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NÉLIDA GONZÁLEZ LEBRÓN

El Espiritismo de las mujeres puertorriqueñas:  
De las extraordinarias pioneras a sus herederas  
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## Analysis of "Of the Fleeting" by Nélide González Lebrón

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## The Spiritist Writing of Nélide González Lebrón

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Translated by Henry Hirschfeld

Nélide González Lebrón, journalist, spiritist, and writer of contemporary fiction and poetry, was born in the town of Añasco in 1947. Her literary career includes the publication of multiple books, such as: *Transfigurada: Verso y prosa* (*Transfigured: Poetry and Prose*) (1997), *Murmullo frágil de silencios* (*Gentle Murmur of Silence*) (2004), *Oasis coloquial* (*Colloquial Oasis*) (2006), *Voz y tiempo* (*Voice and Time*) (2012), *El sueño de los pájaros* (*The Dream of the Birds*) (2012) and *De lo fugaz e intangible: Cuentos espíritas* (*Of the Fleeting and Intangible: Spiritist Stories*) (2019).<sup>1</sup> *De lo fugaz e intangible* is a collection of short stories of utmost interest because it is based on the author's real spiritist experiences, as well as those of her friends and acquaintances. She dedicates the book to Dr. Flavio Acarón, her teacher and President of the *Instituto de Cultura Espírita Renacimiento* (*Rebirth Institute of Spiritist Culture*) in the city of Mayagüez. *Renacimiento* has been a renowned spiritist training center for Puerto Ricans in the southwest of the Island ever since 1888, when the instruction of Spiritism was legalized.<sup>2</sup> Nélide was educated at Dr. Acarón's center as a spiritist and medium, but her spiritist education really began as a child, with her grandmother Candelaria Cornelia Lamberty Velazco. In what follows, we will analyze a selection from *De lo fugaz e intangible: Cuentos espíritas*.



Fig. 1: Renaissance Institute in the early twentieth century.

### “The Dancer” and the Aporia of Reality or Fiction

In an interview with Nélide González in which we asked her who taught her about Spiritism, the author explains:

<sup>1</sup> Nélide González, *El sueño de los pájaros*, Tipografía Carmen N. Rodríguez, 2013; *De lo fugaz e intangible: Cuentos espíritas*, Mayagüez, P.R. 2019; *Murmullo frágil de silencios ...* Antillian College Press, Mayagüez, P.R., 2004; *Oasis coloquial*, Editorial Lunes. San José Costa Rica, 2006; *Transfigurada: Verso y prosa*, Imprenta San Rafael, Quebradillas, P.R. 1997; *Voz y tiempo*, Impresos RUM, Mayagüez, P.R., 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Gerardo Alberto Hernández Aponte, *El espiritismo en Puerto Rico*, San Juan, P.R.: Academia Puertorriqueña de la Historia, 2015, pp. 336, 458-459.

Well, my maternal grandmother. My maternal grandmother was a natural medium, although she had no control of her mediumship faculties. For example, she would be sitting in some random place, and if she felt a spiritist manifestation, she would take hold of the Spirit, speak, sing, and the Entity that was with her at that moment would manifest itself. That is how I saw, since I was a child, how she performed oral mediumship. She spoke. The Spirits would speak through her, and one Spirit in particular, a ballerina.<sup>3</sup>

As revealed in this interview, the character in González's story, "The Ballerina," alludes to her grandmother Candelaria's Spirit guide, who the narrator of the story describes as follows:

I knew her as a child. I never saw her dance, but she would sing. It was a melody never before heard, in another language, or in some forgotten language or dialect (...). She was her Spirit guide, she said, her protector, and would often predict family events and wonders long before they happened. Her predictions never failed, which is why whenever she approached, everyone in the family would tremble.<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 2: Candelaria Cornelia Lamberty Velazco seated in the center (1910).

The story tells of how the girl grows up listening to the Prussian ballerina's songs and messages. The grandmother's mediumistic faculties diminished with age. After her death, the girl eventually became a woman and found herself in Germany, in the region that was once Prussia. She remembers the ballerina, her grandmother's Spirit guide, and eagerly searches for a figurine of a ballerina, hoping to evoke her childhood memories, but to no avail. A little sad, she continues her journey, but in Vienna, at a classical music concert, she listens in awe to an interpreter who sings the melody that the ballerina sang so many times during her childhood.

