

**AUTOBIOGRAFÍA DEL GENERAL FRANCO: PSEUDO-
AUTOBIOGRAPHY,
AUTOBIOGRAPHY, BIOGRAPHY AND
THE CREATION OF THE SELF**

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Autobiografía del general Franco by Manuel Vázquez Montalbán (1992) is a text that defies definition. Its self-reflexive nature and its mixture of history and fiction have led José Colmeiro to call it “historical metafiction,” a term that he takes from Linda Hutcheon (Colmeiro 251).¹ In this metafictional text, Colmeiro sees the use of the genre of autobiography as the subversion of the traditional view of the autobiographical subject. Making reference to Paul de Man, Colmeiro indicates that the text demonstrates that the “yo autobiográfico” is a literary trope that doesn’t have a reference in a reality outside of discourse (253).

Although the text can be analyzed in this fashion, I would like to explore another possible interpretation of the subversion of the genre of autobiography in the text. In the last chapter of her book *Auto/Biographical Discourses*, titled “Auto/Biographical Spaces,” Laura Marcus discusses contemporary attempts to open up autobiographical space for marginal voices in society. While the autobiography of Franco is only a pseudo-autobiography written by Marcial, the real protagonist in the text, I believe that the whole text can be seen as an autobiographical presentation of the life story of Marcial, who is really the voice of Vázquez Montalbán. In the following remarks, I show how *Autobiografía del general Franco* allows Vázquez Montalbán to open up autobiographical space and make his life comprehensible to a postmodern society with historical amnesia.

Autobiografía del general Franco is a first person narrative

constructed around Marcial Pombo, the protagonist/ narrator of the text. An introduction, the "Introito," and an epilogue, the "Epílogo," bracket a text that is labeled the autobiography of the dictator Francisco Franco. Clearly, the title of the novel, *Autobiografía del general Franco*, is meant to make its readers think that they will read a first person narrative in which Franco presents his life story.

As they begin to read the novel, readers indeed do find a first person narrative, but they quickly realize that it isn't Franco's autobiography. The narrator states that he is from a working class family and relates his experience as a university student in the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) and his incarceration for participating in protests. Readers follow the narrator's development into an intellectual and a writer and learn how such intellectuals as Marx, Trotsky, Freud and Gramsci have influenced his ideology. A reader who knows the background of Vázquez Montalbán might suspect that this autobiography really is that of the Catalán writer himself.

However, it soon becomes clear that the narrator/ protagonist's name is Marcial Pombo, who, unlike Vázquez Montalbán, has not become a successful novelist. Despite the obvious fictionalizing of the name of the protagonist and of the differences between his writing career and that of Vázquez Montalbán, the disillusionment with which Marcial responds to the capitalist, consumer society that was dominating Spain during the 1980s and 1990s is the same that Vázquez Montalbán reveals in *El pianista* (1985) and in *La crónica sentimental de la transición* (1985).

While Marcial and Vázquez Montalbán, the intellectuals and militant anti-Francoists, share the same résumé, Marcial and Vázquez Montalbán, the writers, do not. Marcial's economic difficulties force him to go to the publishing house Amescua with the hope of finding work, and because of his participation in the anti-Francoist movement. Ernesto, the president of the publishing house, considers him the perfect person to write about Franco. The format that Ernesto envisions is that of an autobiography in which Franco tells the people of the twenty-first century from his own perspective what happened in his life and times.

Indeed, Marcial writes Franco's pseudo-autobiography, but he doesn't follow Ernesto's directions. The text he produces is Franco's pseudo-autobiography, but it is filled with passages in which he as the writer interrupts Franco's discourse, contradicting it with other versions of the events described by the dictator. In these passages, the narrator Marcial presents in greater detail his family's as well as his own experiences in response to Franco's version of events. Besides his and his family's experiences during the period that stretches from the birth to the death of Franco, the narrator summarizes the points of view of other people of that time, particularly of intellectuals and historians. Often the narrator quotes passages from other texts, explicitly giving readers the source of the information.

