

CHAPTER NINE

AN INTIMATE HELL: ROSA BELTRÁN'S *EL PARAÍSO QUE FUIMOS*

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'Paradise' is one of Rosa Beltrán's most favoured metaphors, but it always seems to appear between imaginary quotation marks: a lovingly sardonic expression in keeping with her generally ironic turn-of-the-millennial take on recent history. Thus, for example, in 1998, while in the process of writing her 2002 novel, *El paraíso que fuimos* (We were paradise) she published an article in *La jornada* that at the same time reminds us of this obsession, and also looks ahead to her fictional project by anticipating the title of the later novel. 'Susan Sontag: El paraíso que fuimos' (Susan Sontag: We were paradise) offers a commentary on the US culture critic's classic work, *Against Interpretation* (1966), and does so with the same organising image that Beltrán later uses for her novel as well.

This is a concept, furthermore, that is already familiar to us from her Ph.D thesis, later published as the scholarly book, *América sin americanismos* (America without Americanisms), where the first chapter is entitled 'Paraísos inubicables' (Unlocatable Paradises). That study as a whole traces the relation between the philosophical conceptualisation of this continent and idea of paradise in western thought, by exploring its history through utopic and apocalyptic versions, to resolve in an explicitly feminine take on the project of utopianism at the end of the millennium. In that book she comments on 'la imposibilidad de trascender los viejos paradigmas discursivos'

(‘the impossibility of transcending old discursive paradigms’) that have determined the discussion about the continent of America through the middle of the twentieth century (16), and suggests that this image of America as

un edén mágico, y en nuestras latitudes, tropical (...) nos confirma la improbable sospecha de que aún existe el Paraíso. Por más que como Colón en su momento, todavía no hayamos encontrado su exacto domicilio (18).

(a magical Eden, and in our latitudes, a tropical one ...) confirms for us the improbable suspicion that Paradise still exists. Despite the fact that, like Columbus in his time, we have not yet found its exact domicile).ⁱⁱ

Like new Columbuses, then, Latin American writers have frequently engaged discursively with this expectation, departing on a quest mission for that which is by definition no-where (u-topos) with the intention of bringing it back home and domesticating it. By the end of her project, Beltrán suggests a paradigm shift that is taking place concurrently with the new millenium: ‘las mujeres escritoras (...) se han ocupado, cada vez con mayor fuerza, a dar una respuesta al problema de identidad desde la periferia’ (‘women writers (...) have been concerned, with greater force than ever, to give a response to the problem of identity from the periphery’) (151). Oddly enough, then, male and female writers take part in a strange chiasmatic choreography. As the men go out to find paradise, hunt it down, and bring it home, women writers – stereotypically confined to the domestic realm – stay home and confer, on the periphery of the quest, which is at the same time the hunt’s ultimate home. In this way, home becomes the periphery of this quest, and the archetypal last place to look. Startlingly, paradise too is located where the writer least expects it, not in some undiscovered geography, but *mutatis mutandi*, right under their noses all along.

And while it is, perhaps, still impossible to imagine ‘America’ without its trailing history of exploration and paradisiacal expectations, Beltrán’s feminine, new millennial novelistic take on the project explicitly points to an invalidated

past ('paraíso que fuimos'), as well as making an ironic commentary on the discursive structures of thought that have allowed for the creation and persistence of this metaphor. That is, the American paradise is inconceivable except as a hoped-for future projection until, with a sleight of hand trick, it suddenly recedes into the distant past. Likewise, it is unlocatable in space until one realises that it has just vanished from the homey place where it always was. In this way Beltrán creates a vertiginous play of signs with the slipperiness of myth operating on each pole – paradise, history; nostalgia, nausea.