What is interesting about this story is that it is told as a personal experience of the author, an anecdote that she narrated in considerable detail during our interview. Literature is, however, a discourse mediated by characters, one or more narrators, as well as strategies that the author employs to represent the world in words, such as space, time, focus, voice, and language. How, then, can we distinguish fiction from reality in this case? Considering this problem is important because it forces us to suspend judgment on what we label as "reality" and "fiction," which in turn invites the possibility of questioning what exactly we understand to be "real."

<sup>3</sup> Nélida González and Clara Román-Odio "8 Transcripción tematizada (2019). Nélida González Lebrón. Paper 1. [https://digital.kenyon.edu/espirtismo\\_nelidagonzalez/1/](https://digital.kenyon.edu/espirtismo_nelidagonzalez/1/).

<sup>4</sup> Nélida González, "La bailarina", *De lo fugaz e intangible: Cuentos espíritas*, Mayagüez, P.R. 2019, pp. 27-30.

The literary strategies that the writer uses in “The Ballerina” convince us, on the one hand, that it is a fictional text. It is important that the story’s narrator is a child because it makes the character reliable. Furthermore, from a literary analysis point of view, the simplicity with which the child, as an adult, reunites with the memory of her grandmother’s Spirit guide indicates a fortuitous encounter with the marvelous. On the other hand, the telling of the event that occurred in the author’s real life suggests that it was an encounter with the spiritual world, with “the fleeting and intangible,” which is also entirely possible. However, the aporia posed in the story by the opposition between reality and fiction is resolved by means of a spiritist principle that the narrator explains in this way:

And it is that the measurement of time, sometimes misunderstood, is not limited to the clock or the calendar. These are inventions of the human mind, in its quest to explain the unknown. Time transcends all reason and logic, although we are not aware of it.<sup>5</sup>



Here, the narrator alludes to the spiritist maxim that establishes that the Spirit is eternal, and for this reason we can communicate with the Spirits at any time, since they exist and evolve in a dimension beyond any human concept of time. In light of this perspective, it can then be argued that the spiritist literature of Nélida González serves the same role as the literature by the pioneer women writers of Puerto Rican Spiritism from the late nineteenth century. That is, promoting an alternative understanding of the spiritual experience; a knowledge that goes beyond religious dogma and is based on a reasoned faith that, on the one hand, observes and studies the phenomenon of communication with Spirits, and on the other, promotes a rational and equitable morality, which pursues the transformation of the human being in search of universal fellowship.

Fig. 3 Nélida, reading the Book of Life.

### “Astral Projection” or the Mediumistic Process as Liberation

In the case of “El desdoblamiento” (“Astral Projection”),<sup>6</sup> the central motif of the story is represented in the first two lines. The narrator explains,

She started having out-of-body experiences as a child, when she could barely understand what was happening. It was a secret that she kept to herself, since they were pleasant, but mysterious.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>6</sup> Nélida González, “El desdoblamiento”, *De lo fugaz e intangible, Op. Cit.*, pp. 71-74.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

Here, the author describes a mediumistic process, specifically the out-of-body experience, or when the consciousness detaches from the body and travels to other places. From a literary analysis perspective, we should note that the story is narrated in omniscient third-person, that the protagonist is a child, and that it discusses how the development of mediumistic faculties can bring a certain feeling of joy. The use of an omniscient third-person narrator is important because, as readers, it allows us to inhabit the girl's interior world and better understand her point of view. For example, in the following passage, we witness the bodily sensations that the protagonist experiences when her consciousness detaches from her body:

She felt as if she was a sphere filled with air, rising to the top of a piece of cloth and then slowly descending. She was never afraid of the experience; in fact, she enjoyed it.<sup>8</sup>

The narrative discourse expands so that we can enter into the manifestation of the mediumistic process. The narrator's focus on the joy that out-of-body experiences can bring to the girl is important, for several reasons. Firstly, because, to a certain extent, it normalizes astral projection. After all, it happens to a young girl, who, because of her age, is a reliable character, and vulnerable to circumstances that are beyond her control. Secondly, because, through the joy that the girl feels, the mediumistic process is separated from the concept of suffering. The same joy invites us to rejoice in the details that the narrator provides. For example, she explains:

As a child, she never wondered why that experience happened, since deep down she knew that it was something natural for her. (...) Floating again every night, like a sphere full of air, was her yearning during the day. It was a ritual, an encounter with the unknown that she experienced every night.<sup>9</sup>

