

SYMBOLIC POETICS OF BALANCE AND SPIRIT.

FOUR READINGS (AND A CODA) AROUND THE WORK OF AIXA PORTERO.

First Reading. The Mythological.

The encounter between Aixa Portero and the mythological figure, Hypsipyle, is curious, paradoxical even. Curious, while understanding the pre-existence and persistence of a series of myths that, in their multiple variants, embody common archetypes which persist in our collective subconscious and that, as Steiner acknowledges, always return to us through art, literature or dreamlike situations, to a common, poetic terrain: “*A thousand times over, blinded, aged fathers will cross waste places leaning on young, talismanic daughters. Once, the child is called Antigone; another time, Cordelia. Identical storms thunder over their wretched heads. A thousand times over, two men will fight from dawn to dusk or through the night by a narrow ford or bridge and, after the struggle, bestow names on one another: be these Jacob/Israel and the Angel, Roland and Oliver, Robin Hood and Little John*”¹.

Only rarely will the artist consciously strive to discover a myth that encapsulates their expressive needs and wherein they encounter their own reflection; time and again, the very myth reveals itself before the artist, who in turn relives it, procuring an encounter that in appearance, seems fortuitous. Passionate about literature in general and poetry in particular – whose verses she treats not as a literary resource, but rather according to their capacity to establish themselves as a mechanism of evocative detonation, once isolated from their logical narrative sequence – the creator (re)discovered one of the best known poems, *Sonatina*, by Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío (1867-1916). Well known for its first verse, “*La princesa está triste... ¿Qué tendrá la princesa?*” [The princess is sad. What ails her?], *Sonatina* was published in 1896 within his *Prosas profanas* book of poetry. Habitually read in Spanish primary and secondary education as an example of literary Modernism, few young readers reach the thirty-seventh verse, which says: “*¡Oh, quién fuera hipsípila que dejó la crisálida!*” [“Oh, if only it were Hypsipyle who left the chrysalis!”] Aixa did. Aixa wondered who or what this Hypsipyle was.

Hypsipyle's mythological narration is an inescapable parallel with Aixa Portero's personal tragedy – the death of her father. The former chief prosecutor of the High Court of Justice of Andalusia was assassinated by the terrorist group, ETA, on his way

home in October 2000. Until then, her creative work explored concepts such as linguistic and formal fragmentation (*Reencuentros, Old Hospital of Dendermonde, Belgium*, Belgium, 1998), the landscape's internal-external relationship (*Trans-Apariencias*, Palacio de los Condes de Gabia, Granada, 1999) and concepts of identity and intimacy, ever-questioned in our bewildering societies (*Multiplicity-Individualcity*, Universidad Uni Mail and Sous Soul Gallery, Geneva, Switzerland, 2000), substantiated through the object, installation and technological image.

That tragedy was a turning point in her career, resulting in works such as the *Rebajas de la Inocencia* exhibition (Palacio Carmen de los Mártires, Granada, 2003; Herbert Marcuse Gallery, San Diego, USA, 2003; Palacio de las Artes y las Ciencias, Bilbao, 2004...) and a series of black and white photographs, witnesses to terrorism intertwined with childish gestures; *Sin palabras*, where a set of apparently distant concepts (violence, justice, death, ethics, fortune, everyday life, randomness, innocence...) were amalgamized into a single project.

The relationships between fathers and daughters have been frequent sources of inspiration in mythological and literary history. In the case at hand, Hypsipyle, granddaughter of Dionysus and Ariadne, daughter of Thoas, king of the island of Lemnos, “*infamous land* – as Ovid² tells us – *since the slaughter of husbands long ago...*”, is a figure of singular and sad destiny. According to various written sources, the women of Lemnos – to be punished with halitosis by Aphrodite for their neglectful worship – decided to murder their husbands, fathers and sons, who had been unfaithful to them with foreign women. Only Hypsipyle saved her father, whom she hid in a closet, then boarded on a ship that took him to the shores of the Tauride, making him disappear forever. The Lemnians, believing him dead, named her queen as rightful heir. This was the feminine realm found by the Argonauts who, on their quest for the Golden Fleece, stopped on the island on their way to the Colchis.

Hypsipyle is the best example of the moral contradiction that leads one to face social duty – as ruler of Lemnos who owes her people – and filial duty, as daughter of a father to whom she owes her life. Euripides, aware of the dramatic power inherent in the story's political and human implications, wrote a tragedy around 470 B.C., of which today only a few brief fragments remain. Both the tragedian from Salamis and artist from Malaga were subjugated by a story that represents a revealing moral: love and politics, affection and responsibility, and family and government should never be

combined on the same moral plane – their combination foretells unpredictable, dramatic consequences.

Second reading. The symbol.

