

MIREN ERASO

### Concerning the Truth of the Useless. An Interview with Belén Gopegui

*The third Periferiak meetings were held in May and June 2005 in Bilbao and San Sebastián under the general title, Democracies of War and Territorial Futures of a Global Economy. One of the principal speakers was Belén Gopegui (BG). In this interview, conducted by e-mail, we tried to address some of the issues raised at her lecture and to investigate further her relationship with politics, fiction, the real, and writing.*

**ME** In your talk, *Concerning the Truth of the Useless*, the man leaning against the windowpane looking at the street is no longer dreaming about the revolution. When exactly did he stop dreaming about it?

**BG** The man in that talk stopped dreaming gradually, from a time a few years before the fall of the Berlin Wall right up to the present day. Ultimately, though, I think the lecture was about the human factor, about resolution, about the extent to which it is possible to get things wrong, in just a few minutes, and also the extent to which it is possible to do the right thing, to make the right choice in just a few minutes. A flash of conscience. My theory is that that flash could happen if there is a context to trigger it and reflect it. When the man manages to access that context, he dreams about revolution again, about a revolution which, to quote Cernuda, could also be defined as the opposite of a *Katrina* in a capitalist country: “a sea whose blue anger swallowed so much cold wretchedness”.

**ME** Your most recent writings contain constant criticisms of modern capitalist society, and there’s a certain nostalgia for the past, a time in which change was possible.

**BG** I don’t really trust this modern idea of nostalgia; I don’t think we’ve lost anything magnificent and I think change is still possible today. From what I can see, it doesn’t really look as if change was that near at hand during the transition<sup>i</sup>; there were people, not many, when it came down to it, who demanded change but as we all know, the PCE<sup>ii</sup> agreed to back down on the fundamental issues. The criticism always comes from a future position; it comes because people think there is a space for rectification. That’s my view. Then again, my books may have mistakes and they might inspire that ambiguity that resides in nostalgia. Book by book, I’ve tried to get away from any ambiguity as much as possible. My critique of capitalism is meant to come—and this is what I’ll try to do—with the optimism of determination but also with what you might call the optimism of need.

**ME** Some of your novels and films portray the individual approach as a way of facing up to the present neo-liberal landscape. Several of your characters end up abandoning professional success (social and economic) in favour of a private life that is less economically “powerful” but personally “richer”. In some way, in that transformation, they relativize, or even subvert, the options of social failure and success. But how can we stop wanting what we have, and what still remains for us to possess?

**BG** I think I’ve always depicted that “personal” approach for my characters as something which, if not actually political, is at least waiting for the political. I’ve never created that kind of character who finds a way out by growing tomatoes or making cheese—not that I’ve got anything against either of those activities. They’re characters who are aware that there isn’t any no-man’s land; the cheese gets sold on the market and today’s market is ruled by the large economic groups. I think that self-containment you mentioned might come about as a consequence of revolutionary change, but it’s not a way of achieving it. Capitalism, as Santiago Alba describes—I’d almost say demonstrates—it, is a victim of its own hunger; it can’t stop eating, it has eaten up what he calls the general assets—electricity, education, etc.—and now it is beginning to trade in the universal assets: the air,

the genome, the colour blue. You can't tell capitalism: "please, be a bit more moderate, pollute a bit less, exploit a bit less". You have to pick another system and implement it. And you can't achieve that just by good individual determination; it is a necessary condition that you have to organise that will; you have to organise it politically. It may not be enough of a condition, but we know that at any moment, a host of dormant stresses might be set in motion by a mistake, a catastrophe, some act which however insignificant nonetheless links in with another and another until it causes a chain reaction, etc.

**ME** I suspect that there will have to be a change in the education we have received, and the one we continue to foster, based on work and consumption. Perhaps, as Paul Lafargue suggested, it will come with the right to idleness.

