merit a comparative study. Since José María Carrascal published *Groovy*, in 1973, Carmen Martín Gaité has written *Caperucita en Manhattan*, Manuel Perellón has published *La ciudad doble*, Juan Madrid has given us *Restos de carmín*, and, most recently, Eduardo Lago has published *Llámame Brooklyn* (Premio Nadal). In addition, although in a more surreal tone, Manuel Vicent's *Balada de Caín* is also told from the perspective of present day New York. Muñoz Molina's text, unlike the others, however, is not a novel, and what in the previous texts serves as a background to plot, here is converted into plot itself.

Muñoz Molina presents the reader with an extensive description of Manhattan, a detailed description, but if the theme is a detailed explanation of the reality of Manhattan, one must ask what is there here that another writer, sociologist, or columnist might not have been able to create. One thinks of a typical museum scene in front of a work by Mondrian or Miró, where the visitor's first reaction is to declare «I could have painted that», and the second is «but I didn't think of it». Aside from the fact that this writer «thought of it», one must discover what is particular in the statements and discourse of Antonio Muñoz Molina, his personal creation, his exaggerations, metaphors, his Manhattan that rises from the interstices of what, at first, seems like a hyperrealistic portrait of the borough. One must also attempt to define those characteristics in his writing that are a result of his being an outsider, perhaps best obtained through a larger study of works about New York produced by writers both from within and without the city.

Essential to this discussion is the definition of the author as subject, that is, in what way does the author recreate himself in his writing, and to what extent does the narrating subject convert itself into a narrated object that becomes independent of the original, «real» author, thus, simultaneously, liberating textual description from its supposed adherence to the «real» referent? Laura Scarano's excellent overview of the problem of the subject in narrative aids us in resolving this question in the present case. She offers an interesting perspective of the constitution of the subject as an I that is both inside and outside of the text, a «voz de la escritura» and a «voz en la escritura» (20). She defines the second of these voices, which is what we are concerned with in the case of *Ventanas de Manhattan*, as «un lugar desde donde ese escritor, su historia y su cultura, construye una voz contextualizada, con categoría semiótica e institucional» (21), and, following Myriam Díaz-Diocaretz, alludes to the possibility of viewing the subject as the intersection of a cultural sociolect and an authorial idiolect (40). Once again, this proves a valuable concept when studying *Ventanas de Manhattan*, given that while Muñoz Molina never abandons the sociocultural context that informs his New York and creates the basis of his text, one must also discern to what extent there is an authorial idiolect that grows from that context and creates its own (fictional?) independence.

Scarano later dedicates a section of her study to autobiography, and this section is equally applicable to our discussion of Muñoz

Molina and his first person approach to the borough of Manhattan. She introduces the question of the difference between the real person and his/her autobiographical self, the second created by discourse and distinguished from the real (59). She counterposes two concepts, «autor como ficción» and «ficcionalización del autor» (60) that fit our study very well. Who is speaking in *Ventanas de Manhattan*? Muñoz Molina? A fictional version of Muñoz Molina? A fictional «yo» with no necessary connection to the author (implausible but a necessary consideration on our path to a definition of the subject)?

Basing her arguments on major thinkers who have dealt with this subject —Derrida, De Man, Barthes, Le Jeune— Scarano continues to develop quite clearly the question of the role, the definition, of the autobiographical subject and his/her referent. Perhaps the most valuable statement she draws from these theorists is De Man's question, which uses Barthes's declaration —«En el campo del sujeto no hay referente»— as a point of departure: «¿Estamos tan seguros de que la autobiografía depende de un referente como una fotografía depende de su modelo?» (63-64). As obvious as this statement may seem, it is an essential one in this study. Antonio Muñoz Molina writes as a real subject about a real city, but whereas photography reproduces, language mediates. It is in that discursive mediation that the critic must discover what, if anything, becomes of the author Antonio Muñoz Molina (whose name, in fact, never appears in the text), and what becomes of the real referent that he represents (or represents)¹.

An important element that Scarano brings out is the relationship of the autobiographer with the other:

La escritura autobiográfica sella más de un pacto, desnuda más de una dialéctica, polemiza con más de un horizonte. El yo revela en su escritura no sólo su fatal disyunción (ausencia o mito) sino una dialéctica con el otro que lo constituye. ¿No sería más pertinente ensayar una mirada de la autobiografía como *escritura del otro*: del otro en mí, de los otros que son conmigo y de los que no lo son, del otro semejante y del otro diferente, del otro fuera de mí, del otro que habla en mí y del que calla? (82)

¹ Angel Loureiro writes similarly of the autobiographer in his study of Muñoz Molina's journalistic production, when he describes autobiography «no como narración más o menos acertada o sincera de una vida, sino sobre todo como un acto por el que un escritor narra indagando, escribe interrogándose, se expone narrado» (41).