And yet, of course, Beltrán can return to this more nuanced reconsideration of the periphery, and of paradises lost and gained, because she has been licensed to travel beyond what she calls the 'bleeding border'. Like her contemporaries Cristina Rivera Garza (Ph.D in History from University of Houston, professor in San Diego as well as in Mexico) and Carmen Boullosa (now living in Brooklyn and working as a distinguished professor at, among other universities, New York University, Columbia University, and City College), Rosa Beltrán (Ph.D in Comparative Literature from University of California, Los Angeles, professor at the Universidad Autónoma de México) is in the vanguard of the new female Columboes, a comfortably transnational writer, one whose theory and practice of writing cannot be easily contained within the traditional frames of linguistic and national borders. Writers like these continue to pose a challenge to literary historians, as they continue to defy the expectations of proper womanly decorum, and in a larger sense their works serve as one way of figuring the impact of globalisation in the cultural realm. This is a generational shift that has been recognised and increasingly celebrated in the male writers of their post *post-boom*, new millennial, generation – e.g. Jorge Volpi, Ignacio Padilla, Mario Bellatín – as attested to in comments like this one, by Nicole LaForte (2003), writing about young, cosmopolitan, male Latin Americans in *The New York Times*, noting how 'the line between North and South America has become increasingly blurred'. One thing is certain: increasingly, the definition and practice of literary scholarship takes place outside of the old Anglo-European paradigms and, I would add, the confluence of

transnational writers with transcultural scholars is reshaping the way we think about literary scholarship and its objects. Yet, at the same time, while critics have celebrated the accomplishments of their male counterparts, they have been slower to acknowledge their equally sophisticated and well-travelled sisters, or to allow them membership in the frequent flier club. As Beltrán notes, when she travels to the US, to Europe, she is always met with puzzlement: stereotypes about what Mexican women are assumed to be like, supposed to be like, rub up against the evidence of her western education (2007, 10). She adds:

for as long as I can remember, one thing that was very clear to me was that the world was divided in two. The one of the 'doers' and the one of the makers, 'fable makers' that is. The doers were the men. The Kingdom of Heaven belonged to them (2007, 1).

If she speaks, as she does in this novel, from that fable making space of traditional femininity, she does so with the tools of a trained and internationally seasoned scholar to give it an ironic knowingness. Like Boullosa and Rivera Garza, she is a smart and elegant writer, who measures her work in its intricate reflections on power from one who inhabits its margins.

Let us go back to Beltrán's comments on Susan Sontag to find our way through this intellectual biography of paradise's vanishing horizon. Beltrán begins her article on Sontag by noting that the current, turn-of-the-millennium cultural sensibility has made the American culture critic's work from the 1960s necessary once again. We are, Beltrán suggests (2), afflicted by a wave of nostalgia 'hecha de los momentos históricos y artísticos en los que ya no creemos' ('made from historical and artistic moments in which we no longer believe'). Sontag is modern precisely to the degree that she is outdated, and the campy aesthetic with which she is so closely associated has outlived its obsolescence. Beltrán's contemporary nostalgia takes the form of resurrecting as cult objects the mid-twentieth century popular culture so elegantly dissected in Sontag's work (the glamorous

and over complex post-World War II modernists she piously eulogises in her many intellectual interventions; the 1950s-1960s energetic and anticapitalist pop culture she eulogises in her notes on camp). What seems most notable here is our inability to accurately interpret this nostalgic gesture while at the same time we cannot escape affectionately ironising it.

In pursuit of understanding, Beltrán harks back to Sontag's deconstruction of a mid-century critical enterprise that persisted (and arguably still persists) in interpreting a work of art, that is, in finding its hidden meaning and displaying it for a reading public. What is needed, argued Sontag in her seminal 1964 article, is not a discussion of meaning, but rather an attention to form, which Sontag defines as the arbitrary and morally unjustifiable qualities of the great work of art. Form seduces, sometimes against the grain of our ethic evaluation of content. 'Ours is a culture based on excess,' says Sontag in the famous conclusion to *Against Interpretation*, and she adds: 'In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art' (13-14); that is, she calls for a reality redeemed by a life of intelligent desire. Beltrán cites Sontag approvingly and adds that not only art, but also history itself has come to us as 'una serie de hechos imposibles de interpretar' (1996, 146) ('a series of facts that are impossible to interpret'), and presumably, also in need of a morally unimpeded, formal erotics. Like Sontag, Beltrán argues for a formal analysis of the everyday, abstracted from the bourgeois failings of moral judgment. This formal (as opposed to hermeneutic) analysis occurs through a quality of attention often associated with the frivolous sophistication that Sontag attributed to camp.