**BG** I don't think you can educate a child not to consume when its entire surroundings—games, movies, and also the demand its parents are living under—all of it is shouting out: Consume! Education has to do with the question "What for?": how is a secondary school teacher going to educate those slum dwellers who know they aren't going to be able to do anything with that education? Educating means shaping, and the hole you have to fit people into is the hole of the survival of the fittest. When another law operates, then another type of education will be possible. As for the right to idleness, the question is who decides what has to be produced. In a capitalist society it is decided by chaos, which in turn is a consequence of the greed inherent to the large corporations; there are too many biscuits being made with harmful fats and not enough research projects that have a usage value and not just an exchange value, but no politician in any capitalist country cares about that: they are so afraid of planning that they have relinquished their position as politicians. That's not what they really are: how can you call someone a politician if they're not capable of making decisions about the things the country they're ruling over needs; someone who hands over that power to a handful of corporations nobody has elected and which are mostly not even from the country the politician is supposed to be governing?

**ME** In *Lo Real*, a portrait of Spain's post-Franco political transition, the common space you've talked about on several occasions has disappeared to give way to personal enrichment. And power is linked to the opportunity for success. What relationship do you draw between reality and fiction?

**BG** Personal enrichment as a basic motor of the traditional bourgeoisie and of what Jean-Claude Milner called the over-salaried bourgeoisie existed during the Franco era and continued to operate after that. That's why it's so easy to decipher the editorials in the mainstream media or the articles by the vast majority of columnists; if you read them through the prism of whatever it is that might benefit or damage their personal enrichment—whether it's that of the person writing or the company that owns the media—you can very easily predict what they're going to talk about, when and in what terms. I mention the example of the media because it's an easy one for people to recognise, but the same is true of other professional careers. What principle is there that opposes this notion of enrichment? There aren't many. The common space I mention in my novels, which might be seen to oppose it, is really an aesthetic way—a Greek, euphemistic, way (maybe that's cheating or maybe it's just strategic)—of referring to communism. It's one way of making that word heard, though ultimately, whenever you modify your discourse under pressure from your opponent, you're actually allowing that pressure to stop you from doing something. It's a dilemma which interests me greatly: you have to be cunning in politics, but you certainly can't act in a cunning way when it comes to the essential questions. To get back to what I was saying, though: in Europe at this moment in time, personal enrichment is only being opposed by a handful of aristocrats of good workmanship—there are still some publishers, perhaps some writers, maybe some doctors, and so on, who think that by doing a good job you can build a space which is safe from the hunger of capitalism.

It's a respectable position, but a residual one. There are still some remains left too of the work culture and concepts like self-esteem, doing your work well because it's a free choice and not a way of increasing the owner's profits, profits which in most cases would increase anyway, even if the work wasn't done that well. But none of these is a way of killing the beast; they only keep it at bay, putting off the moment when it will destroy everything. However, I think a mixture of survival instinct and collective and structured political joy could oppose the principle of personal enrichment, and here I come back to Jean-Claude Milner and the interesting thesis he set out in *Le Salaire de l'Idéal*. In it he describes how the nineteenth-century middle classes of private means became, in the twentieth century, a middle class which was earning more, in principle, than capitalism would be prepared to give them for their work. They didn't get that extra salary in exchange for their work—on the contrary, the more useful the work of many professionals is, the worse they are often paid—instead they receive it as recompense for their consent to capitalist power; they are given it as payment for becoming a complicit ally of that power. Now, though, it is easy to see that capitalism is being forced to reduce, and sometimes do away with, the extra salary it used to pay in high wages or special working conditions, as in the case of many university lecturers. If this process continues, the great buffer that capitalism had built up will collapse and though it may not actually turn against it, it will at least be a weakening factor. To put it one way, what would eventually call that motor into question would be the difficulty of obtaining personal enrichment without resorting to direct violence—today it's obtained through indirect violence, performed by others sometimes on behalf of the salaried bourgeois. To answer the last part of your question, between reality and fiction, I think there's an unequal relationship: I would say that fiction has a modest capacity to alter reality, whereas reality, as a social construct, has a serious impact on fiction.

**ME** In your writings you criticise established values, but on occasions you have expressed doubts about literature's capacity to publicise ideas that oppose the prevailing discourse. As Hélène Cixous wrote about books in *The Newly Born Woman*: "Everyone knows that a place exists which is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and all the commitments. A place that is not obliged to reproduce the system". Might literature be capable of burrowing into the system?