Whatever decision the critic makes with reference to the «reality» or «fictitiousness» of the authorial I, in the case of Muñoz Molina, this statement is highly applicable. Muñoz Molina, as novelist, columnist, or humanist, constantly fixates upon the other in a search for a definition of his own self. This is a constant in his non-fiction writing, from *El Robinson urbano* and *Diario del Nautilus* to *Sefarad*, and in his fictional texts, from *El jinete polaco*, *El dueño del secreto*, and *Ardor Guerrero* to *El viento de la luna*.

Scarano quotes Frederic Jameson's «Leer sin interpretar: la posmodernidad y el videotexto»:

Al estadio de correspondencia entre los signos y las cosas («lenguaje referencial») que reemplazó al antiguo «lenguaje mágico», le sucede otro de arbitrariedad, plenamente saussureano, que si bien no consigue «abolir el referente» le permite entrar al signo «en su momento de autonomía (utópica)» respecto de los objetos. Se trataría de la fase que denomina «movimiento moderno»: «Esta autonomía de la cultura, esta semi-autonomía del lenguaje, es el momento del movimiento moderno, o de un reino de lo estético que duplica el mundo sin pertenecer por completo a él» [...]. Este proceso se agudiza hasta hacer desaparecer «el significado», «la referencia» y hasta «la realidad», dejándonos tan solo «ese juego puro y azaroso de los significantes que llamamos posmodernidad». (228-229)²

This may be applied as a very suitable description of a Muñoz Molina that many critics, notably Randolph Pope in one of the first essays on the author, have described as a postmodern author. Scarano goes a step further than Jameson, however, when she writes:

Sin embargo, una fase netamente dialéctica no aparece en su modelo, y es la que aquí he intentado focalizar: como reacción a la consolidación e institucionalización del modelo moderno se buscaría recuperar y resignificar el vínculo perdido entre signo y referente pero de modo diferente al de la premodernidad, superando el binarismo irreconciliable de lenguaje y realidad, praxis artística y praxis vital. (123-24)

These are the questions we wish to pose when reading *Ventanas de Manhattan*. What is the reader's task? Are we to apply our knowledge of a biographical Antonio Muñoz Molina to our reading and

² This article appears in VV.AA., *La lingüística y la escritura*, Madrid, Visor, 1989, pp. 207-229.

analyze the passages of his work from that perspective, filtered, as it were, through the personality we have come to know through his substantial production of fiction and non-fiction works? Or should we conceive the narrator of this novel, no matter how autobiographical he seems, based without doubt on the lived experiences of the real author in the city of New York, as a fictional creation, who may be built on lived experience but who becomes an independent entity created by discourse, and who ceases gradually to be a recreation of the author, or at least who moves back and forth, depending on the nature of the discourse, between the author, a recreation, and a totally fictional character. It is this floating phenomenon that moves between the author and the perceiving subject that his discourse creates that I choose to characterize as Muñoz Molina's symbiotic relationship with his own text, a relationship in which the author creates the text but in which the text equally creates the author.

An early example of what might be considered the particular style of *Ventanas de Manhattan* is found in a chapter on the homeless:

Regresan los *homeless*, los vagabundos de las calles, vestidos con los mismos harapos y envueltos en un hedor idéntico al de hace diez o doce años³, rebuscando como entonces entre los restos de comida y los envoltorios de plástico de las papeleras, escribiendo de nuevo peticiones de ayuda y relatos de desgracia en trozos de cartón, poseídos muchos de ellos por una pasión acumulativa que no debe ser mucho menos delirante que la de los megamillonarios que habitan apartamentos de cincuenta habitaciones en las torres más ostentosas de Park Avenue o de la Quinta Avenida, frente al lado este de Central Park. Acumulan latas de refrescos vacías por cada una de las cuales les darán un centavo, y al cargarlas en grandes bolsas a la espalda o en los carritos de supermercado que empujan por las aceras van difundiendo un tintineo ligero de metal que es como el sonido de las campanillas con el que anunciaban su presencia los leprosos medievales. Atesoran tantas cosas, tantos papeles, botellas, montones de trapos viejos, pilas de revistas descuadernadas, bolsas negras, racimos de zapatos descabalados, que se les ve agobiados bajo el peso de sus posesiones excesivas, vigilantes, aletargados e insomnes para evitar que se las roben, agotados por el esfuerzo de transportarlas de un lado a otro sobre las espaldas dobladas o en los carritos tan llenos que apenas tie-

³ Shortly before this passage the author states that some years earlier, New York's Mayor Giuliani had effectively removed the homeless from the streets. Here he portrays their return.

nen fuerzas para empujarlos en las cuestras arriba. Parece que viven consumidos por la codicia insaciable de seguir acumulando, empujados por la simple inercia de la multiplicación de sus posesiones, como los reyes avaros de las fábulas, como esos tiburones financieros de Wall Street que no tienen escrúpulos ni conocen el sosiego y son capaces de jugarse la vergüenza y la cárcel con tal de añadir a sus riquezas ya inconcebibles algunos miles de millones de dólares. (34-35)

Although a lengthy quote, this passage is most essential to an understanding of Muñoz Molina's discursive and thematic approach to his subject material. Making ironic use of both contrast and comparison, he underlines at one and the same time the passion in America (and especially in New York) for wealth and the unimaginable distance that lies between the super rich and the super poor. And equally ironic is the vision of what lies between Fifth Avenue and Central Park West: Central Park, nature, neutral territory, everyone's land, a positive sign, but along whose two borders the homeless mount their cardboard homes in full view of the wealthy, who have an equally full view of the homeless from their flowered terraces⁴.

