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# Sex, the Body, and Human Subjectivity in Luis Gotyisolo's Erotic Novel "Escalera Hacia el Cielo"

Terri Carney

Butler University, [tcarney@butler.edu](mailto:tcarney@butler.edu)

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SEX, THE BODY, AND HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY IN  
LUIS GOYTISOLO'S EROTIC NOVEL *ESCALERA  
HACIA EL CIELO*

TERRI CARNEY

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BEST known for his tetralogy *Antagonía*, Luis Goytisolo began his literary career under the Franco dictatorship and soon developed a reputation as an intellectual's writer. His intricate and sinewy prose challenged readers to follow his narrators down labyrinthine paths of extended metaphors, embedded clauses and erudite references. Interestingly enough, the novels Goytisolo published in the last decade lack the narrative complexity and structural experimentalism characteristic of his earlier works. These 90s novels include: *Estatua con palomas* (1992), *Mzungo* (1996), *Placer licuante* (1997), and *Escalera hacia el cielo* (1999). Some might feel that his change to a more traditional narrative style indicates a compromise of his intellectual project and wonder if he has succumbed to the pressures created by the commercialization of Spanish fiction.

The publishing houses certainly play an important role in the development of the post-Franco Spanish novel, promoting new writers and popular genres according to their marketability.<sup>1</sup> Attracting the wider reading public becomes a primary concern, and this situation creates a new kind of censorship that disfavors the difficult, elitist novel and fuels a proliferation of genre fiction.

However, while all four of Goytisolo's 90s novels indeed embody popular generic styles, I contend that they work critically to inscribe the novelistic codes of the genre only in order to question their ideological premises. For example, in his travel novel, *Mzungo*, he undermines the

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<sup>1</sup> See two articles by Santos Sanz Villanueva.

cultural superiority of the quintessential white European tourist; in his erotic/mystery novel *Placer licuante*, he blends elements of both sub-genres in order to juxtapose two ways of knowing: one leading perhaps to intimacy, the other to murder/violence. In the case of his recent novel, *Escalera hacia el cielo* (1999), Goytisolo appropriates the erotic genre as a means to critique the model of human subjectivity implicit in the machinations of the traditional erotic novel, which inscribes desire as a dominating male gaze and an objectified female body, and selfhood as autonomous: defined against a separate and distinct "other."

In his 1998 study "To Hold and Behold: Eroticism and Canonicity at the Spanish *Fines de Siglo*," Wadda Ríos-Font convincingly argues that the erotic fiction of Spanish women writers like Almudena Grandes (*Las edades de Lulú*) and Isabel Franc (*Entre todas las mujeres*) challenges the traditional male-centered erotic novel that "situated woman as its object and confirmed her assigned role of passivity. . . this distribution of positions, the relationship between active looking subject and passive observed subject, structured the understanding of the erotic experience" (356). In this context, Luis Goytisolo stands out as a male author who produces an erotic text that, like those of several women practitioners of the genre, employs narrative techniques that resist the dominance/submission paradigm and suggest an alternative model of desire, in which the lovers engage in "mutuality."<sup>2</sup>

In *Escalera hacia el cielo*, the human subject emerges not as the quintessential Western "individual," bastion of wholeness and securely separate from others, nor as the entirely subjected "subject," determined by outside forces, but rather as an entity in flux that transgresses boundaries of self/other.<sup>3</sup> While the women writers featured in Ríos-Font's

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<sup>2</sup> Ríos-Font uses E. Ann Kaplan's term "mutuality" to explore relationships between female characters in recent women-authored erotic texts. The term suggests an alternative to the dominant/submission paradigm of subjectivity promoted by traditional erotica: "What Kaplan points to is a matriarchal order of subjectivity in which the boundaries between self and other that support the male gaze's (and the male erotic novel's) process of objectification are erased in favor of a relationship of commonality" (Ríos-Font 365). Here I extend Ríos-Font's discussion of fictional female relationships to include Goytisolo's treatment of heterosexual relationships of "mutuality."