**BG** I'm not familiar with the book, and I don't agree that everyone knows that such a place exists. I like the rhetorical strategy of taking it for granted but it's not true: where is that place? If it's in the future or if it's in the imagination, then it's not a place. If it's in Cuba, for example, then not everyone knows about it. I think that a socialist country is a country where what we understand here by the economy (in other words, the economic interests of the large corporations, sometimes including the ministries of defence) is not above politics. On the other hand, the vileness is necessarily bad, but commitments don't necessarily have to be; for example, Cuba felt committed to the people of the Western Sahara and because of that it renounced its trading relations with Morocco, despite the fact that those relations were of great economic importance to it. I imagine the author was referring more to an attitude than a place. I once wrote that an attitude is a feeling that is thought. Cixous might be talking about the attitude of not giving in to injustice, the attitude of being loyal to a project of equality, justice and freedom. I think that if literature has any value, it is only because some texts, and generally not the best known or the most venerated ones, have tried to feed that attitude, and make it last, and give it space.

**ME** In relation to this issue, let's talk about a practical case: following the publication of *El lado frío de la almohada*, your novel was criticised for not following the line of the anti-Castro "establishment". What has your experience been? Has your position affected sales?

**BG** It's been an interesting experience because it's allowed me to have a certain amount of political discussion beyond what you might call the alternative but minority forum where

that type of discussion is generally possible. However I think that was a result of strategy: in this case, the strategy consisted of writing a novel with “literaturised” language and a series of pronouncements that came close to being ambiguous. As a result, I was allowed to speak publicly. That meant that I could then go further in the interviews than I’d gone in the novel. At the same time, it really showed up something we all already knew already anyway, and that was that the mainstream media never gives any real space—and by real I mean something more than token, more than just an exceptional bit of coverage on some particular occasion—to positions that are favourable to the Cuban revolution. Once they realised what was inside that Trojan horse, any chance of going on talking in the mainstream media evaporated. This highlights the limitations of the system we’re living in. The problem is not that you can’t defend terrorism; it’s that you can’t defend socialism, and by socialism I mean questioning private ownership of the means of production. In theory, you’re allowed to do it, but only in secondary forums, never anywhere where you might reach over ten thousand people. The PSOE<sup>iii</sup> is a capitalist party; nobody inside or outside the party would dream of claiming otherwise. The United Left<sup>iv</sup>, at the moment, is a party that tries to “improve” the conditions of capitalism: in other words, it’s also a capitalist party. There’s no debate about the system we’re living in, either in parliament or in the mainstream media. As for your question about sales, I have an average sales figure for nearly all my novels, and that has remained constant; the controversy might have helped sell a couple of thousand more copies, but I think in the end it just meant that they sold faster: in the long run, I’ll end up selling more or less the same number as other books, though I imagine there’s probably been a shift in the readership, with new readers coming in. So it would be interesting to see the impact of the controversy in the long term; to see what sort of discussion there is when I publish my next novel, if I write another one: will people talk about politics?; will they talk about the form?; will they use the form to talk about politics?

**ME** In that sense, you could also talk about copyright and intellectual property. On a number of occasions you’ve said you’re in favour of the free distribution of contents. How do you view that idea from the position of a writer living off her book sales?

**BG** I think Copyleft is an essential idea, and I want to try to have my next book published under the Copyleft system. Copyleft, though, doesn’t affect the sale of the books: it’s a very small step. What I’d really like to see is the complete abolition of copyright, but at the same time I’d like to be able to earn a living. I’d like to be able to live off my work, just like anyone else. I don’t see why so-called “intellectual” work should be governed by a different system. But that abolition of copyright should occur within a system that will allow writers to live, like any other citizen, without exploiting or being exploited.

**ME** Psychology, physics, politics, geography and history are some of the disciplines you’ve worked on in your novels. They intersect with history and with the emotions of your characters, who—as you put it—make, know, imagine and obtain. How do you construct your novels?