Jorge Volpi (1996), in his review of Beltrán's earlier novel *La corte de los ilusos* (1995) (Fools' Court), points to several facets of her work that are equally pertinent here. Beltrán deals with the past (in our case with the near past; in *Corte* with Iturbide's reign), but she does not, says Volpi, write historical novels in the strict sense. References to specific dates and historical content in her *oeuvre* serve as 'meras connotaciones metatextuales' (1996, 73) ('mere metatextual connotations'). Additionally, in both these novels there are gaps between what the characters know or think they know and the fictional world

they inhabit, gaps that unsettle a reader's determination to make historicising sense of a collection of private lives. What is left, is, in some sense Beltrán's version of the erotics of art, stripped of the familiar anchors of seductive content, indeed, almost any content whatsoever.

This gappy erotics is consonant with other reappraisals of the camp moment, and in looking back on the pluperfect of paradise, we need to keep in mind both Sontag's historical and cultural context, and the generational and the cultural distance between her and Beltrán. As Joan Acocella writes (2007, 42),

camp was an escape route from modernism, a return to the charm and glamour that had been banned by that austere movement. The purveyors of camp had been raised on modernism, and so they treated their pretty things with irony as well as with love, but, over time, in the work of many artists – Pedro Almodóvar is a good example – love won out.

One way of seeing this shift in Beltrán from Sontag's more austere analysis to her own more affectionate perspective is through the narrative trajectory she gives the campy characters in her novels, who parody traditional roles and genres, including the roles and genres that have consolidated from formerly inchoate movements/concepts like camp, which is so important to Sontag's vision of contemporary (mid-twentieth century) aesthetics.

Beltrán's twenty-first century revisioning plays with both the thin air of high modernist theorising and the response from camp, moments that are historically located in an indeterminate past. Implicitly, she focuses her work through the centre-periphery, reminding us how seldom women are given a protagonic role in historical narratives, how trivial women's contributions are made to seem in conventional national histories. And yet, her goal is not to reverse this perception of women in history. Following Guerrero (2007), I would venture that this novel, like *La corte de los ilusos* offers a send up of the 'lite lit' associated with women writers, centring on forms and concerns typically dismissed as trivial, but with a campy,

technically complex and lovingly ironic perspective: ‘Beltrán’s novel thereby makes the outer peel of the peripheral, ‘feminine’ domestic side of history to be equally nutritious (and intellectually satisfying) as the central core’ (Guerrero, 5). Her work comes back again and again to the multiple perspectives on ‘truth,’ on the ways knowing is shaped through the acknowledgment of the effects of gender on histories, on the ways forgetting shapes narrative, on how irony and desire and love (or their lack) propel affective interpretations.

The first paragraph of *El paraíso que fuimos* comments on the silences and gaps that define family relationships, often more profoundly than what is said aloud: ‘Se decía cualquier cosa con tal de no decir lo que queríamos y no podíamos decir: se nos había olvidado cómo nombrar las cosas’ (9) (‘they said anything to avoid saying what we wanted and couldn’t say; we had forgotten how to name things’). Importantly, the novel is consistently told through the perspective of this limited, plural narrator, the ‘nos’ that is composed of those of the siblings who are in psychotherapy together at the end of the novel. Those not in therapy are explicitly excluded from the conversation, sometimes referenced, but often ignored, as in the case of the youngest child:

Ignorábamos todo acerca del nene, incluso su nombre de pila, porque nadie se refirió a él más que como ‘el nene’ y porque no vino a ninguna de las terapias (210).
(we knew nothing about the kid, even his first name, because no one referred to him as anything other than ‘the kid’ and because he never came to any of the therapy sessions).