The concept of wealth is redefined as accumulation on the part of the poor, and the comparison with lepers, which evokes the Madrid of Galdós and Baroja, is a sign of the place these people occupy in one of the richest cities in the world. The tragic irony continues with Muñoz Molina's choice of vocabulary: what the homeless collect is of the lowest possible value, and the verb the author uses to describe their activity, rather than *recoger* or *almacenar*, is «atesorar». They are depicted as «agobiados bajo el peso de sus posesiones», as if these possessions had value (and tragically they do, relatively, when one is as destitute as these people). What follows draws an even sharper, although unwritten, comparison with the wealthy. The homeless are «vigilantes, aletargados e insomes» in order to protect their acquisitions, while the wealthy across the street sleep soundly, their doors well protected, generally by two uniformed doormen. The closing sentence maintains a crescendo of ironic application of words that seem perfectly in place with respect to the rich and ironically and totally out of place when describing the homeless: «Parece que viven consumidos por la codicia insaciable de seguir acumulando,

⁴ Although his novel is in no way a study of social class in America, Manuel Vicent's *Caín* calls attention to the street people every time he approaches or leaves the Chelsea Hotel, where he lives.

empujados por la simple inercia de la multiplicación de sus posesiones»... The denunciatory comparison is made in the conclusion of the sentence, but it is not necessary. The entire passage serves to place the two social sectors in extreme contrast by applying to the destitute the materialistic description that belongs to the rich. And this contrast, this tragic and ironic coexistence of the very poor and the very rich, constitutes the image that one will find most prevalent throughout this text, in spite of other passages that allow Muñoz Molina to highlight more pleasant aspects of Manhattan.

In another contemporary view of America, Rosa Montero, in her *Estampas bostonianas*, reacts similarly to American materialism and consumerism, although her focus is solely upon the wealthy:

El dinero. El dinero es el verdadero dios de esta cultura; de eso no hay duda. Oh, sí, es una divinidad común en el mundo occidental, todos los países industriales vivimos instalados en esa absurda esquizofrenia entre la avaricia y los derroches, entre la avidez y el desperdicio. Pero en Estados Unidos eso se nota más. Claro que, tal como se lo han montado, necesitan dinero para todo. Dinero para pagar los astronómicos seguros médicos, es decir, para comprar salud. Dinero para costearse una pensión individual de vejez: para comprar futuro. Dinero para poder ofrecer a los hijos esa costosísima educación privada, esa escuela y universidad de elite que es la puerta para el ascenso en la escala social: para comprar el éxito. Dinero para poder adquirir una casa propia, y un coche adecuado, y todos los archipereos necesarios de una opulenta sociedad de consumo, todos los signos exteriores de la normalidad y la decencia: para comprar respeto. Todo se compra y todo se vende, todo tiene un precio dentro de esta obsesión por el dinero del universo norteamericano: debe de ser lo que se entiende por una sociedad de libre mercado. (46-47)

The task of uncovering Muñoz Molina's fictive style within a supposedly non-fiction work is not new. Aside from his many collections of articles, two other works are very important in this respect: *Ardor guerrero* and *Sefarad*. The latter has been termed a novel of novels, and its chapters create a very postmodern synthesis of history retold through Muñoz Molina's fictive lens. The first work is much more an autobiography, but it is interesting to analyze his discourse there in a manner similar to what we have done above in the case of *Ventanas*... As an example, we might consider the following passage:

Habíamos subido a aquel tren en una noche que enseguida nos pareció remota, y a medida que la mañana avanzaba por los descampados de la Mancha, de un color pardo oscuro y sin vegetación en octubre, con una inhumanidad horizontal como de aparcamientos norteamericanos, a medida que la luz del día nos aliviaba del aturdimiento de no haber dormido, nos dábamos cuenta de que de verdad íbamos al ejército, y salvo algunos imbéciles irreparables que ya se sabían todas las bromas y todas las cabronadas militares y desayunaban cubata caliente de ginebra de garrafa y coca cola apócrifa, a los demás, casi a todos, nos entraba una palidez tétrica y meditativa, como presos que se quedan callados con las manos esposadas entre las rodillas y la espalda contra la chapa del furgón policial... (53)