**BG** I don’t have a method; I normally try to answer some question through the narration, and if I’ve taken on those disciplines you mentioned it’s because I believe that when you’re dealing with characters who work, you shouldn’t limit yourself to some passing anecdotal reference to their work—you have to know what happens in the place they work and what happens during their work time, which is living time. A lot of today’s narrative has been privatised; not only has it left out militant politics, it’s withdrawn to the spheres of family conflict or meta-literary fantasies. As I see it, those fields aren’t enough, and they can’t be viewed in isolation from day-to-day life; the fantasies and the family conflicts vary depending on the pressure to earn a living. Even that expression “earning a living”<sup>v</sup>, is a terrible one, however colloquial it may be; it just shows that you can’t ignore the

conditions of exploitation under which people are struggling to win that fight. What I'm wondering now is how I'm going to construct my next novel and though I'm still only thinking about it, what I see increasingly clearly is that the rules of what is considered to be a good novel are rigged, like loaded dice, so you have to start by thinking from some place that starts before those rules.

**ME** The difficulty of saying "I", which Christa Wolf alludes to in *The Quest for Christa T.*, is a subject that's been debated by feminist critics because of its relationship with women's traditional absence of authority in society. In one way or another, this is a subject which is present in all writing, including yours. Let's go for a moment to the end of the first chapter of *La escala de los mapas*, where the subject's authority is suddenly disclosed, surprising the reader and unequivocally raising the idea of the multiplicity of the "I", the narrator and protagonist. This ambivalence marks the entire reading: it no longer considers the difficulty of saying "I", because it's assumed, but instead it plays with it.

**BG** The condition of being a woman is not unrelated to the class struggle; indeed, it transversely intersects that struggle. Being a woman means having a greater knowledge of exploitation than a man would under the same conditions. To quote Juan Carlos Rodríguez, the difficulty of saying "I" comes from the *I am, I am what?*; in capitalism most of us have to add the predicate of exploitation, and therefore the freedom of the *I am* is no longer the same freedom. If you add gender to this mix, the exploitation is multiplied. In my first novel I tried to get round this problem by going at it obliquely. There have to be other more direct ways; in searching for them I tried to include that double *I am* that the narrator of *Lo Real* uses. As for the context in which one is writing, there's still a really astonishing degree of paternalism in literature with regard to work written by women.

**ME** Most of the dedications in books are expressions of acknowledgement and gratitude. You dedicate your latest book to four women, including María Moliner. Could you tell us what the secret is behind that dedication?

**BG** Just as the church has now apologised to Galileo, I hope some day the Royal Academy will some day try to make amends and apologise for having committed the greatest absurdity in its history by not appointing María Moliner<sup>vi</sup> a member of the academy. If the author of the dictionary had been Pedro or Jaime Moliner, it would have been a different story, of course. Aside from that, in the dedication I mention the debt I hold to the most beautiful and most precise dictionary I know. Most of the little I know about how to write I have learnt from that dictionary. And incidentally, I would argue in favour of the original edition, which sorted the words by families and not by alphabetical order. There is as much knowledge in each word's setting as in the word itself. The functional criterion of the alphabetical order deprived us of that knowledge; as is so often the case, a quest for efficiency puts short-term profitability above any other value.

BELÉN GOPEGUI was born in Madrid in 1963. She has a degree in law. She has worked in several journalistic media and with various publishers. She has given courses in literature and participated<sup>1</sup> in the preparation of the screenplays (*La Suerte Dormida* [*Sleeping Luck*], with Ángeles González Sinde and *El principio de Arquímedes* [*The Archimedes Principle*], directed by Gerardo Herrero). She has published five novels: *La escala de los mapas* (Anagrama, 1993), *Tocarnos la cara* (Anagrama, 1995), *La conquista del aire* (Anagrama, 1998) (made into a film by Gerardo Herrero in 2000 under the title *Las razones de mis amigos* [*Friends Have Reasons*] with screenplay by Ángeles González Sinde), *Lo real* (Anagrama, 2001) and *El lado frío de la almohada* (Anagrama, 2004).

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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<sup>i</sup> The transition from dictatorship to democracy in Spain after the death of Franco.

<sup>ii</sup> Spanish Communist Party

<sup>iii</sup> Partido Socialista Obrero Español, the Spanish Socialist Party, currently in government.

<sup>iv</sup> Izquierda Unida, a coalition party led by the Spanish Communist Party.

<sup>v</sup> “*ganarse la vida*” literally translates as “winning one’s life”

<sup>vi</sup> The Real Academia Española is the body responsible for regulating the Spanish language and publishes a prescriptive dictionary. María Moliner (1900-1981) was a Spanish lexicographer who produced the leading descriptive dictionary of the Spanish language.