The symbol in the works of Aixa Portero is an indispensable mechanism in processes of cultural transmission and, therefore, also in aesthetic-plastic communication devices. They prevent the memory of a collective from dissolving in the shadows of time. Following Lotman, we can discern two planes of interpretation with respect to the symbol. Some people see in this a logical artefact that translates – by means of signs – planes of expression to planes of content. Other schools of thought, on the other hand, define the symbol as an absolute sign of a non-symbolic essence and; consequently, should be assumed as a bridge between the world of the irrational and the world of the mystical³.

The butterfly is symbolic of the metamorphosis of life, of the will to radically transform its physical and spiritual reality. The Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío (1867-1916), metaphorically drew Hypsipyle emerging from the chrysalis, leaving the comfortable golden shelter – this means, precisely, the Greek term *Khrysalis*, “golden” – throwing herself into flight and adult life. As a lepidopteran – butterfly – the semantic roots *-lepidó* (scale) and *ptero* (wing) echo two opposing worlds: the aquatic, as we usually associate scales with the figure of the fish, and the aerial.

The concept of the aerial is very important in Portero’s work, its presence is felt in the form of a feather, evidence of wind, lightness, elevation and flight. The volatile figures, the butterfly wings, the light arboreal branches, guinea fowl and stork feathers... created a rising feeling. As Cirlot points out, for San Gregorio, bird feathers symbolize faith, contemplation and the quill, as well as the written verb⁴.

The presence of the book in its production is also steeped with symbolic meaning. The book has two significant readings: the book is intellectual, but the book is also free. It is a door through which access is gained to knowledge and the establishment of critical thinking. Time is the medium that ignites the imagination, but in Portero we speak of the book as a fragment, as a trace, a memory of a communicative channel that has been severed and only partly continues to preserve its transmitting condition. (Does your critical conscience emerge here, and condemn the disappearance of a medium that has enabled the advancement of societies, precisely at a moment in which ignorance is

exalted?) It leaves in our hands and consciences the process of reconstruction, of reinvention in short, which is catalysed through the artistic work.

In the *Poiesis* series (2015-2018), the torn-up pages barely allow a narrative coherence to be glimpsed, while allowing a glimpse the following pages; neither from the first, for their lack, nor from the last, by concealment, can we articulate a coherent narration. Portero steals the opportunity for logical understanding from the viewer; that which they are accustomed to in continuous confrontation with the image, but gives them the chance to interpret it. In the *Las raíces del vuelo* installation (2017), she shows us a book installation, without external identification, of blank pages, which are suspended, levitating and inert, while a myriad of letters appear to be scattered on the floor. As in a recomposition exercise, without principles or endings, to which we are invited.

Tree roots-branches are also substantial elements in her work. The tree is one of the most frequent symbolic elements in all cultural traditions, either in correspondence with divine figures (Attis-Fir, Osiris- Cedar, Apollo-Laurel...) or in association with the personification of the qualities of an entire people (Celts-Oak , Scandinavians-Ash, Germans-Lime, Hindus-Fig...). As a vertical symbolic image, it is possible to see a vehicle of direct contact and transmission between the underground world (as origin) and the aerial world (as a horizon and culmination) in its form. The tree of life, *arbor vitae*, and the tree of death, *arbor mortem*, are the same, and relate to the three worlds, the bottom is the roots (chthonic or infernal), the central is the trunk (terrestrial or of the manifestation), and the top is the branches (celestial)⁵.

And yet, despite all that has been said, symbolic interpretation is an inscrutable path, because the symbol itself exists before, and independent of, any given text.

“It reaches the memory of the writer from the deep memory of culture and revives in the new text like the grain fallen in new land”⁶, indicates the Russian semiologist, Lotman.

Moving the image proposed to the field of plastic arts, we could infer from Portero’s work that symbols cross the borders of time, sprouting and reaching from culture’s most ancestral consciousness, projected towards the present and future by the creative act, with a new heightened sense each time. That is why, perhaps, all the images analysed lines back, and the interpretations raised, are no more than epidermic

speculations, as the ultimate intention of their appearance and meaning could only be offered by the artist herself.

Third Reading. Multiplicity, Contradiction and Chance.

Contradiction. Contra a singular diction: there is no one way of saying things, nor a unique channel for doing so. Aixa Portero's production is a clear example of how the multiple, the contradictory and chance can be naturally adopted as factors to be reconciled in plastic creation.

We have seen how contradiction is a present condition in her production, both lyrically and conceptually: weighty feathers, roots which sprout in the air, the world topsy-turvy and its crushing hardships. These works lead us to another debate, circling and lingering over the techniques addressed. Although, as spectators, while believing that we sense a pictorial intention in many of them, our first instinct is entirely three-dimensional. The search for the third dimension is ever-present, and is all the more eloquent in pieces that, in appearance, are and should be, two-dimensional, even breaking the physical barriers of the frames that guard/delimit them.