In the "Epilogo" of the text, Marcial gives his manuscript, *Autobiografía del general Franco*, to the publishing house. After reading it, Ernesto, its president, criticizes Marcial for adding passages that contest Franco's version of history and for making Franco condemn himself in ways that the dictator would not have done if he were truly writing his own autobiography. By excising the passages that contradict Franco's discourse, Ernesto makes it clear that the purpose of publishing these texts is to make money, and that society has no place for the loser's version of history. He exclaims, "¿Qué coño le importaría a la generación del futuro que tú trataste de aguarle la fiesta a Franco tirando octavillas contra Eisenhower [. . .]" (561). For Marcial, the message is extremely harsh: only history's winners will be remembered.

Marcial realizes that the strategy of the dominant discourses of society is to wipe away the social battles of the past. Bitterly, Marcial imagines Franco's historic image in the future, the image of a man who did what was necessary to prevent Communism in Spain and who paved the way for the hegemony of multi-national capitalism. When the most brutal and repressive elements of Franco's discourse evaporate from the collective memory, the narrator knows that his life and his identity as an anti-Francoist activist, as a militant Marxist intellectual, as a son of a political prisoner, will no longer be comprehensible to his society or to his readers.

While contemplating the destruction of his text by the publisher,

the narrator again directs his attention to Franco, asserting, “Sin prisas pero sin pausas le estamos olvidando general y olvidar el franquismo significa olvidar el antifranquismo, el esfuerzo cultural ético más generoso, melancólico y heroico en el que se resistieron” (662). Marcial has defined himself as an Anti-Francoist, building his identity around the ethical fight against the dictatorship. When the discourses of that dictatorship disappear from the collective memory, Marcial in a certain sense no longer exists; he loses his identity. For this reason, I believe that instead of talking about the false or pseudo-autobiography of Franco, we can define the text *Autobiografía del general Franco*—as a whole—as the autobiography of Marcial, or that is to say of Vázquez Montalbán himself.

Instead of considering the text as two parallel narratives, one of Marcial and one of Francisco Franco, we could describe the text as an admixture of discourses that have come together to create the identity of Marcial, which manifests the voice of Vázquez Montalbán. As we will see, the writing of autobiography is in fact the creation of oneself in the present. However, Marcial, whose identity was defined by the Cold War and the Franco dictatorship, also needs—if his life is to make any sense—to bring his ethical fight into the present, into the postmodern world where such an ethical fight cannot truly be comprehended. Only by bringing into the present the discourses that made up reality under Franco’s government can Marcial (and by extension, Vázquez Montalbán) create his “self” and give his life meaning, a process which one can achieve by writing one’s autobiography. Only by having Franco speak in the present, and then by responding to it, can Marcial make us understand why his life has developed as it has.

According to Georges Gusdorf, an important inspiration for writers of autobiography is the need to recover what has been lost in their lives: “Autobiography appeases the more or less anguished uneasiness of an aging man who wonders if his life has not been lived in vain, frittered away haphazardly, ending now in simple failure. [. . .] So autobiography is the final chance to win back what has been lost” (39). The “Introito” of *Autobiografía del general Franco* becomes an important expression of this sense of loss, as it explains the need for

Marcial (and for Vázquez Montalbán) to write his autobiography. This sense of loss is especially strong in Marcial's description of his trip to the Soviet Union shortly before its disintegration, a trip in which he saw the complete destruction of Marxism in its former fortress.

Marcial's sense of loss also includes a loss of understanding that he feels in his society. In the "Introito," Marcial highlights this lack of understanding by talking about his son, a lawyer for the government who is attempting to reorganize the economy of Asturias. His son, ironically named Vladimir, claims that in order to make Spain and the European Union strong Asturias needs to change, which means getting rid of miners and steelworkers. When Marcial reminds his son that he had gone to prison for his support of the striking Asturian miners in the 1960s, Vladimir responds that the world has changed and that today the only solution is multi-national capitalism.