Describing out-of-body experiences as natural and rewarding for the girl changes our understanding of these occurrences. We no longer perceive them as taboo; forbidden, unnameable, or perverse. Furthermore, dissolving the shadow of the unknown is crucial to the development of the story. The passing of time allows us to witness the strengthening of the girl's mediumistic faculty:

As the years went by, that faculty became stronger, to the point that she was able to leave her body with ease, both at night and during the day, as was necessary. In her waking state, she could communicate with beings never before seen, with acquaintances and strangers, and she could also travel without a vehicle and without anyone preventing her from doing so.<sup>10</sup>

It is necessary to emphasize the importance of the development of her faculties. Over time, the girl becomes a *medium of movement and suspension*, which Allan Kardec defines, in *El libro de los médiums (The Book of Mediums)*, as "those who cause aerial movement and suspension of

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

inert bodies in space with no support; those who can elevate themselves by their own will.”<sup>11</sup> In that *unknown* space that she accesses, the protagonist travels and talks with acquaintances and strangers. At this point, the story extends into the future, when the girl, now an adult, transcends the domestic space and experiences the complete freedom of consciousness, outside of her body:

One night, while she was watching television, the out-of-body experience happened again, but this time, without the mosquito netting of childhood, she got out of bed and contemplated her inert matter under the white sheets, submerged under a deep lethargy. Then, she went out onto the street. It was a challenging night. She no longer cared if anyone saw her, for she understood the phenomenon, which she had experienced so many times.<sup>12</sup>

Her exit from the domestic space and challenging night, however, do not worry her, which suggests that the out-of-body experience offers the protagonist not only a temporary liberation from the body’s dense matter, but also a liberation from society, which continues to identify the woman with inferiority, weakness, and a need for protection.

On this journey through space, we witness a crucial moment in the protagonist’s adulthood, during which she passes through the walls of a hospital where a friend was hospitalized, and observes spiritual doctors working on the patient: “one of them, dressed in white and with long hair, had already done work in the astral sphere and was on his way out.”<sup>13</sup> Surprised by what she sees, she returns to her body. The story concludes with a call from her friend the next day in which she tells her that she is no longer ill. The protagonist, in full confidence of herself, replies that she already knew. The importance of the adult protagonist’s out-of-body experience is that it alludes to experiences similar to those reported by the Spirit of André Luiz (a doctor who lived in Brazil at the beginning of the twentieth century) to the famous Brazilian medium Chico Xavier in the book *Nosso Lar (Our Home)*. This dictation from the afterlife, published in 1944, exposes the daily life of Spirits who complete tasks in schools, hospitals, and work groups in the spiritual dimension. It declares that life after death is fully active and that Spirits continue their progress and perfection in close proximity to the human world. This allusion reveals that Nélida González knows the history of the development of Spiritism as a doctrine and as a contemporary world movement. She knows and seeks to share this knowledge using a spiritist literature that addresses not only personal experience, but also the discoveries that Spiritism claims today.



Fig. 4: Nélida as a girl.

<sup>11</sup> Allan, Kardec. *El libro de los médiums*, 11 ed., trad., revisada y corregida por Salvador Gentile y Alipio González Hernández, Araras, Brasil: Instituto de Difusão Espírita, 1986, ítem 189, p. 206.

<sup>12</sup> Nélida González, “El desdoblamiento”, *De lo fugaz e intangible*, *Op.Cit.* p. 73.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

The above allows us, then, to conclude that “Astral Projection” aims to naturalize out-of-body experiences and to propose the mediumistic process as a form of liberation. The protagonist’s joy, or that of the consciousness that is free from the body, normalizes the spiritual experience of astral projections and frees the protagonist from the domestic environment to give her access to a wide range of previously unknown experiences. The contemplation, as an adult, of spiritual doctors who treat her friend’s illness offers a perspective of contemporary Spiritism; a dynamic and global movement that continues to address and expand the horizons of the spiritual world. It is interesting that, as in the case of “The Ballerina,” Nérida González speaks in our interview about the out-of-body experiences that she had as a child and as an adult. This suggests that the writer made her personal experience into a story because she recognizes that our definition of reality and fiction is, to some extent, a human attempt to name and give form to what is “fleeting and intangible.” Furthermore, it can be argued that the passage from the anecdotal to the literary helps us, because within the framework of literature we suspend judgment and we are easily able to delve into the mystery of that which we do not know but long for: a true encounter with the sacred.