THEIR HEART BELONGS TO DADDY: *LAS HOJAS MUERTAS* AND THE DISINTEGRATION OF PATRIARCHAL AUTHORITY*

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Due to its admittedly autobiographical elements[1] and simple narrative voice, the first reaction (and, indeed, the most common, if early critical response is any indication)[2] is that *Las hojas muertas* (1987) is Bárbara Jacobs' personal homage to her father, in which the daughter voluntarily sacrifices her voice to reconstruct his authority. Any challenge to the paternal order is defused, it seems, by diluting the narration into an anonymous mass of "nosotros" who express themselves not only with a child's perspective but with childlike speech patterns as well. In short, it would appear that Jacobs' novel is an accomplice to the notion of female authors as frivolous, since her discourse, aptly described by Yvette Jiménez de Báez as "voluntariamente menor" (128) will not usurp the authority of "serious" male narrative. Nonetheless, this is only one of the many readings that lie beneath this deceptively simple text. For at the same time that the novel elevates the father, embedded within the text's mythologized rendering may also be detected certain discrepancies that, rather than privileging a single point of view, induce the reader to consider multiple possibilities that put into question not only a one-dimensional reading of the father but the univocal nature of official discourse in general.

Many studies have indicated that because the father is often less accessible, a daughter's relation to him is more likely to involve fantasy and idealization (Chodorow 80). In fact, as Jean Wyatt observes, "a girl's relation to her father trains her to idealize a distant and mysterious figure whose absences she can fill with glamorous projections" (27). This mystique extends beyond the confines of the family as the daughter must contend with a cultural configuration in which she is virtually invisible (Boose 20). In *Las hojas muertas*, the daughters occupy a peripheral position in their own story, as the narration is deflected and subordinated by male narrative(s) from outside. In such a scenario, the father's importance is such that it becomes associated with the original Father, as is suggested in the first words of the novel: "Esta es la historia de papá, *papá de todos nosotros*" (9, emphasis added). This notion of the father as a godlike figure is reinforced in the novel by a continual evocation of the past as an idealized Edenic period in which everyone was happy; a time so perfect that even fear did not yet exist (16). But the reader soon discovers that the daughters, like Eve, have been expelled from paradise by their father.[3] Why the daughters are banished from their

father's house is never directly addressed. Although ostensibly they had to leave because of lack of space, the family continued to welcome houseguests for many years afterward (13,32).[4] However, the possible injustice of such an arrangement is never posited within the text, since the memories of the novel are evoked as a child would experience them, without the benefit of adult revision. Unable to share the child's ignorance, such episodes encourage the reader to assume a more active role in untangling the often unreliable narration.

A careful reading indicates that discrepancies in the narrative are, in fact, glaring and recurrent. The novel continually reiterates the narrators's happiness as children (17, 23, 27, 30, 88) and is progressively insistent on this point, as if sensing the reader's skepticism. Though the statement appears at first without comment, it is soon accompanied by qualifiers that implicitly separate the childhood vision from adult consciousness: "*según nosotros* . . . éramos felices" (27); "*nos parecía a nosotros* que en *ese tiempo* éramos, *sí, de veras*, felices" (30, emphasis added). Finally, the narrators question the father himself when he remarks that he also considered himself happy when the entire family lived together. If this is true, the narrators ironically observe, such happiness must have been brief indeed, since the daughters left the house when they were very young (91). The reader soon may perceive a more wide-ranging gap between the idealized father that the narrators seek to construct and the actual father--often absent and indifferent to his family--that is betrayed by his actions. In one episode the children paint their pet dog and the animal dies soon after. The incident, reported with a child's candor, expresses no remorse; the narrators's only regret is that their father became very angry and punished them (22-23). The reaction of the father in this passage exemplifies yet another significant discrepancy in the novel. Although the narrators insist several times that their father never lost his temper, they subsequently proceed to recount numerous incidents in which some activity by the children or their mother sparked his anger (17, 19, 21, 22, 22-23, 31, 33, 34).

