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"Antonio Otero Seco, the Forgotten Memory of a Spanish Republican Journalist, Literary Critic and Author in Exile"

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**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this review is to raise awareness of the crucial importance which lies in rescuing the memory of Antonio Otero Seco, a fine Spanish poet, journalist and literary critic who went into exile after the Spanish Civil War. Due to this circumstance, his memory was progressively forgotten in his home country. He is famous for having made the last interview to Spanish major poet Federico García Lorca, just a few days before he was assassinated in Granada by the Falangist militia. His second greatest achievement was the publication of *Gavroche en el Parapeto* (1936), the first novel ever written in Spain dealing with the subject of the Spanish Civil War, in collaboration with colonel Elías Palma Ortega. Following the recent publication of the complete poetry of this author in Spain, called *Poemas de ausencia y lejanía*, published by 'Libros de la Herida' from Seville, I believe the perfect moment has come to place Otero Seco back on the spot as one of the greatest Spanish intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

**KEY WORDS:** Spanish Republic, Spanish Civil War, poetry, exile, Federico García Lorca, literary criticism

## **1- INTRODUCTION**

Antonio Otero Seco was born in Cabeza del Buey (Extremadura) in 1905. He wrote intensely both in Extremadura and Madrid to defend the political principles and intellectual ideals of the Second Spanish Republic. He also followed accurately the development of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) through his numerous journalistic articles. Particularly, he traced the effects of the conflict in the capital city, Madrid, publishing for the main left-wing national newspapers and magazines (*Estampa, La Voz, El Sol, Mundo Obrero, Mundo Gráfico...*).

Because of his Republican ideas, at the end of the Civil War he was prosecuted and sent to jail on several occasions, where he also suffered terrible torture during his imprisonment. After many hardships, he managed to escape to France, and he settled in Rennes, where he taught Spanish Literature at the University of Haute Bretagne, educating many of the current Hispanic professors in the country. He remained active until the end of his life working from the Resistance in his exile in France. He also collaborated with the newspaper *Le Monde*, with extensive articles on Spanish literature and politics, hence spreading Spanish culture throughout France and even South America.

He died in Rennes in 1970, aged 65, due to cancer.

However, the life of this poet presents many secrets and curiosities that we will try to uncover throughout this biographical review. The purpose of this piece is to give value to Otero Seco's literary figure and to recover his rich cultural and personal memory, with the hope of future spread through education at Secondary and University levels.

I consider this purpose a matter of justice, not only because the author deserves to be remembered and recognised in his home country, but also because we cannot build a positive cultural identity in our country if we despise or neglect our own remarkable people, if we react with indifference to the great men who fought to create a better, smarter, well-read society.

## **2- FIRST YEARS**

Antonio Otero Seco was born on the 21<sup>st</sup> of September, 1905 in Hospital Street in Cabeza del Buey, in a liberal, middle-class family. His father was a local lawyer and councilman named Mariano Otero Valverde, and his mother was Emilia Seco Gálvez. He had six siblings: Jacinta, Eduardo, Juan (who was a painter), Elisa and Emilia.

As for his studies, he finished A Level in the Institute of Badajoz, and he later continued with a Degree on Law and Philosophy and Letters in Seville, Granada and Madrid. Furthermore, he completed his PhD on Philosophy and Letters at the Central

University in Madrid, the current Complutense University, where he befriended the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, who was also his teacher here.

His literary interests aroused at a very young age. When he was only 17, he became the local correspondent of *Cabeza del Buey* and he published several articles on newspapers in Badajoz, reviewing local festivities and celebrations such as the Carnival, the local pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of the Virgen the Belén and other parties in town. He studied and helped gather some popular songs and folklore from Extremadura too. He also published his poems and tales in the press *Correo Extremeño*, *El Correo de la Mañana* and *La Libertad* in Badajoz.