<sup>3</sup> Paul Smith articulates the polar extremes of human subjectivity, represented by the "individual" (as autonomous and wholly conscious), and the "subject" (as subjected or determined by outside forces). It is noteworthy that either extreme model of the human subject ("individual" or "subject") requires a separateness from the "other": "In different versions the subject enters a dialectic with that world as either its product or its source, or both" (Smith, xxvii).

study contest the masculine domination enacted in literary erotica using appropriation of the male gaze and performance of the female character before the male looker, Luis Goytisolo's complicitous critique hinges on the omniscient, extra-diegetic narrator, who resists the scopophilic drive to visually objectify the sexual encounter through detailed narration of actions, and represents the human body not as the armor of the fortified "individual" but rather as a fluid entity in constant exchange with "otherness."

*Escalera hacia el cielo* takes place in contemporary Madrid. It is a novel about a circle of artists and intellectuals, of rich and powerful socialites, of hypocrisy and corruption, of dehumanized materialistic values. It is also a story about the transformative potential of the human subject in love. In each of the sixteen chapters of the book, the narrator focalizes through one of nine characters, providing us access to their conversations, their thoughts, and their experiences. Among the principal characters are: Beatriz Llorác, a 40-something, well-to-do art connoisseur who promotes new artists in her gallery and enjoys an open marriage with her husband, Estanislao, who insists that she tell him every detail of her affairs; Patrick Izaguirre, a handsome artist from Siberia, whose photographs of provocative landscapes of the human body are all the rage in the art world, and who works in a Spanish version of Wal-Mart; María José, an ambitious reporter who, in the process of divorcing her husband and breaking up with her boyfriend, meets Patrick the photographer, and begins a relationship with him that becomes the focus of the novel.

The textual representation of sex in this erotic work emphasizes the mutual exchange of energy and the lack of an identifiable border between lovers, thereby challenging the definition of the classic erotic novel, which Ríos-Font describes as:

A male author and a presumably male reader enact the gaze and the voice which follows it, directing them toward an other gendered as feminine and perceived as entirely separate. [. . .] If the boundaries that delimit self and other, subject and object, dominance and submission, blur, the edifice of this novel will crumble. (362)

These boundaries that contain the Western "I" and perpetuate the gendered drama of the erotic tradition are the target of Luis Goytisolo's critique in *Escalera hacia el cielo*.

In the following passage describing a sexual encounter between María José and Patrick, the narrator grammatically erases the subject/object logic of the sentences, choosing instead to cast the scene in reciprocal constructions:

los besos y abrazos en el ascensor, en los pasillos, ya desnudándose el uno al otro, comiéndose a Patrick, siendo comida. [. . .] abrazando y siendo abrazada, montando y siendo montada, . . . (116)

The subjectless verbs and the back and forth rhythm of the text communicate a mutuality that overrides the narrative drive to position the lovers as active subjects or passive objects. The effect created is a blurring of difference between the two lovers. The same effect is achieved in an earlier sex scene, in which the narrator uses abrupt changes in focalization. From one sentence to the next the point of view shifts from Patrick to María José, and readers are likely to confuse the lovers when trying to determine the subject of the sentence. Essentially, readers are denied information that would permit them to recreate a visual account of the events.

In the archetypal erotic text sight is the equivalent of sexual possession and individual affirmation. In their study on the novel *Las edades de Lulú*, Barbara Morris and Lou Channon-Deutsch acknowledge "literary pornography's tendency toward a visual aesthetic, its insistence on the complicitous gaze of readers and characters alike" (310). In *Escalera hacia el cielo* the narrator demonstrates a resistance to narrate sexual encounters, thereby denying the reader visual access to the scenes that we know are unfolding. The following two quotes from Goytisolo's novel reveal a narrator who defies the ocularcentric enterprise of erotic textuality:<sup>4</sup>

se fueron esfumando en un continuo atemporal, en una secuencia de imposible reconstrucción. (116)

Reconstruir lo que sucedió a partir de ese momento hubiera sido imposible, ya que ni mientras sucedía podía hablarse propiamente de un antes y un después de lo que estaba sucediendo. Hubo abrazos y besos no sólo al principio, sino durante todo el rato [. . .] le hubiera resultado imposible saber cuánto tiempo había pasado desde que lo dijo, perdida como tenía toda noción de transcurso. (109)

<sup>4</sup> Martin Jay employs the term "ocularcentrism" to refer to our investment in the visual paradigm as a model for Western modes of epistemological thought.