The structure of therapy – the talking cure – has always given priority to what is not said, what is repressed in the psyche with dramatic and under-comprehended effects on daily life. Similarly, in this novel, the structure of the talking cure opens out not onto the revelation that will resolve the case, but rather the revelation that there are gaps in the narrative, that silences are often more telling than the words on the page.

Later, the narrative 'we' generalises from the family situation to a national one, so that what is not said in one space inflects what is not said in another: 'Para que los ciudadanos pudieran entender qué ocurría en el país, el gobierno no solo necesitaba recobrar su memoria; (...) necesitaba primero descubrirla. Dar con ella' (177) ('For the citizens to understand what was happening in the country, the government not only had to recover its memory; (...) it had to first discover it. Locate it'). The world that Beltrán lays bare in these concise, deceptively straightforward lines, is what Sontag might have called, from her mid-twentieth century perspective, a dangerously lobotomised view of society.

Nevertheless, and despite this profound emphasis on such transcendental issues as that of how to understand a nation that has forgotten itself, of how to define a family and a community that no longer knows or even much cares what is real or true, Beltrán herself remains true to her campy, ironic side. While she signals the loss, and the gravity of the task ahead, the kind of recovery effort associated with successful therapy – the recuperation of memory, of history, of a usable personal identity – is not a priority in Beltrán's world.

Just as the passionate political commitments of a Sontag or her cultural heroes (Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil) are no longer accessible to the characters in Beltrán's post-paradise, so too the affective energies are flattened out in the attenuated family relationships. One of the characters meditates: 'Convivir era más bien conmorir (...) Conbeber. Destocar. Sinsentir' (119) ('Living with is more like dying with (...) Drinking with, untouching, without feeling'), unmaking community rather than constructing it. Another sister, typically, notes that 'se le olvidó cómo saber' (98) ('she forgot how to know'), although she seems vaguely curious about this loss rather than profoundly concerned by it. Very quickly, she finds that the deep anxiety she had previously associated with the words 'no sé' (98) ('I don't know'), gives way to an unusual resolution of her problem: 'No sé. No tengo la menor idea, de veras. Y lo mejor del caso fue descubrir que esas palabras guardaban detrás otras casi mejores: no me interesa saber' (98) ('I don't know. I haven't the slightest idea, really. And the best part was to discover that

those words sheltered behind them others that were almost better: I am not interested in knowing’) – a defence of ignorance as chilling and amoral as anything in the annals of bourgeois capitalism.

In general, the narrative ‘we’ is content with the status quo:

en cuanto a lo demás, nada estaba aclarado y eso era lo que hacía de nosotros lo que éramos. (...) Y eso hacía que tuviéramos ganas de seguimos viendo en aquellas tardes terapias sin que a ninguno se nos hubiera arreglado nada (211-12).

(with respect to everything else, nothing was clarified and that was what made us what we were. (...) And that was why we were willing to keep seeing each other in those afternoon therapies without any of us fixing anything).

Repetition without memory or comprehension creates the grooves of daily life and, by extension, national history. If the reader of these lines is all too aware of the price paid for a lack of regard for others, at the same time appalled by and unwittingly interpellated in these cultural formations, then Beltrán’s irony has found its mark. Paradise was never so close to hell.

El Paraíso que fuimos is set between the dates of September 1, 1982 and December 31, 2000. It tells the story of Rodolfo Martínez de Hoyo, a soft drinks manufacturer whose product is in a losing battle against Coca Cola; his wife Encarnación, the perfectly stereotypical middle-class housewife; and their four children: Tobías, Concha, Magdalena, and ‘el menor’ (‘the youngest’). The novel alternates among all their stories, but the most important one is that of Tobías, who is both autistic – hence constitutively incapable of accessing any emotional register whatsoever – and, as if to make up for his lack of affect, a specialist in self mutilation. Tobías is generally considered a saint, at least until his eccentricities evolve to such a level that he needs to be institutionalised. Encarnación, a self-defined decent bourgeois woman, who would never permit herself access to her sensuality, nevertheless relies exclusively on emotion for her dealings with life, falling almost imperceptibly

into the typical illnesses of the end of the twentieth century – alcoholism and depression. Perfectly able to impersonate the conventional spousal role of heroic abnegation, she cannot conceptually imagine herself in any other way: as the narrative voice notes, not being included in any of her husband's thoughts or communications comforted her with the conviction that hers was a normal marriage (33).