In the 1920's, when he was around 20 years old, he published three novels for the press in Badajoz: *El dolor de la vejez* (1925), about a case of adultery suffered by an old librarian, *La tragedia de un novelista* (1926) and *La amada imposible* (1926). Another novel, *Una mujer, un hombre y una ciudad* (1929) was published in Barcelona. None of these novels has ever been reprinted again.

In the 1930's, he went to Madrid with his family, and he started his new golden age in the capital city; a place which unveiled for him a paradise of pleasure, literature and culture. He fell in love with the bohemian life of the city under the Republic, and he frequently attended literary talks at famous cafés such as 'Pombo' in Carretas Street, or 'Café Granja el Henar' in Alcalá Street, where he met many of the prominent artists of the period such as Ramón Valle-Inclán or Ramón Gómez de la Serna, among many others. Within this atmosphere of artistic exuberance, he is remembered for his wit and genius as a speaker as well as his sincere friendship.

During his first period in Madrid, he also published a play called *La Princesa Coralinda* (1934), which had a warm welcome at theatres.

Later on, he became one of the main reporters in Madrid during the War. He gathered numerous stories from people in the streets, presenting emotional portraits of the individual suffering of ordinary families in the middle of the War. He paid attention to particular events as well as the lives of the "popular heroes" of the Republic, mainly young and revolutionary men and women defending the Government. He used the pen name "Antonio de la Serena" to protect himself while publishing for the main left-wing newspapers of the capital such as *Mundo Gráfico*, *La Voz*, *El Sol*, *Estampa* and many others.

His journalistic activity was unstoppable: As a point of interest, I would like to say that he published three articles a week for nine months in the newspaper *La Voz*, a rate which proves that he was a hard-working and highly committed journalist.

### **3- MAJOR PUBLICATIONS**

In 1937, he married María Victorina San José Toribio, born in Valladolid. They had three children, Antonio (who became a plastic artist), Mariano (who became a

painter) and Isabel. All of them have made a significant contribution to recovering the memory of their father both in France and Spain.

Moreover, we can also say that 1937 is the year of one of the most important publications of Otero Seco.

This year he published the interview which made him famous, under the title "Una conversación inédita con Federico García Lorca. Índice de las obras inéditas que ha dejado el gran poeta" in the newspaper *Mundo Gráfico*, on 27<sup>th</sup> February, 1937. According to Professor Ian Gibson, the value of this interview is considerable, due to the amount of important, new information that García Lorca confessed to his friend Otero Seco.

Surprisingly enough, the interview had been made a year before, in 1936, some days before the Andalusian poet attended his mortal date in Granada, but Otero Seco decided not to publish the interview until the death of Lorca was a fact and not mere speculation, since rumours at that point of the War were rather dangerous. Otero Seco kept the interview for a more suitable moment later on, when there were no doubts about the death of the poet, with the aim of protecting Lorca from gossip.

In 1936, he also published his most important novel, *Gavroche en el Parapeto*, in collaboration with Colonel Elías Palma Ortega. The novel tells the story of a group of men living the war on the trenches. His reflections are acute and the journalistic style is predominant. The name "Gavroche" is taken from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, and it is said that it was actually the nickname of Colonel Elías Palma. There is no certainty if the winners of the War knew about the existence of this novel, but we can surely say that there were people who lost their lives for sharing less compromising testimonies than the ones provided in this novel.

This text has remained unpublished up until now. As I mentioned before, the publishing house 'Libros de la Herida' in Seville has undertaken the task of rescuing the memory of our poet, and they are going to present this novel reprinted next year. They have recently published the complete poetry work of Otero Seco, which sees the light of day in Spain for the first time. The book has had a great reception in Cabeza del Buey, Cáceres and Seville, where a few events were organised for welcoming Otero Seco's family, who came from France for the occasion.

After the Spanish Civil War, Antonio Otero Seco was imprisoned and sentenced to death, but his penalty was commuted to 30 years of prison. He spent eight months of the year 1939 in Porlier Gaol, which was the hardest prison in Madrid, and later on, he was moved to El Dueso jail in Santander, where he stayed for two years, until 1941, when he was released under surveillance conditions.