The narrator's refusal to describe the sexual acts coupled with the references to atemporality constitute an unwillingness to reduce the sexual interlude to a linear narrative of grammatical subjects and objects. As a result, the narrative denies readers the voyeuristic position promised by the erotic text.

While the narrator clearly thwarts the reader's visual consumption of sex scenes in the novel, readers do find detailed visual descriptions of the human body. However, as opposed to the version of the body as a fetishized object positioned by the male gaze, here the gaze is self-reflexive, either literally or figuratively. In these passages, the human body emerges not as a metaphor of the coherent subject, but rather as a locus of ongoing exchanges with the environment, as a living organism ravaged by the passage of time.

I read the physical body's permeability in the natural environment as a metaphor for the human subject's ideological permeability: that is, its susceptibility to the penetration of social forces that shape and influence our selfhood. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that "for inner and outer worlds to remain utterly distinct, the entire surface of the body would have to achieve an impossible impermeability." (in Ríos-Font 367).<sup>5</sup> In Goytisolo's novel, the narrator focuses on the physical porousness of the human body, thereby foregrounding the subject's interconnectedness with the outer world, with "otherness." In the following passage, the narrator follows the self-absorbed gaze of Beatriz Llorác, who contemplates her own image in the mirror:

Se retiró un tanto del espejo, lo justo para verse de cuerpo entero sentada ante el tocador sin más prenda que unas bragas de encaje negro. Repasó sus muslos con los ojos, su cintura, sus caderas, los pechos, el cuello, de nuevo el rostro. Se dio un último toque a los brillos esbozando una sonrisa. Podía sentirse satisfecha. Ya quisieran muchas, con diez años menos que ella. . . A veces se ponía histérica, lo admitía, pensando en que los peligros estaban ahí, acechando. Un proceso hormonal que se desencadena, un pequeño accidente de coche, unos simples rasguños en la cara, el mero paso del tiempo unido a bajar la guardia en lo que se refiere al cuidado de la piel, el sol, la nicotina, el alcohol, la dieta, los malditos radicales libres. (33-4)

<sup>5</sup> Ríos-Font applies Butler's notion of the body's permeability to open a discussion of how sexual encounters in erotic fiction can defy socially prohibited crossings of the body's fissures and apertures. I use it here as support for the idea that the autonomous stable self which undergirds the erotic gaze is merely a fiction which is always undermined by the body as a living, ever-changing organism.

Beatriz's visual inventory of her body parts recalls the mission of the erotic tradition: the objectification of the female body and the concomitant assertion of the male I/eye. However, when she generates a list of threatening external factors, like the sun or the free radicals, she interrupts a static vision of her body as an aesthetic object.

If Beatriz's self-reflection (visual and mental) challenges the prescribed role of the woman as submissive object of the male gaze, the following portrayal of a male character satirically displaces the dominant male subject of traditional erotica who would position her. In this passage we hear the thoughts of Martín Solé, an aging, chauvinistic novelist who pines for the younger, attractive reporter María José:

De pronto lo vio claro: no se le iba a levantar con María José ni ahora, ni más tarde, ni nunca. No tenía sentido intentarlo. Ni siquiera le apetecía. Todo estaba perdido. Ni el verla desnuda provocaría en él la menor reacción. Lo único que deseaba era soltarse un pedo. El problema era que, por mucho que fuese al baño, al prorrumpir, igual se le oía en toda la casa. [. . .] Y, sobre todo, tenía la necesidad perentoria de soltar de una vez el pedo. (101)

Defying the tradition of a voyeuristic narrator aligning his gaze with that of the dominant male protagonist in a visual conquest of the female body, the narrator registers a shift in Martín's position from disembodied gaze to sentient being bound by the fluctuations of his corporeal reality. This pathetic aging man with gas does not successfully position a female object; Goytisolo disrupts the technology of domination enacted by the objectifying eye and renders Martín subject to the inescapability of his own bodily functions.

Luis Goytisolo's *Escalera hacia el cielo* critically engages with inherited models of erotic fiction through the use of a narrator that eschews the scopophilic paradigm and erodes the notion of the autonomous individual. Sex becomes an arena for the free play of fluid and interconnected subjectivities, which are no longer primarily defined by clear demarcations between self and other. Moving beyond the bedroom, we might consider how such alternative notions of subjectivity might reverberate throughout our social structures to diminish power struggles and violent encounters.

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