Such episodes have implications in terms of the children's larger separation from the father, since the narrators note their fear that aggravating their father would lead to a "separation" of their souls, so great that it would create "un barranco entre cada parte y que no habría puente posible que lograra juntarlas nunca más" (31). Thus, the daughter's expulsion from their father's house was at least in part related, in their minds, to punishment for their sins; in this case, the "sin" of challenging their father's authority by provoking his anger. Thus, they must undergo a process of recuperation to recover not only

the image of the Father but their own severed relation to the past. Ultimately, however, it is revealed that this past has been an imaginary construction, a trick of memory, since in reality, as Marina Anaya points out, the world of the father is a world from which "nosotros" is always excluded (70). Early in the text, the narrators mention how as children they enjoyed spending time with their father when they accompanied him to work, but then, in the same paragraph, they admit he rarely took them there and that, in fact, the youngest child never went at all (15). They recall that sometimes he would take them to the cinema, but that he would not watch the film with them, preferring instead to stand outside and read (27-28). At one point he concedes his shortcomings and says he is a poor father; the children, however, observe only that they cannot judge whether he was good or bad, although they acknowledge that he was different from other children's fathers (27). Despite the fact they adore their father, in many ways he is a stranger to them:

> no nos habíamos preguntado si era buen o mal padre y lo que nos caía bien, *aunque lo conociéramos poco porque nos platicaba poco.* Queríamos mucho a papá y [a] mamá aunque *a papá no lo conociéramos tan a fondo como a mamá* porque con él casi no estábamos y él casi nunca nos contaba nada. (27, emphasis added)

Although by the end of the novel, he has again retreated into silence, in the second part of the novel, with the children older, the father begins to speak to them of his life (41). Nonetheless, the fact that the narration presented through the eyes of the children has already been filtered through the father's idealized memory and the mother's adoring recreation creates an ambiguous interplay between the narrators's attempt to assert veracity despite limitations in perspective. Such assertions alternate between absolute certainty "lo único cierto es" (44); "así era and así fue" (71); and inevitable admissions of their limitations as narrators: "*en cierto sentido* fue así y no es así sólo porque nosotros así lo veamos" (51, emphasis added). Despite the narrators's attempts, such passages betray their presence in the reconstruction of their father's past. An illustration of this interplay and the breakdown of narratorial authority appears in the descriptions of their father's childhood in Michigan, contaminated by the idealized cinematic version of smalltown America:

> *Es seguro* que entonces no *fuera* sólo aficionado al béisbol sino

> que *jugara* con sus vecinos o con sus compañeros . . . o con los que trabajaban con él en la gasolinera que *es probable* que fueran todos los mismos y que se reunieran a unas horas en un lugar y a otras en otro en la cancha, en la farmacia, afuera del cine, con una cerveza en la mano . . . y *es probable* que con ninguno pudiera hablar de las ideas socialistas . . . . La vida diaria de Flint alrededor de 1930 era *más o menos* así pero en cuanto a papá para él *la vida estaba en los libros* . . . esta vida era la historia y la literatura. (47, emphasis added)

The assertion "es seguro" is immediately undermined by the subjunctive mode, followed by the even less reliable "es probable" and "más o menos." Ultimately the entire vision is put into question by the father's literary predilection. The correspondence between the father's imagined world and a recreated past may provoke further doubts about other events recounted in the text. The narrators seek to convince the reader of their credibility by affirming their father's relation to some well-known figures (Waldo Frank, Paul Robeson, Arthur Rubenstein) but noting that he "probably" just missed meeting Lillian Hellman when she visited Spain. Even if s/he accepts his acquaintance with these figures, the familiarity of many of the incidents recounted about the father's past may lead the reader to question his role in such incidents: from a passive reader he becomes an active participant in the famous Bremen incident (58)[5] and is named leader of his detachment in Spain (60). Such doubts become more pronounced when the narrators mention that the father's memory was stimulated by a television documentary on the Lincoln Brigade. The fact that there is no evidence of his participation in these events--his articles were confiscated by United States authorities, and his participation in the riot remained unknown since he was able to escape--casts further doubt on the extent of his involvement. The narrators absolve themselves of responsibility for the historical accuracy of such events, noting enigmatically: "Él lo recuerda lo recuerdan otros o no" (58). The reliability of the narration is further undermined in the second section by a conspicuously uneven perspective: for example, as might be typical of a small child's point of view, Francisco Franco is described but not named (58,63), yet the narrators use the term "fascism" and know the exact regiment of the Lincoln Brigade to which their father belonged (63). This incongruent balance of knowledge and ignorance, of fiction and reality, is a further indication of narrators unable--or unwilling--to differentiate the external historical figure of the father from the idealized one constructed from a memory contaminated by films and

books. Although it is not clear to what extent the narrative has exaggerated or altered the father's role, the uneven nature of the discourse itself underlines the tension between the mythical and historical lines of the novel, producing a gap between the idealized literary expression of the father and the real historical configuration.