If there is a difference between the two first-person narratives, and I believe there is, it is that the narrator of *Ardor guerrero* is an autobiographical I, while the narrator of *Ventanas...* is much more a fictitious Antonio Muñoz Molina, created by the author of the same name, in a sense a close relative of that Manuel of *El jinete polaco* who drew so much from the real life experience of his author without being one and the same person. But in both cases, what the reader encounters is a writer who creates, to a greater or lesser degree, a written version of the self, who through a metonymical process steadily and smoothly glides away from the non-fiction source until it reaches a level of fiction that no longer depends upon the original referent. This approach to writing the self is not new, and can be found in other texts that take place in New York. Henry Miller was a master in leading the reader gradually, in a style akin to magical realism, from a perfectly acceptable scene (in the sense of verisimilitude) to a final passage that makes one realize that somewhere along the way what we might call reality has been transformed into unreality. In a narrative structure similar to that of *Ventanas...*, Miller can do this because his narrator is an invented character named Henry Miller who has replaced the author of the same name. An example of Muñoz Molina's similar conversion of reality into fiction is found in chapter fifty-seven, where he describes a street drummer:

Al salir del metro cerca de Times Square un escándalo de tambores africanos estremece el aire y retumba con ecos multiplicados en los muros de ladrillo oscuro del otro lado de la calle 42.

Y entonces veo a un negro sentado sobre una caja vacía de cerveza, rodeado como por los objetos de un vertedero o de una

caótica chamarilería. Es un hombre solo y toca una música en la que cabe el tumulto de toda una banda de percusiones tropicales, y la hace con esos objetos dispersos igual que Picasso hacía una cabeza de toro o una cabra preñada con los despojos más inservibles de un almacén de chatarras. Toca como en trance, sudando, con los ojos cerrados, pero los entreabre un segundo cuando me inclino para dejar un dólar en el cubo de plástico de las propinas. Sus largos brazos abarcan la multiplicación de los objetos resonantes que ha organizado a su alrededor; una cesta de alambre de las que se ponen delante del manillar de las bicicletas, un carrito entero de supermercado, una bombona pequeña de butano, un cubo de latón, varios cubos de plástico puestos boca abajo, un trozo de persiana metálica, una tubería de plomo, el cubo de una rueda de carrito de niño, el de una rueda de coche, la tapa de madera de una máquina de escribir antigua, una papelería de plástico, un abanico de varillas de paraguas, una hilera de botellas de diversos tamaños, una lámina flexible de acero. (227-28) ⁵

This rambling quote is without doubt the text's best example of the fluid transformation from reality to unreality, whether or not that transformation is played out objectively in the text, that is, with the reader's total awareness of the sequence, or subjectively, in which the reader would comprehend the description as an exaggeration and feel free to experiment with it, rearrange it, much as Juan Ruiz invites us to do in his *Libro de buen amor*. In his interview with Nuria Morgado, Muñoz Molina refers to this ambiguity between the writerly and readerly task, when he states, «Si yo escribo no-ficción, por ejemplo en este libro [Ventanas...], yo no tengo derecho a inventar, no debo inventar nada. Otra cosa es que eso funcione como ficción una vez es para el lector. Los mecanismos de creación son los de la ficción» (298). The street drummer might very well have collected all that is depicted, played on it, or made use of it otherwise, but Muñoz Molina's style, either as real description or as the impression of a visual confusion, guides the reader into and out of verisimilitude, allowing him/her to read the drummer sequence on the level s/he chooses. In this sense, the reader participates in what David Herzberger, referring to Muñoz Molina's *El Robinson urbano* and *Diario del Nautilus*, defines as the «papel desfamilarizante de la escritura» that is

⁵ In his response to Morgado's first question (¿Cómo se gestó *Ventanas de Manhattan*?), Muñoz Molina alludes to the influence of García Lorca's *Poeta en Nueva York* on this book. Specifically, one might recall here the «Oda al Rey de Harlem». This similarity was pointed out to me by David Sherzer-Gea.

born at the time of writing of those texts and that forms «una vision que se ha ido desarrollando a lo largo de su carrera y que ha emergido como uno de los conceptos unificadores fundamentales de su obra» (46).

The reader must be careful to distinguish —when possible, given that the author's task is precisely to avoid this possibility— between the author as aesthetic creator and the author as conveyer of a social message. This distinction is brought home in Muñoz Molina's portrayal of the rich and poor, when he places them in direct opposition, separated by Fifth Avenue, New York's most famous and wealthiest thoroughfare:

Quizás no quepa en ninguna otra parte del mundo tanta distancia en un espacio tan breve, entre el resplandor dorado y misterioso que fluye de las ventanas de los infinitamente ricos y la sucia penumbra, al otro lado de la avenida, donde se arrebujan tirados en sus bancos los más miserables. (35)

Here we see a narrator who editorializes and poeticizes simultaneously. It is obviously tempting, from a poetic point of view, to discern the greatest separation of wealth in the world on the two sides of Fifth Avenue, but here poetry may weigh in more than sociology. The homeless Muñoz Molina depicts are horribly sad, but marginal figures, as opposed to the equally desolate poor, working poor, who are not marginal in other countries and are equally separated materially from their upper class compatriots. Muñoz Molina, without trivializing (his objective is quite the opposite) these homeless, sees them, in all their desolation, as heroes, in a sense tragically romantic in their struggle for existence in American society.

