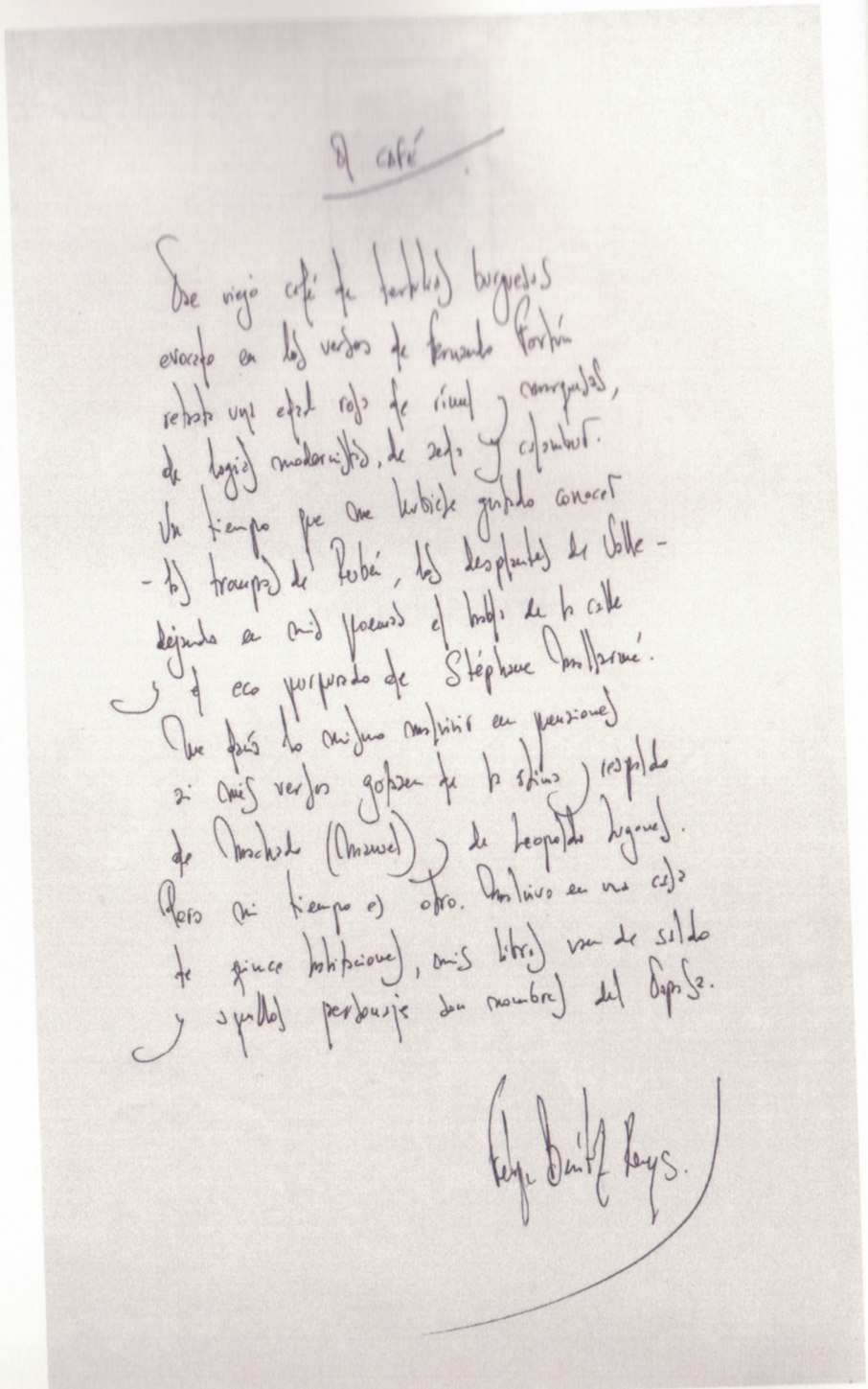

El café

Ese viejo café de tertulias burguesas
evocado en los versos de Fernando Fortún
retrata una edad rosa de rímel y marquesas,
de logias modernistas, de seda y calambur.
Un tiempo que me hubiese gustado conocer
- las trompas de Rubén, los desplantes de Valle -
dejando en mis poemas el habla de la calle
y el eco purpurado de Stéphane Mallarmé.
Me daría lo mismo malvivir en pensiones
si mis versos gozasen de la estima y respaldo
de Machado (Manuel) y de Leopoldo Lugones.
Pero mi tiempo es otro. Malvivo en una casa
de quince habitaciones, mis libros van de saldo
y aquellos personajes son nombres del Papa.