He reflects on his terrible experience in prison and the fall of Madrid in the last days of the War in an autobiographical book called *Vida entre paréntesis*, a moving

account of the suffering lived in Spanish jails at that time. It is a heart-breaking testimony of the cruelty and injustice lived within those walls, where he witnessed a great number of his peers on the death row, waiting for death. Some days, he saw 20 prisoners leaving the cell, other days, up to 165 were led out to be shot.

Once he started his life in secrecy, he continued with his job as a journalist under the pen name "Luis Herrera". The authorities forbade him to use his name, so he had to publish several plays such as *La eterna enamorada* (1941) or *El rey de oros* (1943) with the name of his friend Manuel Ortega Lopo. The plays were very well received by the public at theatres in Madrid and Barcelona.

However, these plays were lost in some of the many inspections that the police carried out at Otero Seco's home in Madrid, when police officers used to destroy his library looking for incriminatory documents. What's more, Ortega Lopo, after the success of the performances, did not want to share the profit or acknowledge the real authorship of the plays, so we can say that Otero Seco's plays remain not only forgotten, but also partially lost under another person's name. Further research will be needed in case we can find and study them properly.

Finally, during this secrecy period, he also wrote several biographies of prominent Spanish men such as Garcilaso de la Vega, Alfonso X the Wise, Fray Luis de León, Francisco de Zurbarán or The Great Captain, collected under the title *Claros Varones de España* (1942-1943) published in the magazine *Mission*.

#### **4- LAST YEARS IN EXILE**

His undercover activities were finally found out by the Falangist militia and he was put under arrest once more. He was tortured so as to make him confess who his partners were. But he never betrayed them. Thanks to some friends' help, who managed to bribe his custodians in jail, he was able to escape from prison in 1946.

The following year, he went into exile in France. He fled Spain with fake documents and dressed up as a priest, crossing the Bidasoa River lying down on a boat in the middle of the night. First, he arrived in Paris, but soon he settled down in Rennes, where he waited for his family to join him in 1956.

In Paris, he joined the Association of Spanish Journalists in Exile and between 1948 and 1950 he travelled throughout the North and East of Europe as their representative, visiting Switzerland, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden and Finland among other countries. He reflected on his impressions of these trips in his short book of poems *Paréntesis sonriente*.

In Paris, he met remarkable French intellectuals such as Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre. He also worked as a translator for the United Nations and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Geneva.

He became an assistant and teacher of Spanish Language and Literature at Haute Bretagne University in Rennes in 1950, a job that he kept until his death in 1970. He was beloved and respected by all his students.

From 1957 to 1970, he went on publishing articles on literary criticism about contemporary Spanish literature for numerous French and American newspapers and magazines, hence spreading cultural awareness about Spanish intellectuals abroad. Among these publications, we can name the famous magazine *Ibérica*, directed by Victoria Kent from New York. His main focus was on Spanish literature, but he also devoted extensive articles to comment the works and lives of painters such as Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí or Le Corbusier, and the main artistic trends of the moment. He made his last contributions for *Le Monde* between 1967 and 1970, the latter being the year of his death due to cancer.

## **5- ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

In 1970 he was awarded with the Order of the French Academic Palms, one of the greatest acknowledgments given by the French Republic to prominent intellectuals who have enriched the French culture.

In 1973, the University of Rennes organised a memorial after his death and they published a book in his honour called *Homenaje a Antonio Otero Seco*, in which remarkable Spanish personalities such as Ramón J. Sender, Ana María Matute, Miguel Delibes or Camilo José Cela contributed with articles and letters, since they all knew Otero Seco and the great efforts he had made to spread their works in France. The University of Rennes inaugurated a new amphitheatre with his name and they placed a portrait and a plaque in his memory at the library of the University.

In 2017, La Maison de la Poésie in Rennes and the Cervantes Institute in Paris organised other events in honour of the poet.