Despite these apparent contradictions, throughout the text any facts that would cast doubt on the authority of the father are either diverted or subsumed altogether. The economic decline of the family is addressed only obliquely, and when it is, it is suggested that the father's failure was in part the result of the poor business sense he inherited from his mother (14). Although the relocation of the daughters to their grandparent's home could be perceived as the first sign of decline, the narrators maintain that they never noticed anything unusual until the parents themselves were compelled to retreat to the maternal grandparents's home (80,85). Likewise, just as the narrators must suppress details in their father's character that would undermine their idealized vision of him, they uncomfortably try to straddle a middle ground between attraction towards the father and a denial of the same. Although apparently still young when they left the house, the fact that in the novel only the daughters are obligated to leave may suggest the separation between father and daughter that occurs at the time of the child's adolescence. In *Las hojas muertas* the narrators allude to this ambivalent relation as they confess the daughters's interest in their father's friends (18) and recall their father would sleep in the nude in front of them and that he did not always close his bathrobe at the breakfast table (21). Finally, they admit the daughters's attraction towards the father as they recollect:

> *Papá era todo un hombre* y las mujeres de nosotros que estábamos medio enamoradas de los amigos extranjeros decían que si entre ellos hubiera uno como el del retrato al óleo que mamá había pintado de memoria de papá por lo enamorada que estaba de él ellas de ése sería del que se enamoraran pues de papá no podía ser." (35, emphasis added)

In such passages, the absence of adult revision functions as a means of retaining the idealized version of the father, untainted by sexual overtones. Nonetheless, the narrators are clearly reluctant to engage the issue directly, insisting--twice on the same page--that: "eso no podía ser" (35).

Nonetheless, the central conflict in the novel is perhaps rooted less in separation anxiety than in the narrators's need to reconcile their

admiration for the public figure shortchanged by history and their ambivalence towards the private man who denied them his affection.[6] This analogy underscores the conflictive play of obedience/challenge to the father's authority that the novel suggests since the image of the seductive father is also a potent metaphor for the cultural seduction of the patriarchy (Herman and Hirschman 109-117). Because such violation (whether literal or literary) effects the mind as much as the body, the daughter's conflicting feelings subsume her sense of identity and deprive her voice of its *author*-ity.[7] In the first part of the novel it is evident there was little communication between the father and his children and that indeed in his presence they were often ordered to keep silent (19,27,34). Similarly, the narrators in *Las hojas muertas* may seek to silence or downplay the contradictions of the narrative since revealing the truth could jeopardize their own recuperation of the past.

Faced with silence and the rejection of the father if they betray him by growing up, the narrators become accomplices to the patriarchal order. This complicity is exemplified by their ritual of feigned helplessness as a conscious attempt to ward off the loss of their father. Initially, the ritual is only practiced by the daughters (28,35), although at the end of the novel both daughters and sons participate (103): "desde la orilla se metían un dedo a la boca y se hacían las más niñas y le cantaban Querido papá te necesitamos, Querido papá te queremos, Querido papá te extrañamos para que volviera" (35). This song, which the children have borrowed from the film *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, is another ambiguous sign that undermines the message, since in its original context it exemplifies the grotesque spectacle of a woman unable to abandon the little girl role imposed upon her by her overbearing father.[8] The recontextualization of these lyrics in the novel underscores the rigid nature of power relations within the narrator's family. As adults, the children continue to assume a subordinate position as a means not only of reinforcing their father's authority but to validate their own happiness: "aunque sonáramos infantiles . . . cuando hablamos de papá lo somos porque *esto nos acerca a él que es en donde todos queremos estar porque papá tiene mucho que ver con la época en que éramos felices*." (88, emphasis added)

Ironically, by indulging their father in this way, the narrators suggest that his authority extends no farther than the confines of his own home. At the same time, however, this mythologized rendering of the father figure is also a means of questioning power relations since he is himself a victim of patriarchal authority. Indeed, by the third part of the novel, a subtle inversion has been effected by which the children,

although superficially conforming to the traditional roles of authority, have become the voices for the father who has descended into silence. Just as the childish ritual of singing at the seashore was posited as a means of ensuring his return, the novel's infantile discourse functions as a means of recovering the father, in his old age now "confundido como un niño" (89). This inversion of roles is further underscored by the fact that the room in the home of the maternal grandparents in which the father takes refuge is the same one the daughters shared when they were expelled from the shelter of the paternal garden (91). In this way, the motif of exile itself becomes a point of conjunction between father and daughters.