Felipe Benítez Reyes.

Probable Lives

Vidas probables

Poems by

Felipe Benítez Reyes

Translated from the Spanish by
Aaron Zaritzky

with an Afterword by
Itzíar López Guil

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Afterword

Probable Lives is situated within the so-called *poetry of experience*, a movement that, in the early eighties, made its appearance on the Spanish literary landscape, and eventually became one of the central poetic tendencies which, according to Juan José Lanz, make up the "common aesthetic space" of postmodernity.[1] This collection of poems, in which a fictitious narrator presents the biographies and work of various character-poets, constitutes one of the most valuable contributions of the poetry of the postmodern era, characterized, among other things, by frequent fictionalization of the speaker of the poem.[2]

If, during the modern period, the artist still retains individual subject consciousness—his need to "be by being another"[3] can be read as an affirmation of the subject faced with the difficulty, but not impossibility, of communication with the world and with himself—in postmodernity we witness the disappearance of this consciousness. Luis García Montero, for example, one of the most notable figures of the *poetry of experience*, in *La otra sentimentalidad* (1983),[4] written in collaboration with Álvaro Salvador and Javier Egea, defends the illusory condition of the individual, which he understands to be a product of the bourgeoisie, and thus reflective of historic and social reality. This is perhaps one of the most interesting traits that differentiate the character-poets of *Probable Lives* from their better-known Iberian precedents, the *apócrifos* created by Fernando Pessoa and Antonio Machado at the beginning of the 20th century, that is, in full modernity. As the studies of Georges Günert demonstrate, in both poets the creation of fictitious writers is a consequence of an identity crisis resulting from the precariousness (in Machado) or even rupture (in Pessoa) of the communicative process between the speaker and himself, and between the speaker and the world (the totality of relationships manifested in a text) that constitutes lyric poetry: both "doubt the possibility of entrusting his speaker to his writing and of finding in it his identity. For both, there exists a kind of tension (ranging from doubt to rupture) between the achieved text and the desire to express which dictated it."[5] If Pessoa, when faced with the impossibility of expressing his speaker, uses heteronyms (Alberto de Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis) to serve as a link between himself and his writing, the creation of *apócrifos* (Abel Martín, Juan de Mairena) in Antonio Machado arises from the need of the poet, in his stage of maturity, to become a critical interpreter of his own work.

The poet-characters of *Probable Lives* are not, however, the consequence of a rupture in the communicative process as we have seen in Machado and Pessoa, precisely because, since he created the book in full postmodernity, the communicative process and its function have changed, as the following words of Benítez Reyes demonstrate: "I believe that in a poem emotion should be feigned.... I have lost that superstition according to which the poet must leave his life on paper. I have no interest in understanding poetry as confession but rather as a type of fiction."[6] This tendency to emphasize the fictitious quality of artistic work occurs because the artist loses individual subject consciousness. This artist understands reality as mere convention:

> The credibly realistic world created in his texts, based on the awareness that what we call reality is mere convention, [consists of] a play of mirrors, of levels of fiction, of dialogues [that] oftentimes allows one to glimpse, beyond the limits of pure representation, a visionary perception of the void, of inner reality.[7]

In the poems, then, the important thing is not the anecdote but the *impression it gives as reality*, the fiction of reality that imitates reality's appearance in a credible way. Personal experience is put in objective terms so that diverse readers may find it valid, and it is expressed in a narrative manner—a departure from high-flown language and stylistic display, since, as Benítez Reyes indicates:

> The poet of our days... seems condemned to maintain a well-mannered modulation of voice—in no way harsh—and to exercise his technique without display, insuring that his effectiveness does not exceed his invisibility.[8]