In Spain, Professors Francisco Espinosa and Miguel Ángel Lama achieved a milestone in 2008 by publishing two volumes with the 'Editora Regional de Extremadura', within the collection "Rescate". These two books contained the biography of Antonio Otero Seco and numerous articles on his literary criticism and journalism, as well as some instances of his poems.

In December 2020 his town Cabeza del Buey organised the first local event to rescue his memory under the name "Acto de Homenaje a Antonio Otero Seco en el 50 aniversario de su fallecimiento," which was a pioneer step forward in the recovery of his figure in his home village.

Recently, in September 2021, the publishing house 'Libros de la Herida' has presented for the first time in Spain the collection of his complete poetry works under the title *Poemas de ausencia y lejanía*, an edition prefaced by Juan Manuel Bonet. It includes many photographs of Otero Seco and his family and two QR codes; one to

have access to a recital conducted by Otero Seco reading his own poems, and the other one to listen to a song that musicians Fiona Aráez and Daniel Mata have made of the beautiful, deeply emotional poem "París."

The book is divided into eight different sections: "Viaje al Sur" gathers several poems about Otero Seco's trips to Andalucía and the North of Africa, and the impressions he had in some of the cities he visited. The next two sections, "Con los ojos abiertos" and "Ausencia" present some of the hardest, most emotional poetry of the collection, containing poems addressed to his wife while he was imprisoned, and denouncing the conditions he saw in jail. Some of them are touching elegies addressed to his peers in the cells, who were taken away to be executed, such as Martín Manzano, Major of Móstoles, or Pedro Luis, a ploughman from Badajoz. In other poems of this section, he pays homage to some of the Spanish poets he admired the most, such as Antonio Machado, Miguel de Unamuno, Federico García Lorca or Miguel Hernández, who was one of his closest friends.

In the next section, "Paréntesis sonriente", Otero Seco reminisces about his trips around Europe. The last two sections, called "Exilio" and "Lejanía," include poems written from the exile to his family and friends, conveying them his best wishes and missing them bitterly.

The book also contains some minor sections with several interesting poems, such as "Mirada interior" or "Poemas fechados", and many first versions of poems and other variations.

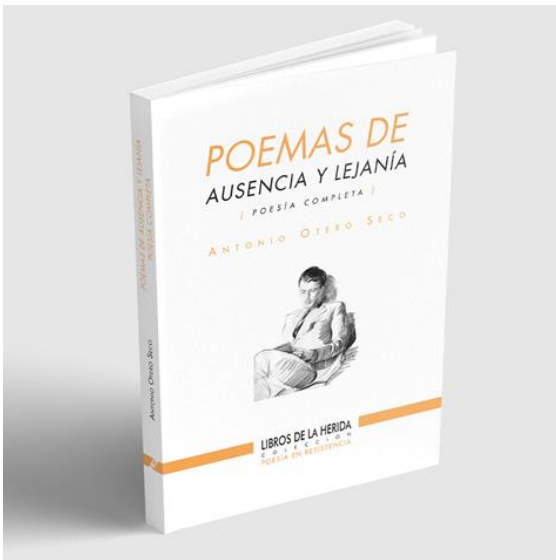
In all of his poetry we can see a melancholic view of Spain and sheer nostalgia for the cultural and intellectual background of the Republic, a context that was lost after the War. His later vision of life is a combination of existentialism and his heart-rending experience in exile.

The length of this article is not enough to comprise the life of Antonio Otero Seco. Here I have just tried to make an introduction to his vast collection of works, but more has been left out for the sake of convenience and readability.

To close this review, I would like to return to the statement I made at the beginning of this text: Antonio Otero Seco is one of those remarkable figures of the Spanish culture that has probably been left aside because of oversight and neglect, or simply due to apathy or ignorance. It is time to claim back a respectable figure of whom we can truly feel proud of.

*"Vendrás, sé que vendrás; porque hace mucho tiempo que te espero".*

AOS



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