As stated above, the homelessness of New York's ultimate poor is the major motif running through this text. After an idyllic and romantic evening in Arthur's Tavern, the couple taxis back to the hotel and the author contrasts their sublime condition with «un indigente con la cabeza derribada por el agotamiento, el sueño o el alcohol sobre una mesa de plástico, sucia de restos de comida» often found in «cafeterías y restaurantes grasientos de pizzas o de hamburguesas que no cierran nunca» (52). What he has done is substitute himself and the unnamed Elvira Lindo for the Fifth Avenue rich, not in order to identify themselves with the rich, but in order to do what he feels the rich fail to do: empathize with the poor from their favored position.

These marginal figures will be a focal point for the narrator throughout the text, in various ways. Note, for instance, his treatment of the topic in chapter forty-three, again with the poetization of homelessness (necessarily, in order to achieve the desired effect), as gruesome as parts of the description may be. Reality is here converted into Muñoz Molina's personal vision, a long metonymical collage in which his own condition of nomad wandering through the streets of Manhattan allows him to espy desolate inhabitants in a manner of which the average New Yorker following his/her daily existence is incapable:

El nómada en Manhattan es más nómada solitario que casi en ninguna otra parte, porque estará perfectamente solo en lo más espeso de una muchedumbre, y porque nadie reparará en él, igual que si estuviera en un desierto o se hubiera quedado solo en una ciudad abandonada. El nómada, si acaso, se reconoce en quienes circulan tan sin destino como él, en los chalados y los vagabundos, a los que podría identificar tan sólo por el modo en que arrastran los pies rodeados de gente que cabalga elásticamente sobre los talones... (177)

The description continues for four pages, evoking every type of street person, every type of ethnicity. Once again, the combination of the reality of the street and the heartfelt empathy of the writer results in an unsuspected poetization of what generally is the saddest image of the city, a poetization that in no way reduces the destitute state of those described but that, through the poetic, the fictive act, makes the subject of that destitution palatable for the reader. Witness, for example, the following description of a homeless woman, which, in spite of her degradation, humanizes and uplifts her even to the point of creating a certain note of humor:

En la Novena Avenida, hacia la calle 54, una mujer gorda y no muy vieja se instala, en el filo de la acera, bajo una especie de tienda de campaña hecha con mantas o lonas, alzada sobre el palo de una escoba, sujeta al suelo con ladrillos, y está tan gorda que ocupa casi entero el interior de su refugio, donde se atarea cosiendo algo, fingiendo que se dedica a alguna especie de confusa artesanía, iluminada por una lámpara de carburo. El chamizo la cubre como un caparazón para su anchura fofa de galápago, y ella se asoma de vez en cuando y mira a los que pasan con ojos muy claros y muy idos, y habla sola, o reza, o canturrea tejiendo o modelando algo, y delante de ella, en una plancha de cartón alzada sobre dos ladrillos, hay un muestra-

rio de desechos que resultan ser los géneros de su comercio, lo que podría ofrecer el más miserable de los desposeídos en un bazar de Haití o de Kabul: un peine roto, sucio, con pelos grises enredados a las púas, un zapato de niño del pie izquierdo, un espejillo, un naipe de póker, una revista de televisión tan vieja que los colores se han vuelto amarillentos. (179)⁶

What begins as degradation transforms itself into a kind of wonderment, with tinges of humor, and concludes as admiration for this person's ability to survive with a certain dignity. Furthermore, as in the case of the street drummer, whether or not this woman and her worldly possessions actually exist slowly loses importance as the poetic importance of the passage develops.

A final variation on the same theme can be found in chapter seventy-five, which is dedicated to Manolo Valdés, an accomplished Spanish sculptor. In spite of Valdés's wealth and fame, aspects of his description fall ironically within Muñoz Molina's overall depiction of homelessness. Much like the street people, Valdés uses castoff material for his trade, as in the case of the street drummer or the fat lady on Ninth Avenue:

Si el artista primitivo trabajaba con los materiales que tenía más a mano, el ocre de la tierra y el negro de un tizón, el trozo de un hueso y las rugosidades de la pared de una cueva, Manolo Valdés, que es un hombre cultivado y sabio, se vuelve un buhonero y un primitivo urbano cuando encuentra el punto de partida de su inspiración justo en aquello en lo que nadie repararía, a lo que nadie concedería ningún valor: las cajas de cartón prensadas y empaquetadas en las aceras sucias de Manhattan, los tubos de plomo de una cañería que perteneció a un edificio recién derribado, los jirones de sacos que trajeron quién sabe qué mercancías de los extremos del mundo y que ahora se amontonan en el suelo de su estudio como los harapos en jirones de las traperías de mi infancia. (327)