The explicit, calculated distance between the biographic "I" and the poetic "I" in this understanding of poetry as a type of fiction leads the creator to the dissolution and annulment of personality in other voices, breaking the precarious link between poet and *apócrifo* that still survived in modernist authors like Machado and Pessoa. In fact, Benítez Reyes affirms: "Perhaps poetry aspires to nothing more than converting person into personage."[9]

When emphasizing the fictitious—although realistic—character of poetic work, "the only thing that remains with postmodernity is the possibility of dialogue with a dead epoch..., with Literary History, with previous creations seen in terms of past Literary History,... continually recurring as *pastiche*, giving the writing a scenic, theatrical dimension, not for what it *is*, but for how it *represents itself* in the role of what it was in another time.[10]

If *Probable Lives* can be situated—in all fairness—within the last phase of this aesthetic change, then in Benítez Reyes' previous books we find, as a concept, the evolution toward this new notion of poetry. In them, the speaker of the poem is presented as an exile of time—the prime object of his reflection—from a happy, carefree nocturnal kingdom of summer festivities, associated with adolescence and early youth. Numerous poems invite us to identify this vital but no-longer-existent phase, which the speaker recalls in a fashion that makes poetry out of what the author denies in his quotation. For example, the poem "Poetry" from *Pruebas del autor*: "To the rhythm it kept I arranged my life / At its feet I then placed the best that I had / adolescence: that ingenious way / of cunning. And to its kingdom of smoke / it led me by the hand. / How vain were the worlds that it offered, and I know now / that the jewel, once appraised, is lesser in value. / What has it left to give me?: perhaps only ashes / and a bit of boredom."[11] The poem certainly does not yearn for this form of poetry, but rather for the lost world in which it originated ("a shattered world that watches us"),[12] an age that was golden (the adjective most frequently used to qualify it), warm, trivial, filled with myths to believe in, an age in which one could squander "virtue, money and time with impunity."[13] Exiled, therefore, from those nights "that should have been life,"[14] the speaker, on the road to winter, is plunged into a different night, dark and icy. The painful act of memory—and with it that of poetic creation—never fully recovers the moment remembered: what life was before returns, through memory, like a slight shudder; that which had precise limits returns now in the form of ashes; what was once warm and bright is now nothing more than snow and darkness. The temporal distance that separates both nights—the one remembered and the one in which the speaker finds himself—should be interpreted precisely as the distance necessary when one is faced with poeticized experience, an experience which should be put to paper with a sense of detachment. Benítez Reyes, in 1995, indicates the following about this work: "After having written these poems I sense that I have cast only shadows. Shadows that seem to have the shape of a life. But they are not, of course, life."[15]

In postmodernity, what Eliot called the *first voice* in poetry,[16] in which the poet talks to himself or to no one, disappears, and what prevails is the *second voice* in which the poet addresses *another*, thereby establishing a dialogue with the reader. This second voice, however, is not the innermost voice of the poet but, as Lanz indicates, a falsetto; it belongs to a fictional character, since the dialogue, established within the narrative framework, is fictitious: "Only a poor reading of the poetic text...might bring us to identify the poetic *self* who acts in the poem with the historic *self* of the poet and to understand as *confession* that which is exclusively *invention*."[17] In *Probable Lives*, defined by Benítez Reyes as "a gallery of *apócrifos* in which I attempted to conceal with borrowed masks my most habitual poetic mask,"[18] the anthologist who writes the biographies of the character-poets is also fictitious; his distance from Benítez Reyes is equivalent to the distance between Machado and his *apócrifo*, as the quote from *Juan de Mairena* (a Machado heteronym) that closes Benítez Reyes' book of poems demonstrates:

> ...you think—added Mairena—that a man cannot carry more than one poet inside himself? More difficult would be the contrary: not carrying more than one.