One of the daughters confesses that she, in contrast, found stressful that 'no sabía discernir entre lo que sentía y lo que pensaba' (185) ('she couldn't tell the difference between what she felt and what she thought), another typical illness of the age, this one specific to young women like her, who all seem to want careers and independence without having the ambition to follow through on her desire, or the talent to bypass the standard routes to middle class acceptance. Her cure, which leaves her worse off than the disease, is a biochemical one. After many conventional therapy sessions, once the problem with Concha is defined as a serotonin-absorption deficiency, then she can be treated, she can go on to be successful in a career she despises, and 'sería la Nueva Mesías, sin paraíso y sin fe' (198) (will be the New Messiah, without paradise and without faith). If the women of her mother's generation who married young to a life of boredom and disappointment were no happier than their daughters, then at least, according to their father, they were living 'una vida verdadera' (168) (a real life), a normal life. It must be admitted, however, that the idea of what is 'real' or 'normal' has been contaminated by the surrounding discussion about the declining pool of real men as potential marriage partners, now that transgender people were getting 'la operación completa' (168) ('the complete operation'), thus subtracting themselves from the pool of available marriageable men and, worse, outclassing 'real women' in the competition for mates (168).

Meanwhile, by this time, Tobías, after many travails, is content to have the authority to turn the television on and off. For Rodolfo, Beltrán's narrative collective voice evidences the 'fascinated repulsion' (Sontag 1996, 75) of an anthropologist toward her subject; in the context of this domestic and feminine novel, he remains a foreigner who hails from another,

unfathomable place: 'el país del que procedía Rodolfo, llamado Sexo Masculino' (146) (the country from which Rudolfo arrived, called Masculine Sex). This alien being is defined as follows: 'Hombres. Los únicos seres de la creación que habían nacido para mirarse el ombligo' (167) ('Men. The only beings in creation born to stare at their navels'). And yet, of course, the naval-gazing has a point – the way that men in Beltrán's novel learn to be successful is by mimicking the style of success, by copying the gestures and attitudes of successful men, and hence gaining acceptance into that exclusive club (they are, in this sense, perfectly coherent, on a different scale, with their transvestite counterparts, who likewise gain realness through mimicry, though with a different object choice).

It can come as no surprise that 'paradise' is a trademark name and flavour in the business world. It is something to be marketed and consumed, and consists of a product full of artificial additives and empty calories. If, as Rodolfo suggests, 'El tránsito de la Edad Media a la Edad Moderna estaba entre dos manzanas: la de Adán y la de Newton' (63) ('the transition between the Middle Ages and the Modern Age is that between two apples: Adam's and Newton's'), his job as inventor and entrepreneur is to bring clients into the modern age con 'el único fin de proporcionar a los hijos de Adán el paraíso irrenunciable del sabor y el olor y la textura artificiales' (61) ('his only goal to provide the children of Adam with the irrevocable paradise of artificial flavour, smell, and texture'). Taking his metaphor the next step would suggest that between the Modern and Post Modern ages the spiritual temptation of Adam and the science of Newton's apple have been upgraded in Mexico by the artificially-flavoured autochthonous apple soda. And yet, with each sugar high comes a crash. Rodolfo's goal is to 'despertar en otros la necesidad de poseer un objeto que no vale nada' (201) ('awaken in others the need to possess a valueless object'), the conceptual equivalent of flavoured glucose. Likewise, each apple contains its fall; in a next inevitable step, local apple soda will in turn be supplanted by the televisual paradise promised to consumers of the ubiquitous transnational Coca Cola.