⁶ Once again, Lorca's *Poeta en Nueva York* comes to mind, this time the imagery of «Paisaje de la multitud que vomita (anochece en Coney Island)». In *Caperucita en Manhattan*, Carmen Martín Gaité also develops a homeless female character, Miss Lunatic, but contrary to Muñoz Molina's depiction, Miss Lunatic, while at first modeled on a typical bag lady, soon transforms into a fantasy figure in Martín Gaité's adaptation of the Alice in Wonderland myth, and even when she strolls with Sara along Central Park West and they pass the homes of the wealthy, an image that is equivalent to what we have seen on Muñoz Molina's Fifth Avenue, there is no suggestion of the difference of wealth. It is not part of Martín Gaité's novelistic plan, given that her novel is directed to a totally different implicit reader.

Here, in a Fifth Avenue studio, the imagery of homelessness pervades. Does it reduce the image of the separation of wealth in an attempt to rehumanize the homeless through the comparison with Valdés? Is that the purpose of the author's own recollection of the junk stores of his youth? Whatever our answer to these questions, there seems to be no doubt that the author seeks to create an identification between the three, whether that identification humanizes the street people by seeing their environment replayed in a Fifth Avenue studio and Ubeda or whether it serves to justify the empathy with which a Valdés or a Muñoz Molina may gaze upon these people who sadly populate the streets of New York.

Chapter eighteen constitutes a clear example of the impressionistic style that lies at the foundation of the fictive element of the text. Muñoz Molina is able to begin this symphonic chapter with an idyllic evocation of the music students of the Juilliard School, an image which goes hand in hand with the musical style of his writing. The imagery is broken, however, by a telephone call from abroad that tells him of the Twin Tower bombing. While there is no reason to doubt this sequence of events, the important aspect of the chapter is the author's ability to combine two totally different registers and conclude with a subtle and seemingly impossible image that maintains the idyllic nature of the Juilliard School and Lincoln Center's cultural aura without reducing the weight of the September 11th tragedy. What this combination of two moods ultimately creates for the reader is not simply a vision of New York on a fateful day but, as we see throughout the text, a creation of an independent self, a self that gazes in a particular way with a particular style upon the city:

Al cabo de unos minutos el timbre del teléfono deja de sonar, y su silencio es el primer signo de verdad inquietante. Levanto el auricular y ya no hay línea. El cielo que se ve desde la ventana permanece tan limpio como todos los días más allá de la fea esquina de cemento de la Juilliard School, por encima de las terrazas de los edificios desiguales de Lincoln Square, en una de las cuales hay una copia a un tamaño considerable de la estatua de la Libertad. (80)

If one were to search for a particular note in this passage that would point to the author as a character who develops himself through his own writing, it would be the decision to refer to the «fea esquina de cemento» de Juilliard, a descriptive element that clashes with the idyllic tone of the beginning of the chapter. The replica of

the Statue of Liberty, however, will be the ultimate ideological point with which the author formalizes his identification.

It is important to note that even when describing the atmosphere immediately following the terrorist attack of September 11th, Muñoz Molina presents the reader with a fine example of the fluid musical style that he uses so deftly in *El invierno en Lisboa*. The writer's aesthetic register is always on a par with his thematic register; he is always faithful to the style that is found in almost all of his prose, and here that aesthetic register accompanies the climactic feelings that are caused by all the inertia-bound activities that occur while the threat of terrorism hangs over the city:

Cualquier cosa puede pasar, podría haber pasado, pero nadie sabe o dice qué, nadie formula vaticinios ni hipótesis, de modo que el miedo no tiene nada concreto a lo que asirse y la normalidad se mantiene inalterada, el lento glaciarse de los hábitos y los horarios, de las costumbres que mantiene viva la ciudad, el flujo de la energía eléctrica y del agua caliente por las tuberías subterráneas, el de los taxis amarillos, la gente atareada en las aceras y tras las ventanas de las oficinas, los vagabundos y los locos, los clientes de los restaurantes y las mujeres que se prueban zapatos de tacón o abrigo de invierno en las tiendas lujosas. (134)

In chapter forty the reader will find a vivid and extremely accurate depiction of Central Park as the author, wandering from the Sheep's Meadow to the entrance to the Great Lawn, conflates very different scenes and locales. What impresses this writer is Muñoz Molina's ability here to be absolutely true to reality with a style that is as poetic as one would find in the most inventive of fictions. It is one of the clearest examples of what I refer to as symbiosis in this text. The real referent is there and is faithfully reflected, but by the end of its reflection, the poetic result it creates is as independent of the referent as the referent is of its written depiction. This is what is tantalizing about this and so much of Muñoz Molina's fictive writing. Is his Lisbon, for instance, the Lisbon in which the Portuguese live, or is the Madrid of *Beltenebros* the city where Madrilenians live and work? One is led to consider similar constructs, in Juan Marsé's description of Barcelona's Gracia neighborhood or Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's *barrio chino*, both, while more directly in the realm of fiction, more historically and sociologically exact. Muñoz Molina, while admitting to an influence of the first writer on his early nov-

els (and denying any connection to the second), has always insisted on redefining the referent as a vehicle for the construction of the narrative voice itself, in this sense his personal response to a more socially directed literature.