One of the explicit motivations underlying the narration, then, is to recount, in the father's place, the history of a man who fought the "good fight" but who was marginalized from society. Although he was not silent in his youth (48,54,55), after watching his friends die in the Spanish Civil War (64) and suffering a series of humiliations culminating in his voluntary exile from the United States (65,66,68,71-73), he descends into mute isolation. Finally, he removes his name from the phone book and asks his children to tell people he has died (84). Tragically, although once a writer himself, he has begun to lose his power over words, which no longer come easily to his tongue (98). Since his children cannot convince him to write his autobiography, they have reconstructed one in its place. In his declining years, the father becomes obsessed with a bridge surrounded by dead leaves, *las hojas muertas*. Significantly, he does not dream of crossing this bridge but dying under it, with the dead leaves covering his corpse. However, like the dead leaves cannot cover the father, the leaves/pages of the novel *Las hojas muertas* cannot bridge the fact that the world as the father knew it and as the children would like him to be immortalized has disintegrated. The use of plural narration and a childlike perspective, then, serves a dual purpose: on the one hand it sacrifices its voice to the father's authority; but, on the other, it destabilizes the veracity of the narration. In so doing, the novel at once admits its literary debt to the father--and father texts--and puts into question the univocal nature of the patriarchal order.

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*This article was made possible by a Faculty Research Program Grant from the Office of Research at the University of Notre Dame. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Interdisciplinary Program on Women's Studies at the Colegio de México (P.I.E.M.) and, especially, to Bárbara Jacobs herself.

NOTES

[1] Although Jacobs has defined *Las hojas muertas* as "biographical," she is careful to note the artistic transformation involved; the novel "cuenta la vida de mi padre. . . pero como toda invención sustentada en la realidad ofrece conjuntamente verdad y fantasía" ("Vivir la literatura en matrimonio" 182). Jacobs further encourages the reader to detect autobiographical elements by including epigraphs, in English, from her own father. Nonetheless, the force of such autobiographical elements is displaced by the plural narrative voice ("nosotros").

[2] Antonio Marquet goes so far as to refer to the character as "Emile Jacobs" throughout his review (69-70). Yvette Jiménez de Báez also identifies Emile Jacobs as the father (129).

[3] This association between the daughter's removal from their father's house and Eve's expulsion from Eden is suggestive both on a literal and literary level. In her discussion of *Genesis*, Lynda Boose interprets Eve's conflict with the Father as both sexual rebellion and the appropriation of language. The rebellion of the first daughter--Eve--occurs as she seizes the forbidden fruit from the Father and is expelled from the garden. Likewise, the literary daughter who dares to appropriate the Word from the father is an outcast because the "taboo on plucking/ingesting this knowledge of good and evil forbids the daughters from appropriating/castrating/incestuously partaking of the Father's potency and privilege" (55). The fact that only females are singled out reinforces this image of Eve, since all her daughters must bear the burden of the mother's "sin".

[4] In an interview published several years after the novel had been released, Jacobs explains that she and her sisters had lived with their grandparents "en la casa central de una comunidad de cinco dentro de un mismo jardín. En las otras cuatro vivían nuestros padres y hermanos, y nuestros tíos y primos" ("Bárbara Jacobs: El oficio de escribir" 1).

[5] The father's account of the Bremen incident and subsequent riot coincides neither with contemporary newspaper reports (*New York Times* July 27, 1935) nor with the version recounted in the documentary *The Good Fight* (1983).

[6] Jacobs admits the contradictory nature of the father, adding, however, that "La entrega del 'papá de todos nosotros' a su tiempo, a una causa noble de la humanidad, fue total; creo que un personaje de esta naturaleza tiene 'derecho' a ausentarse el resto de su vida de todo lo que no sea nexo con aquel pasado grande" ("Entrevistas: Bárbara Jacobs/Carmen Boullosa" 51).

[7] Significantly, the mother in *Las hojas muertas*, although acknowledged in passing as the primary caregiver (27) is reduced--both in terms of her actions and her importance to the narrators--to a secondary character. Her sole purpose, according to the novel, is to ensure her husband's happiness (21) and to elevate him, through her stories, in the eyes of the children. In the process, the narrators insist that the father had a "firm character," while the mother is dismissed as fragile and weak (30) although events of the narration contradict this view. As a prodigious reader and a writer himself, the father becomes a literary model to whom the narrators are indebted, while the mother's reading in the novel is limited to cookbooks. Likewise, although the daughters grow up in their maternal grandparents's home, these figures are nearly invisible in the narrative, whereas relatives from their father's side of the family are named and described at length, even though they live in the United States.

[8] The lyrics of the original text are as follows: "I've written a letter to Daddy/ His address is heaven above/ I've written: '*Dear Daddy, we miss you and wish you were with us to love.*'/ Instead of a stamp I put kisses/ The postman says that's best to do/ I've written a letter to daddy/ Saying 'I love you'" (*Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, emphasis added). Like the daughters in the novel, the protagonist of the film attempts to revise her past, choosing to avoid the unpleasant memories and to emphasize the happy ones, such as dancing for her father on the beach. However, as Jacobs herself notes, the relation between the song and the novel does not necessarily extend to the film itself (unpublished interview with author, June 12, 1994).

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