The ironic distance that the anthologist establishes from the selected poets as he relates their biographies and that, by analogy, must be assumed between Benítez Reyes and the anthologist, is duplicated in Benítez Reyes' relationship with the anthologized poets and their poems: it is in precisely this new "turn of the screw" that the reader discovers one of the main differences between *Probable Lives*' author/*apócrifo* relationship and the modernist work that it quotes and reinterprets. Thanks to this complex poetic voice, one of Benítez Reyes' primary aesthetic postulates—poetry as a type of fiction—becomes a theme, as does his position in contrast to previous literary tradition, as will be seen below. He also manages to represent the almost complete detachment between the actual author and the poems anthologized. Throughout the book, this process, synthesized in the Machado quote, is woven into a textual space of great importance—the biographies—through two narrative strategies that operate simultaneously. The first

consists of constructing a biographic profile that is believable as much for the anthologist as for the character-poets. In addition to furnishing biographical facts, such as the dates and places of birth and death, the poet is linked in some of the biographies to known historical figures and events, and in others to the anthologist himself. The style and content of the poems fit the character-poet's biographic profile exquisitely, that is to say, they correspond not only to the time period and literary context in which their author supposedly lived, but also to the peculiar circumstances of each poet, since the anthologist relates concrete events from their lives that will later be mentioned in their poems. So, each character-author's poems do respond to the confessional mode of poetry, a mode considered plausible only within the framework presented here: that of fiction.

The second narrative strategy is to compel the reader to gradually establish a disconnect between the biographical "I" and the anthologist. For each of the eleven poets, the anthologist offers a biography in the same format: the poet's name, followed by a brief definition that alludes to his life journey or his poetic work (for example, "Miguel Fonseca, Traditional Poet" or "Pablo Arana, Poet of Experience"), and the biography itself. Far from emphasizing their originality, as one would expect, the anthologist, with this a priori definition of the poet and his work, situates it in the territory of the prototypical. In this way, he distances himself from the character and makes clear the existence of a hierarchical relationship in which he—the definer—occupies a superior position, the starting point for all ironic utterance. This is confirmed throughout the eleven biographies that the anthologist narrates, at times satirizing, at times judging and negatively assessing, in an explicit fashion, the life and the work of the poets anthologized:

> The literary destiny of Ángel Ruiz del Valle, excessively late modernist, was not much different from that of modernists who were prudently late: to play an antiquated instrument, to read old music, and to deny that innovations can be made in poetry several times during the course of a century.... The majority of the poems continued to seem like a melodious charade...
>
> ("The Wandering Portfolio of Ángel Ruiz del Valle")

> We wish we could say that Lucas Villalba (Cuenca, 1929–1988) was a graceful murderer, for nothing brings more prestige to the memory of a writer than atrocities. We must acknowledge, however, that he was a melancholy and elegant scholar, a thoughtful husband, and a bewildered father of many...
>
> ("Lucas Villalba, the Suspect")

With the exception of the penultimate *apócrifo*, Pablo Arana, the biographic profiles of the poets, quite varied and disparate, are the same in that they do not fit the social discourse considered appropriate to the successful writer: their days—that invariably end in sad anonymity—usually pass in the gray region of mediocrity or, as in the case of Pau Rinkel, in marginalization. The anthologist, who has connections in the literary world—on one occasion he mentions having directed a literary magazine—thus turns out to be their literary "messiah," having rescued them from oblivion. The conscious assumption of this role on the part of the anthologist becomes increasingly explicit as the work advances: the importance he attributes to his anthological labor gradually intensifies, as does the ironic treatment—at times openly contemptuous—toward the person whose poems, in the end, he almost seems to deign to give us. If the reader detects a certain sympathy toward the earlier poets that leads the anthologist to define the first one (Paul Chase) with the line from Dylan Thomas or to exonerate Servando Montes' (the second *apócrifo*) miserable destiny, attributing it to "the...threads of fate," the scales begin to tilt toward contempt starting with Ángel Ruiz del Valle: "The majority of the poems continued to seem like a melodious charade.... It seemed as if the author had written these pages disguised in clothing from old dressers that smelled of humidity and mothballs." Thus, Amita Lo "forms part of the extensive gallery of contemporary phantoms," and the poetry of Gonzalo de Lerma is defined as "a curious disjunction between common sense and punctuation."