In Beltrán's paradise – lost before it has been found –, the country suffers from the same clinical diagnosis as her dysfunctional family. In remaking itself it loses some part of itself. Like camp art, 'it (seeks to) transcend the nausea of the replica' (Sontag 1996, 289), but it is no longer able to relate the emotional to the intellectual registers with any degree of confidence. The suggestion of an analogue between Tobías and the state is particularly powerful, but the link is formal rather than symbolic or content-based, created in a flamboyant discursive gesture full of duplicity and dark humour. National historical events merge with and are seen through domestic family space, as in this example:

El primero de septiembre de 1982, cuando Tobías se colgó, el presidente acababa de nacionalizar la banca. Los camilleros tocaron el timbre sin saber que el suicida ya había recobrado el pulso (...) como si no supieran que es México y no hay necesidad porque aquí no te salvan nunca los paramédicos. (...) A las seis veintitrés de la tarde, cuando Tobías ingresó a Urgencias, no había ya nada que hacer: el presidente había congelado las cuentas bancarias (...) (y) de ahí en adelante vivían en un país de ficción; el otro, el verdadero, se lo estaba llevando él a una cuenta en Suiza (44-5).

(On the first of September 1982, when Tobías hanged himself, the president nationalised the banks. The emergency medical technicians rang the doorbell without knowing that the suicide victim had regained his pulse. (...) as if they didn't know that it's Mexico and there is no need, since here the paramedics never save you. (...) At 6:23 pm when Tobías was admitted to the Emergency room, there was nothing left to do: the president had frozen the bank accounts (...) and from then on they would like in a fictitious country: the other one, the true one, he was carrying away to a bank account in Switzerland).

When we recall that Tobías is both autistic and self-destructive, a saint obsessed with cloning Jesus Christ, then the metaphor becomes almost too pointed. The president and the saint act in

concert, the paramedics and the citizens of the country are locked out of meaningful response, the opportunity for salvation and the country itself have been evacuated elsewhere: hope, truth, utopia are now to be found in a numbered bank account in Switzerland.

Tobías is also astigmatic (which, given his propensity to cutting himself, sounds all too close to ‘stigmatic’); as his optometrist says, ‘el niño ve de más’ (17) (‘the child sees too much’). He sees too much particularly into the holes in the world, which in this reflection, just before he is interned in the psychiatric hospital, take on a tangible quality in the spatial typography of Beltrán’s text:

Nada de lo que podía decirse poseía un mundo, aunque todo lo que se decía en el mundo hablara de él. (...) Y mientras menos silencio hubiera, habría menos mundo. MuNdo y mudo eran, pues, la misma cosa. (...) Pensaba en la ene de mundo. La ene no tiene nada: No, Nunca, Nada, es decir la ene es NADIE para que mundo y mudo puedaN ser (138-9).

(Nothing that can say itself has a world, although all that is said in the world speaks of him. (...) And when there is less silence, there is less world. World and mute are, then, the same thing. (...) He thought about the n in mundo (world). The n is nothing: No, Never, Nothing, which is to say that the n is NOONE so that the world and mute caN be).

This reflection is an interior monologue that goes unheard except by the reader. It participates, thus, in exactly the interplay of mudo/mundo that Tobías theorises, since its world building is – unless we read the book aloud – doubly mute, both within the text and in its projection beyond the written page. At the same time, the insistence upon the negative in this poetically-resonant passage holds open that particular space in a way that recalls the great poem by Wallace Stevens, ‘The Snow Man’. Stevens’ poem ends with the lines: ‘For the listener, who listens in the snow,/ and nothing himself, beholds/ Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is’ (54).