In chapter sixty-nine we find another example of Muñoz Molina's symbiotic style, the last we will quote because our argument should be clear by this point. The lines he devotes to Dee Dee Bridgewater constitute a perfect example of the conflation of objective reality and authorial subjectivity. She is there, but through his novelized version of his experience of her, and this experience is contrasted with the conclusion of the previous chapter, in which Muñoz Molina, from the perspective of a lonely Javier Bardem, portrays a more depressing vision of New York at night:

Le parecía que hacía mucho que se estrenó la película en el Lincoln Center y que sus compañeros se volvieron a España. Nueva York, cada noche, no era la ciudad de las películas, de los libros y de las postales, la resonancia tentadora de su propio nombre, sino estrictamente el espacio cerrado de esa habitación, el fluorescente demasiado intenso del cuarto de baño, el roce pegajoso de la cortina de la ducha contra la piel mojada. Nueva York era el televisor encendido a deshora, frente a la cama, el fragor de las máquinas en el patio al que daba la ventana, frente a otras ventanas en las que se entreveían figuras cruzando la penumbra, perfiladas por la fosforescencia de los televisores. Sin calcular la hora que sería en España llamaba a los amigos para escuchar una voz y usar la suya propia y se gastaba fortunas hablando por teléfono. (299)

In contrast to this almost naturalistic passage, now, in a night club, the author seeks to explain an inexplicable experience, much as San Juan used worldly poetic metaphors to explain the unexplainable. Not far from Bardem's lonely hotel room, Dee Dee Bridgewater, in all her sexuality, arouses her public, and among the many images that Muñoz Molina evokes, perhaps the most symptomatic, the most literary and creative, is found in his application of words and sounds in order to recreate the emotion he feels inside himself:

Pero no sólo está haciendo bromas sexuales a costa del trombón, también canta secundando sus notas entrecortadas o alargadas, ajusta a ellas la letra de una canción, deshace las palabras en sonidos puramente fonéticos para que su voz suene igual que el tan celebrado instrumento, enredándose con él en

un desafío de persecuciones, notas agudas seguidas de notas muy graves, gritos, maullidos, chasquidos convulsos de la lengua, jadeos acompañados por la oscilación de las caderas, por los golpes de los tacones sobre la tarima del escenario. (302-303)

The reader witnesses the gyrations and sounds of Dee Dee Bridgewater, but at the same time s/he is caught up in Muñoz Molina's own stylistic gyrations, that seem to take their creative cue from this singer just as in *El invierno en Lisboa* Santiago Biralbo, Billy Swann, or the real artists they are based upon serve as a point of departure for the musical style of that novel. These texts attest to the high level of authorial self-consciousness that exists in all of Muñoz Molina's creations, but this aspect of the author's prose is most essential in non-fiction works like *Ventanas...* where the referent would impose itself almost entirely were it not for the persistence of fictive or fictive-like elements in the style.

We distinguish between tourists and travelers. The tourist sees as a camera does, seeking what is in place and can be remembered. The traveler is more subjective, more sophisticated, searching to meet a given reality halfway and, in Hegelian fashion, create an *aufhebung*, a third reality, which is, in this case, not simply what the city is, but what it represents, and what it represents to the traveler. Muñoz Molina is very much a traveler, a narrator who has become a part of the very city he observes. He has crossed through the windows into the reality on the other side, and through his incorporation of himself and his various sensibilities into the depiction of New York, he has created his city, his New York, which, at the same time, makes all of us who live there question whether we fully understand the city we inhabit.

In the same vein, we might say that just as the author strikes a balance between the terrible degradation of the street people and his poetic perception of them, a balance that allows him to write poetically of this desolate humanity without one's losing sight of that desolation, he is able to write in general of New York, as a traveler, as a journalist, at times as a sociologist, but always with a poetic register that allows the reader to understand what s/he is reading equally both as literature and as testimony.

We return to the question of how to read this type of literature, and this work in particular, which, given the literary register with which the author, an established novelist, writes, stands above tra-

ditional journalism. If the text is not pure novel (there is, strictly speaking, no plot) and if it is not pure observation of reality or autobiography, one element that is foregrounded, as if by default, is pure writing. One might conclude, therefore, that non-fictional representation of reality and a fictional register meet on a common ground that is most understood as the phenomenon of writing itself, what Roland Barthes long ago called «writing degree zero».