In this way, the natural empathy that all readers feel toward a voice that speaks in the first person and that, at the beginning of the book, leads them to identify with the one speaking, weakens. This growing haughtiness in the anthologist is nothing but an elaborate design, an intelligent and silent manipulation of the affections of the reader, whose only remaining option is to increasingly distance himself from the anthologist since, within all asymmetric relationships, any aggression begun by the powers that be will cause those assaulted to gain public favor. The process culminates precisely with none other than

Pablo Arana—the only poet who knows success in life—whose biography becomes a direct attack on the poetry of experience, in which the anthologist goes from the most bitter irony to contempt and insult based on fundamentally extra-literary motives which are, therefore, out of place in a poetic anthology. The critical turn toward the personal—as private as one's own sexual orientation—and furthermore, toward generalizing pretensions, drives the reader not only to instinctively support, at least morally, Pablo Arana and the poetry of experience, but also to create a distance between himself and the anthologist similar to the one between the anthologist and Benítez Reyes in his role as author of the book (recall what was said in reference to the quote from Mairena), and who is, of course, a known follower of this school of poetry.

It is at this point that the anthologist reveals himself to the reader: the poems from Arana that he declares to have selected are those which least reflect the influence of the *poetry of experience*, poems which most resemble poems written in Arana's "earlier period," the most "valuable" in the eyes of the anthologist. The first poem, "Homage," proves enlightening—it possesses one of the characteristic traits of writing by *novísimos*,[19] the generation of poetry immediately before the *poetry of experience*: a literacy of foreign culture evident at first glance in the intense use of literary reference. It is important to clarify to the American reader in very plain terms that the *novísimos*, whose aesthetic assumptions reject the experiential poets, split into diverse poetic groups in the mid 1970s. Later, some of them—Luis Antonio de Villena, Luis Alberto de Cuenca—ended up joining the ranks of the *poetry of experience*; others inclined toward newly formed schools, like the so-called *aesthetic of silence*, that have maintained a boisterous confrontation with the experiential poets. By thus making the anthologist assume a posture diametrically opposed to that of Benítez Reyes, Benítez Reyes stresses the anthologist's fictitious nature and makes it impossible for the reader to link him to the true author of *Probable Lives*.

Finally, I would like to focus on a central aspect of the book—its form of diachronic anthology—which is related not only to the voice that speaks in the poem but also to the postmodern posture of Benítez Reyes in contrast with prior literary tradition—tradition which, in the second of three essays from the prologue to *Paraísos y mundos*,[20] he defines as an "accumulation of trial and error, of good guesses, of stupendous errors, of fortuitous discoveries, and of inspired outbursts":

> Aside from a term established for our mutual understanding—which at times only serves to keep people from understanding each other—tradition is a multiple bequest that, once parceled out to the liking of the consumer, each one assumes, interprets and finally exalts or trivializes according to his ability and understanding.[21]

In postmodernity, tradition is understood "as a projection of personality [of the author], who, seeing it from a contemporary perspective, tries to find in it that which is *permanent* in humanity."[22] Thus, as Benítez Reyes affirms, "any style of its own amounts to nothing more than an appropriate, balanced mix of larcenies, underhanded expropriations and ingenious fraud filtered through a truly-defined stylistic personality...with the wisdom to blend it all together."[23] This finds its true reflection in *Probable Lives*, where the multiple coincidences between the first and the last character-poet establish a visible line of continuity between them: their presumable *equivalence* serves to emphasize, in the face of tradition's diachrony (represented by the historical succession of different character-poets), the permanence that exists within this diachrony—thus giving the book of poems a circular structure.

As I have indicated in other work,[24] some of the coincidences between Paul Chase and Pau Rinkel, the poets who open and close the book, are easily perceptible: both have the same first name and a foreign surname, both live in unusual circumstances or outside the social norm—a civil war, fighting for survival in a marginalized environment—which they project in their work with realistic will; their poems are characterized by the use of free verse, with clear hendecasyllabic and heptasyllabic influence (the first is most abundant in Chase and the second in Rinkel), as well as an elevated prosaicness—more extreme in Rinkel—with a special concentration on lyricism in closing. Moreover, in the compositions of both we find as a theme a very similar idea of the poetic act.

The six poems from Chase, supposedly written during the Spanish Civil War, all present a reflection upon the categories of *being* and *seeming*, since each makes an analogy to a situation external to the speaker. This analogy is often provoked by an irruption in permanent natural order (what *is*) caused by a disturbing element of human origin.

