

Posthumous text

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Death and the press

During the medieval theocracy, death was viewed as a promise of social levelling: worldly inequalities collapsed and death made everyone equal in a democratic limbo: the bishop and the servant, the king and the beggar. If this fantasy ever really comforted anyone, the bourgeois society, which, through force of habit, tends to secularity, put an end, around the 18th Century, to any type of posthumous consolation. The press, a typically bourgeois institution, is a good index to assess people's stance on departure. So, let's carry out a brief analysis of individual death in newspapers, since this is the subject underlying, no pun intended, Txuspo Poyo's press drawings.

A first discrimination: a death notice is democratic; an obituary is elitist. The death notice is drawn up —if listing descendants and stating the time and place of the funeral can be called drawing up— by those closest to the deceased, relatives or friends. However, the obituary is entrusted to a specialist, someone who knows how to write well, who can deal with information and images, choosing them carefully, who may even know how to move the reader, but who has not necessarily experienced the death of the person concerned as a domestic issue. Perhaps the only form of an absolutely sincere and objective obituary is the death notice: information without passion, lists, a place and time to remember the deceased. Nothing else.

Because the human vanity of the writer, the survivor, often slips into the obituary. At best, grossly showing their intimate familiarity with the deceased "The last time I spoke to Manu Leguineche, in Beirut, if my memory serves me right..." Or at worst, when the writer's vanity takes over the entire obituary and he becomes more important than the deceased himself. This is undoubtedly the worst obituary, since it wickedly suggests that the deceased was a great figure because he had dealings with the person who wrote his obituary. Human vanity, as is well known, does not stop even before death.

As a literary genre, the obituary is essentially kind. A panegyric seems to be obligatory. The rule according to which it is advisable not to speak badly of those who are absent at social gatherings turns into law in the obituary genre: one does not mention someone who has just died so as to criticize them. The proximity of death is a kind of "vote of confidence" for the deceased. It will be necessary to wait some months or some years so as to make a more objective critique of their work.

Press obituaries show a photograph of the person, usually in all their glory. Always an image of the deceased, never a photograph of their work. Franz West dies, Walter de Maria dies; the obituaries show the photograph of the artist, not of any of their works, in such a way that many of the readers who are browsing the newspaper in the morning do not know their work, but can see the features of the person who did it, can imagine that behind that face there was a person who was able to create beauty. The case of On Kawara, recently deceased, is an exception: each of his works, dated with dark paint on the canvas, could serve simultaneously as an image of himself and as a work. Three years ago there was a major retrospective of On Kawara's *Date Paintings* at the David Zwirner gallery in New York. At the entrance, next to the first work he had done nearly fifty years before, on 4 January 1966, there was another one in dark blue dated the day before the inauguration, 4 January 2012, of a size similar to the first one and placed next to it. As if the beginning and end of the exhibition were the visible form of a life story. The artist who would not allow his being photographed, who strongly refused any type of cult of genius, had been writing or painting his own obituary for nearly fifty years of his life.

Someone suggested that the worst thing about any autobiography, what most frustrates the reader, is that the author never writes the end. An autobiography is a book without a final climax. The most the narrator can do, in any case, is to provide an epitaph, a short sentence written when still alive and which should help to remember them by. But the epitaph is like a living will, it conveys the artist's thinking, their stance on life or creation, but not the circumstances or the details of their death. Marcel Duchamp wrote his epitaph long before his death and it is engraved in the family tomb in the cemetery of Rouen: "D'ailleurs c'est toujours les autres qui meurent. Marcel Duchamp 1887-1968". What he didn't know —no one knew— is that he would die in his bathroom at home in New York in the early morning of 2 October, while he was brushing his teeth.

In an obituary, it seems that the entire life is summarized in death or perhaps that the latter, now retrospective, can go over the life of the person from their first steps. An obituary is a kind of biography written backwards. A text which starts from the end, devouring at each step the life it is narrating. In any obituary, the date of birth, the first steps in life, youth itself, are shrouded in the mist of a distant past. Whereas death is the beginning, the start, maybe, of a second life in immortality.

We already have that first discrimination which shows us that human beings are not equal before death in the media: a bricklayer dies and has a mere death notice; a great man dies and has his obituary in the newspaper. But, as I suggested before, the obituary is not synonymous with immortality, since not all the dead are alike. Let's look at another difference, another discrimination established by the press in its obituaries. This is the case of the third model I would like to mention: the death of a person who is so important, so decisive in their field that their death jumps from the mere obituary to the front page of the newspaper: "The Earth and Macondo in mourning. Death of Gabriel García Márquez: a literary genius", was the five-column headline in *El País* the day after the Colombian writer passed away. It is not an obituary; it is a global piece of news. The adjectives unique, universal, classical, endless, etc. pile in few lines of text and give rise to disproportionate praise. And the poor second-class souls, set aside on the obituaries page, are only left with the grief that their minor departure has coincided with another enormous, universal one.

But let's carry on, as there is a last filter on immortality. At the end of the year, between the 28th and the 30th of December approximately, newspapers try to summarize the year in political events, in scientific breakthroughs, in future challenges, etc. And there is also a section summarising the "distinguished deceased" of the year. 2014: death of Gabriel García Márquez or Emilio Botín, top-class deceased people, departed souls who seem to bring a headline with them. That is, another way of sidelining the rest of the deceased that year. Only some months ago, the same newspaper devoted a whole page to comment on the figure of the fashion designer Manuel Pertegaz or the singer Joe Cocker, but at the end of the year, at the moment of truth, they fail to pass the filter of the greatest amongst the great. Their immortality starts to fade.