This loss of understanding reveals that, even though autobiography is a retrospective narrative, the writing of this narrative is a reaction to the state of one's life in the present. What we see in the "Introito" is a narrative that intentionally demonstrates that the text that Marcial is going to write, which ends up being his autobiography (of which Franco's pseudo-autobiography is a part), is a response to the world around him. Angel Loureiro, in his book *The Ethics of Autobiography*, concludes that autobiography is the creation of oneself in the present as an ethical and political reaction to an "other" in the present (15-19). Unlike Paul de Man, Loureiro believes that discourse does have at least some type of vague connection to material reality. He says, "autobiographies provide life with a form and a semblance of sense, construct a meaning through the indispensable mediation of always inadequate, refutable discourses" (20).

For Vázquez Montalbán, even though he decides to describe his experiences under the false name Marcial, the walls of the prison to which he was sent really did exist; his family suffered real hunger and real repression. A "semblance of sense" in the life of Marcial (and of Vázquez Montalbán) can only be created through the writing of an autobiography that includes Franco's discourse, a discourse that was instrumental in forming the identity of this Marxist intellectual from

the proletariat, in forming the identity of this anti-Francoist. Marcial understands that his identity depends on preserving Franco's most brutal and fascist discourse, the very discourse that the publisher wants to eliminate. At the end of the "Epílogo," Marcial directs his discourse toward Franco again as he recalls a horrendous scene from his childhood:

Tengo ganas de autocompadecerme. No sé desde cuando. Probablemente desde aquel día en que nos vi, a los tres, en el salón donde al juzgar a mi padre, también nos juzgaban a mi madre y a mí por haber perdido la historia, aquel salón al que me había llevado mi madre para inspirar compasión. Nos vi a los tres y tuve el presentimiento de que pese a las apariencias, nunca volveríamos a casa. Y usted allí, tras el tribunal, junto al crucifijo, su retrato, evidentemente trabajado para que destacara su mirada [. . .]. (663)

Through this nightmarish memory of coming face to face with Franco's repressive gaze, Marcial reveals the importance of Franco's discourse in the formation of his identity and explains why he dedicated so many years of his life to fighting against the dictatorship.

As a writer and intellectual, Marcial looks for weapons in his battle against Franco in historical, literary, political and philosophical texts. Clearly, the formation of Marcial's (and Vázquez Montalbán's) identity cannot be understood without taking into account the texts he has read, including the very texts with which he contests Franco's version of history. Michael Sprinker, using *Vico's Autobiography* as an example, notes that the books that one reads are very important in forming one's identity: "*Vico's Autobiography* is a text about texts, a book that originates in other discourses, an original work that cannot claim originality in the sense of independence from other works" (326). In the same way, Marcial's interpretation of the past and of his role in it is as much formed by the texts he has read as by his own memories of the events that took place. He constructs his portrait of the past in *Autobiografía del general Franco* with passages from a wide range of sources (often explicitly identified), among which one finds such texts

as *La barbarie organizada* by Fermín Galán, *Memorias* by Manuel Azaña, and the Spanish newspaper ABC. Moreover, Marcial often backs up his attacks on Franco's version of history by summarizing the arguments of such scholars as Stanley Payne.

The history of Marcial's family is another important factor in the development of his identity. In a way, we could say that Marcial's autobiography began before his birth when the fate of his father as a member of the proletariat and a future fighter for the Republic was being determined. Thus, Marcial's (and Vázquez Montalbán's) autobiography began with the birth of Franco, whose life shaped that of Marcial's father and that of Marcial. In this sense, the text is biographical and autobiographical. As Laura Marcus points out, "Recounting one's own life almost inevitably entails writing the life of an other or others" (273).

According to Loureiro, we should remember that autobiographic discourse is always directed at an "other." He adds that this "other" often manifests itself through the presence of textual addressees, always present in autobiography, either implicitly or, on many occasions, even explicitly. Giving an example of apostrophe in autobiography, he mentions Rousseau's *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques*, a text which is constructed "as a three-poled dialogue between a Frenchman (an emblem for his enemies), Rousseau (an impartial double), and Jean-Jacques (who represents the intimate, authentic Rousseau)" (25). In *Autobiografía del general Franco*, we have Marcial (the "intimate, authentic" Vázquez Montalbán) in dialogue with Franco ("an emblem for his enemies"). However, while in Rousseau's text, Rousseau, "the partial double," serves as judge, in *Autobiografía del general Franco*, it is the reader who serves as judge.