In a way parallel to Stevens, Tobías is drawn to the shift from ‘listening’ to ‘beholding,’ or in his case, from saying to thinking. The counterpoint of the ‘the nothing that is not there’ and ‘the nothing that is’, however, helps sharpen our understanding. For Stevens, the ‘mind of winter’ can be articulated precisely in its balancing of noun and verb: ‘the nothing’, an ineluctably embodied void, ‘is’, that is to say, takes shape and being. In a similar vein, for Tobías, ‘la ene es NADIE para que mundo y mudo puedaN ser,’ in other words, no one is the condition for the existence of the world and of silence. ‘No one,’ in this sense, calls to mind the no place, the u-topos, Beltrán’s abstract and unachievable paradise.

Calling ‘nadie’ into being so that the world can be is also an activation of what philosopher Denise Riley would call a syntax of interpellation, albeit in an unusual form. Riley helpfully analyses an analogous concern through her discussion of the ‘strange temporality of language as a kind of anteriority – the anterior future tense of interpellation where you become what, hearing yourself called, you acknowledge yourself to be’ (2000, 34-5). Her analysis explores how certain kinds of autonomous subjects can be constituted through negativity or abjection, through the wilful embrace of terms meant to be exclusionary, because those terms at the same time, and at least, constitute an interpellation, a recognised social person. Tobías, a strange savoir for a lost paradise – autistic, madman, mystic, a/stigmatic – performs this action on himself, in collaboration with the reader, through the assumption of his mute and abjected body as the condition by which the literal/literary world finds its way onto the page. Here we see in a nutshell the intelligence of Beltrán’s project, which combines high seriousness on the one hand with passion and wit on the other.

‘All Western consciousness of and reflection on art have remained within the confines staked out by the Greek theory of art as mimesis’ says Sontag (4). Like the US critic, Beltrán wants to venture beyond the confines of mimetic art. Her project, unlike that of realist narrators, is precisely not that of a mirror held up to nature, the clichéd mimetic trope, but revealing that the supposed mirror is at best a mirage. As she says in one of her interviews: ‘Todo escrito es siempre una

contradeclaración al mundo' (García Bonilla, 158) ('everything written is always a counterdeclaration to the world'). A contradeclaration and not a declaration; as Beltrán well knows, narrative is always written against other writings. She is, as a committed woman writer interested in finding an original form of expression, but she also knows that possibilities are limited, and that her contradeclaration, her antimimesis is framed by the declaration and the mimetic impulse. The figure of mimicry appears throughout the text to show its bankruptcy; just as the construct of paradise has to be evoked in order to be relegated to the past. In a parallel sense, for Beltrán the work of art is an experience and not a statement, an artefact of words to be lived/loved rather than interpreted or used for other goals, even the laudable ones of social reform. In Sontag's words, approvingly cited by Beltrán: 'Transparence is the highest, most liberating value in art. (...) Transparence means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself' (13). This stance signals a kind of intellectual catharsis that is simultaneously attractive and offensive, one that is best described with reference to an erotics of form. Contemporary anomie means writers like Beltrán are compelled to respond, even if the compulsion means self-contradiction. Along the way, we readers have to resign ourselves to losing paradise but perhaps, at least, finding humour in the loss.

Notes

¹Rosa Beltrán is a Mexican writer, journalist, translator, and professor of Comparative Literature at Mexico's National Autonomous University (UNAM). She received her doctoral degree in Comparative Literature from the University of California Los Angeles in 1993. She is the author of three books of short stories – *La espera* (1986) (The Wait), *Amores que matan* (1996) (Deadly Loves), and *Cambios cosméticos* (2006) (Cosmetic Changes) – and three novels: *La corte de los ilusos* (1995) (Fools' Court), winner of Premio Internacional de Novela Planeta/Joaquín Mortiz), *El paraíso que fuimos* (2002) (We were Paradise), *Alta infidelidad* (2006) (High Infidelity), and *Cambios cosméticos* (2006) (Cosmetic Changes). Her critical study, *América*

sin americanismos (Mexico City, UNAM, 1997) (America without Americanisms), was awarded the Florence Fishbaum Award and her critical work on women writers gained her as well as a recognition from the American Association of University Women.

ⁱⁱ All translations from Spanish into English are my own.

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