Moreover, we must not forget that the obituary is a geographically and culturally localized genre. That the deaths of the actor Álex Angulo or the chef Arturo Barrio belong to a limited sphere, whereas those of Robin Williams or Lauren Bacall are global, and others, such as those of the football player Alfredo Di Stefano or the Duchess of Alba encompass both characteristics. Txuspo Poyo makes his drawings on sheets from leading newspapers, but if we check a local newspaper, *Deia*, for example, in Bilbao, or *El faro de Vigo* we will find a review on the deaths of a Basque soldier who fought in the civil war or a teacher who taught in Basque during the Dictatorship, the oldest shellfish gatherer on Costa da Morte or someone who played for Deportivo de la Coruña in the 50s. And as the world is really big, one wonders what happens with Lida van der Anker-Doedens, Dutch canoeist, Andreas Bjørkum, Norwegian philologist, Anker Buch, Danish violinist, Pierre Capretz, French writer, Guillermo Delgado, Peruvian footballer, Mi Pana Gilito, Puerto Rican comedian, Jacques Le Goff, French medievalist, Rolf Rendtorff, German theologian, Frank Illiano, American mobster, Wendy Hughes, Australian actress or Michel Antochuw, French-Mexican

cartographer, all of whom died in 2014. What happens to the little great men, the second-rate heroines, the peripheral celebrities? Nothing happens: they are dead and buried in their local notoriety, remembered only by their friends and relatives or, in any case, by some improbable scholar who studies the history of canoeing in The Netherlands, Norwegian philology or Peruvian football.

Vanitas

Death and immortality are two completely different issues. Death is the private act par excellence; immortality, on the contrary, is the public recognition of the work of an exceptional individual. But in spite of this being an allegedly categorical assertion, the idea of immortality is also —strangely enough— *provisional*. Moreover, the immortality we deal with at present, when the media describe so many things as unforgettable, historic, has become an especially worn out concept. Season after season we have the opportunity to attend the “match of the century”, “historic goals” and the like. At the same time there are “exceptional” artists and “unforgettable” figures whose exceptional nature is immediately forgotten.

I may not need to remind you, using a cliché, that Mr José de Echegaray was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1904, at the zenith of his popularity, but in fact he is now only remembered —wretched immortality!— as an example of a mistake made by a jury; or that Vittore Maturi —whose screen name was Victor Mature— was not able to cope with his innumerable engagements in Hollywood in the 50s and only half a century later is unanimously described as a stone-faced so-called actor. But this is precisely where the paradox of these negative immortalities lies: if Victor Mature had managed to develop some acting feature, even if a small one, that is, if he had been a slightly better actor, he would have been completely forgotten amongst a mountain of mediocre actors who inhabited Hollywood for decades, but it was his inability to act that made him immortal. Or if Echegaray had not written trite verses such as “O death o holiness” and “Run in pursuit of an ideal”, he would be just another mediocre 19th century writer, but it is precisely the awarding of the Nobel Prize what has brought about his immortality as a perfect example of a pretentious and melodramatic writer.

Someone’s immortality is an obstacle race which starts with recognition from his contemporaries but in no event ends with death. In any case, this is where the most difficult part of the race starts, since it does not depend on one’s works —one’s legacy, using the terms of the obituary genre— but on posthumous components upon which it is not possible to act: one’s farsightedness, one’s anticipating character, one’s resistance to fashion change, one’s inertia to join a revival... and many others which will be defined in subsequent decades; because if there is something clear about immortality, contrary to what it claims with its resounding name, is that it is just a fragile leaf floating on the rough waters of the *Zeitgeist*.

The first step for this race towards immortality is the obituary. Typically the obituary —that is, death— arrives when the celebrity enjoys a good reputation, although there are numerous examples to the contrary. Some of the deceased reach their obituary in a much degraded state. Jean Fontaine, “Hollywood actress” or Betty Page, “Pin-up model in the 50s”, appear on their mortuary page always young and smiling. But in fact their obituaries refer to people who were very popular in the 40s or the 50s and died in retirement at their home in Los Angeles or Carmel after years of strict anonymity. On American TV there used to be a programme in the mid-60s called *Whatever happened to...?* on the failures and falls of little entertainment prodigies, who had been famous at one time and then fell into oblivion. At least, in that programme, the survivors were still alive and could cash the cheque of their momentary resurrection, but they also knew that that television appearance would only serve to degrade even more their ultimate demise and their possibilities of having a more or less respectable obituary. At worst, the obituary is just a mere wake-up call before final oblivion.

For an obituary reader like me, these are the most interesting ones. If I read in the newspaper that Leopoldo M. Panero, for example, has died, I will remember the pleasure of reading some of his poems; I will even have another private moment with his character, his accursedness, his excess. But this cannot be compared with the obituary of an authentic failure; not someone cursed but someone unknown: Reading in the morning, while having your first coffee of the day, that Betty Page has died is like coming face to face with life. Discovering that someone you did not know has died, that a life which was totally alien to you has finished, that a woman who was once famous for her beauty but who you knew nothing about has died. This is the real vanitas of the obituary: that of the unknown who will immediately join the ranks of the forgotten.