It is important that in the "Introito," Marcial is not addressing Franco, but an invisible person whom we have to consider as the reader. This section serves to justify his project to the postmodern reader before that reader has entered the text that Marcial has written. Knowing that the reader may not comprehend the meaning of his life, Marcial uses various arguments to justify his text and to convince the reader to continue. For example, he talks about the economic benefit of the

project: “Cinco millones de pesetas. Igual se vende mucho” (22). What we read in this “Introito” is that Marcial will write the pseudo-autobiography of Franco, an important historical figure in Spanish history, not the autobiography of a person who was among the losers in history.

Vázquez Montalbán mirrors Marcial’s ploy of hiding the true nature of the text. By presenting the text as a novel and giving it the title *Autobiografía del general Franco*, he is hiding from the reader the autobiographical presentation of what we could consider his life. The fictional elements in the “Introito” continue this important process of getting readers into a text that they are not expecting. Once the readers are finally within what they expect to be Franco’s pseudo-autobiography, they become judge of Marcial’s (Vázquez Montalbán’s) life. Marcial (Vázquez Montalbán) may be addressing directly Franco; however, he is looking back at the reader as he does so.

As Gusdorf explains, in order to write an autobiography, one has to look at one’s life from a distance, envisioning the “subject” of the autobiography as the “object” of a narrative (35). De Man suggests that we should consider that “the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life” (69). In *Autobiografía del general Franco*, we can consider the fictional elements of the text as a distancing mechanism that makes the presentation of Vázquez Montalbán’s life comprehensible to himself and his society. Lejeune, perhaps unwittingly, gives us a key to looking at autobiography this way when he tells us that an important focus of an autobiography is the “personality” of the subject (4).² The personality that Vázquez Montalbán reveals in essays, newspaper columns and interviews is reflected in the personality of Marcial. And, as Gusdorf points out, including fictional elements in an autobiography, to give it a “semblance of sense” (as Loureiro says), is nothing new (43).³

Finally, when we examine the structure of autobiography we have to take into account the needs of a marginal voice in a postmodern society. How is a marginal voice made comprehensible in today’s world? As Marcus notes in her chapter “Auto-Biographical spaces,” the process of creating autobiography is now being exposed and theorized

explicitly in autobiographies. Marcus emphasizes that many contemporary autobiographies “are written at the intersections of biography and autobiography, case-history and social history, psychoanalysis and oral history. These texts use auto/biography to mediate, or perhaps to intertwine, theory and experience” (274-5). I believe that we can consider *Autobiografía del general Franco*, in like fashion, as a contemporary form of autobiography that attempts to open up an autobiographical space in postmodern society for marginalized voices.

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NOTES

¹According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodern historical metafiction’s “contradictory ‘contamination’ of the self-consciously literary with the verifiably historical and referential challenges the borders we accept as existing between literature and the extra-literary narrative discourses which surround it: history, biography, autobiography” (224).

²Lejeune’s definition of autobiography is as follows: “Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality”(4). I use the word “unwittingly” to describe Lejeune’s contribution to our study because, as he works from the very general definition of autobiography given above, Lejeune develops a set of conditions that are meant to limit what texts we consider autobiographies. Most theorists today reject his approach to the genre because it would exclude such contemporary autobiographies as *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1975) by Maxine Hong Kingston, *In search of a Past* (1984) by Ronald Fraser, and, of course, *Autobiografía del general Franco*, the text we are analyzing in this study.

³The example that Gusdorf gives of an autobiography that contains a great deal of fiction is Chatcaubriand’s *Voyage en Amérique*: “We may call it fiction or fraud, but its artistic value is real: there is a truth affirmed beyond the fraudulent itinerary and chronology, a truth

of the man, the images of himself and of the world, reveries of a man of genius, who, for his own enchantment and that of his readers, realizes himself in the unreal" (43).

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