Thus, in poem 2, first this disturbing element is indicated ("We heard a shot behind Cerro Grande"), then its effect on the natural order ("The partridges flew away, and in the air / for an instant the erratic echo / of the detonation: a hollow shaking") and finally the analogical reflection: "It seemed as if the world resounded / confused in the emptiness." In poem 4, an ad in a newspaper tangled in brambles generates the following affirmation: "Reality is a thing of the past." In poem 5, in which Chase describes a joyous scene of quotidian life in a guerilla camp, the disturbing element is present in the form of a threat as he emphasizes the precariousness of such a situation in the last two lines ("Life, for a moment, recomposes / its small peaceful maze")—what should *be*, due to its transitory character, can only be assumed as a brief appearance, a mere *act of seeming*.

In the work of Pau Rinkel, the first two poems ("The Gentleman," "Eldorado") and last two ("The Detail," "The Luggage") allude to an element or concept of social discourse—in the first binomial, of a clearly positive nature—elevated to the category of prototype through the determinate article that precedes it. The middle poems point to phenomena ("Echoes of Society," "Chain Reaction") that are familiar to the reader, and they therefore need no further specification. There is, however, an open contrast between what is proposed in the poem's title and what we read in the body of the poem: the gentleman is, in reality, someone who holds up gas stations and who, even with a bullet wound, arrives on time for his amorous meeting; Eldorado is the work plans that a pimp offers to a prostitute; the echoes of society are the terrible, despairing news of the luck befalling some members of a marginalized group (prison, prostitution, AIDS...); the detail is the gold chain stolen in one swipe from a "housewife" which a delinquent gives to a "little whore" on her birthday; and the luggage constitutes, according to the speaker, the shadows of "The girls that I've fucked." So, through the title and the poem, Benítez Reyes puts two discourses face to face: one from normal society, the other from the marginal delinquent. As in the case of Paul Chase, it is the poetic gaze that allows the one who *is* a delinquent to *seem* for a moment a gentleman. Benítez Reyes does this by presenting in the poem characteristics inherent to society's concept of the prototype proposed in the title—characteristics which impede its exclusion from the paradigm: the criminal is a man of his word, since he stops by, despite everything, to pick up his lover; in "Eldorado" there is a proposal for the future; the "Echoes of Society" give an account of the most recent events in the lives of specific members of a social strata, etc.

In this way, through reflection on the categories of *being* and *seeming* present in the poems of Paul Chase and Pau Rinkel, Benítez Reyes emphasizes their identical conception of reality (as fragile) and the poetic act (as verbal operation that succeeds in transforming *being* into *seeming*), thereby bringing to light the permanent qualities of literary tradition as contrasted with its diachronic character.

Throughout this commentary, I have tried to point out to the English-speaking reader some of the most relevant aspects of this brief book of poems. *Probable Lives*, one of the major contributions of the Spanish postmodern aesthetic, is far more than an inspired experiment with different styles; it demonstrates a profound and extremely personal reflection on the poetic act. Moreover, the following words from Benítez Reyes himself, written some years earlier, can be justly applied as much to *Probable Lives* as to its author:

> Every good poet is unavoidably owner of a style, but in good poems the vigorous will of a style is rarely evidenced, but rather the unmistakable mark of an artistic personality. The poet who makes a display of his style is not an authentic stylist, as is the poet who knows how to make use of a style in order to achieve an aim that is not, of course, the style alone. Style, in any case, should be the natural gesture of a character, not a forced grimace.[25]

Itziar López Guil
University of Zurich (Switzerland)

Trans. Aaron Zaritzky

[1] See J. J. Lanz, "Primera estapa de una generación. Notas para la definición de un espacio poético: 1977–1982," *Ínsula, 565* (1994), pp. 3–6.

[2] See *La nueve poesía española (1975–1992),* ed. by M. García-Posada, Barcelona, crítica, 1996, pp. 16–18.

[3] J. J. Lanz, "La joven poesía española al fin del milenio. Hacia una poética de la postmodernidad," *Letras de Deusto, 25* (1995), pp. 173–206; the quote is from p. 177. The italics are mine.