When thinking of novelists whose work takes place in New York, many names come to mind, the most famous of which might be John Dos Passos, Henry Miller, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and the two Roths, Henry and Philip (and all of these writers, especially Bellow and Henry and Philip Roth, have had a definite impact on Muñoz Molina as reader⁷). But the comparison that this writer finds most interesting, because in both cases we are discussing novelists writing in a journalistic mode, is with Djuna Barnes⁸, and her articles on New York that were published from 1919 to 1925 in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle and then in book form under the title *New York*.

In what sense does Barnes write as an insider, as opposed to the outsider Muñoz Molina? Not only in the sense that she is from New York, but also because she is part of what she describes, as one sees in her «The Tingling, Tangling Tango...» in which, although she writes as a third person narrator, or at least voice, there is a definite level of indirect discourse in the character named Therese, through whom the scene is focalized. And the sarcasm with which the chapter ends —«we are interested to know how shocking society is going to be when it's proper»(49)— is Barnes speaking through her character, expressing how she feels —marginalized or alienated to a certain extent— within her society, as prohibition moves it towards an undesired propriety, as opposed to Muñoz Molina's more objective discourse, even when denunciatory and ideological, as with his depiction of the marginalized street people, an identification from without, written from a position of empathy, but crafted out of a feeling of understanding rather than true identification.

Barnes's chapter «Come Into the Roof Garden, Maud» is another

⁷ As an illustration of the author's interest in Philip Roth, see his interview with Roth in *El País*, October 9, 2005.

⁸ Djuna Barnes is most famous for her novel *Nightwood*, which was the object of much critical attention in recent decades when it was used as a prime exponent of the spatial novel.

er interesting point of comparison and contrast. Again we remember Muñoz Molina's penchant for music, for jazz, and the economic disparities that constantly foist themselves upon him. Just as Muñoz Molina describes the atmosphere in clubs in the Village or Harlem, followed often by a consciousness of those have-nots who may not partake of the pure enjoyment that music affords (or a consciousness of the difference between hearing music in the Village and in Harlem), Barnes, in her description of the roof gardens where people go to dance, is both tongue in cheek and conscious of class difference:

First of all, enter the atmosphere. And this, the atmosphere of a roof garden, is ten percent soft June air and ten percent gold June twilight, and a goodly percent of high-hung lanterns and the music of hidden mechanical birds swinging under the tangle of paper wisteria fifty feet above where, between guarding panes of glass, shine the electric signs, plus a few stars, of Broadway. [...]

The thing that is really lacking is a sense of humor. There are not ten people with a really good laugh in their systems in a whole evening on a roof garden. A sense of humor, of course, is never well fed. Here people scan the menu too often and too long to allow the humor to get upon its basic legs. A woman is a terribly good sport and wants to enjoy herself; her escort is growing old in the attempt to make it an evening of evenings. [...]

The fifty-mile look is here, too. Let me explain. People from out of town can't hide it. Even people no further away from home than the Bronx hide it very badly. The born-in-the blood persons, those who seem a part of the place, are those who live in the hotel opposite, or in the apartment just around the corner, or at most, no more than five blocks away. (150-152)

This doesn't include Judy O'Grady, who dances upstairs upon the roof in the garden of children's and husband's clothing swinging in the breeze off a back alley. It is those places about Broadway where the sound of a taxi is personal.

There is an obvious pose in Barnes's heavy tongue-in-cheek tone here, a sad irony that serves a definite function, journalistic and oriented toward a regular weekly reader, as in Rosa Montero's articles but much less if at all in Muñoz Molina's chapters. Where this leads us is to a view of Muñoz Molina's work and style, as opposed to Barnes', in which he is, as difficult as it sounds, equally thematic and stylistic, to the point that his personal and sentimental, ideological, theme, as much as it is genuine, serves as a conduit for his style,

while his style, monologic and intensive, forms an equally logical lead into his theme. There is, thus, a perfect symbiosis, as I have stated above, between discourse and message, a balance that is practically impossible to strike. In this case, however, one has the impression that the writer has created the theme without thinking about the style and discourse in which he was to present it, and then rewritten the entire book, with a sole view towards precisely the non-thematic, discursive presentation.

This last comment may be projected, in fact, onto the entirety of Muñoz Molina's literary production. True, many of Spain's contemporary novelists write newspaper columns —Montero, Millás, Vicent, Lindo, to name just a few— but perhaps none of them are able to strike the balance that Muñoz Molina has maintained from the outset, from his earliest exercises in journalism, a balance in which his journalistic eye enhances his authorial persona —witness as a case in point the visual nature of *Plenilunio*, the detective as daily chronicler of Mágina— while his novelistic persona gives a depth to his journalistic style —perhaps *Sefarad* is, for now, the supreme example— that is unparalleled among contemporary Hispanic writers.

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