Not only when the creator interacts with (and on) a traditional medium, format and dimension, such as the field of the pictorial, transcending limits and literally seeking to exploit the parameters of that medium, but also in the increasingly frequent occasions in which she traverses the technological field, as in *3D Showroom 05. El verso de Hipsípila* (2017 – 19), wherein atop transparent plastic columns she projects a few texts that are literally diluted liquescently, it is possible to perceive the compositional rhythm and markedly architectonical space – eloquently classical. After a deep and meticulous reading of her pieces, will it be possible for us to glimpse the balance of the classical through the more progressive or hear the timbre of the more transgressive vanguard at the close of the melody of the traditional? To confirm it would be to corroborate the presence of this contradictory value.

As she repeats to whomever cares to listen, chance is yet another material within any artistic process, and it would be presumptuous not to take advantage of it in favour of the creative act. In one of her most emblematic pieces, still in its early stages of development due to its complex technological implications, the interactive installation of feathers, dynamism, sound, spectator intervention and organic movement are all

harmonized. Control, dance, chance. What in the hands of another could have become a sort of aesthetic game is transformed into a sensory experience... The artist seeks perfection even in interactivity, even beyond chance.

Aixa Portero builds images whose purpose is not extinguished in the very justification of their existence; nor are they justified in the transmission of concepts ranging from the vindication of beauty as poetry of representation, to the assumption of a synthetic fragility as a nexus of constructive cohesion. The image as a possibility, the revealing image, the image as a paradox; the image, in short, that displays without demonstrating, is for her a field of artistic action that reveals reality's happy mirages, the existing synchronies between different fragments of nature, sometimes distant from one another, sometimes not.

The complementarity of the opposite, like a reverberation in a mirror that gives back to us a subtly distinguishable reflection, is a force that moves the universe and that, from a certain point of view, shows us the fragility of our certainties. The roots of a tree expand and articulate in their search, just as its branches unfold in the same vital quest. And that relativizes the truths and any affirmation. That something, and its immediate opposite, can *be* and *exist* at the same time is, according to the creator, always possible.

Fourth Reading. Language as the Art of Installation.

Written language fulfils a triple function in Portero's work; appearing as a catalyst of transmission for the communication of experience that transcends time; as a chance to evoke other worlds through imagination but also, and finally, as an indelible trace since antiquity of humanity's cultural production which must not be allowed to die. Appearance, chance and trace. Communication, evocation and culture. Life. Death. The text is, of course, creative material; raw material to be cut, trimmed, burned; a sustaining, sustained element for pictorial, objectual, sculptural and installative creation.

Scraps of texts and registers of language, with the aforementioned consideration, appear very early on in her production. The *Minima Muerte* (2013) pictorial sequences and the nest-objects associated with said series present themselves as such, with the backing of the poetry of Malaga-born Emilio Prados (1899-1962); while on occasions, the poems' medium, the paper of the edition – trimmed, burned, folded, shaped flowers or butterflies – is transformed into plastic material pieces that attempt to transfer the effect of an introspective reading of those poems into a three-dimensional environment.

Equally, the fertility of the fields traversed is surprising. Or perhaps not, since it could be inferred that art as a language, process and mechanism is one and multiple, preventing us from ascribing Portero's work to a genre or recurrent techniques. The path taken travels the pictorial with the same intensity that circulates through the installation, revealing fragmentary images of exceptional sensitivity with the same exigency it reserves for subsequent readings of concepts woven out of iron. Behold, this is its danger and its triumph. It is very probable that certain gazes, when confronted with some of the Malaguenian artist's works and series, will stop and linger (and from that point not deviate) on the most eloquent aesthetics, those which please the senses, and will not digress towards other, more fertile, more complex readings; trapped by this dazzling, epidermal presentation. Observe the unsettling sublimity and measured compositional imbalance in one of her most recent series: *Glaciares* (2018). The viewer shall be free to become trapped in beauty's comfortable glow, but will miss the chance to descend into the dramas that can be discovered, into the dialectics that seem to emerge, into her ultimate intentions, whatever they may be – which is always a more demanding but, in the end, a more satisfying journey.

Nor should we discard the fact that today art can be reclaimed as a producer of beauty, an issue foolishly situated at an unusual point in artistic discourse, not only from the avant-garde (as if any beautiful artistic product could not carry a valid conceptual message), but rather much earlier, from the confluence of reality and realism as the ultimate and only justification for art; nor, in the same way, does it seem feasible or advisable to reveal the universe's paradoxical folds, the inevitable reverse of so much beauty, in such a heart-breaking, unavoidable way.

There are works in which an asymmetrical relationship between content and form is produced. On multiple occasions, in contemporary art, the content has phagocytosed everything that was around it and the message reached the viewer as a document devoid of artistry; in other stages of art history it was the beautiful container that was unconcerned with the public, not trying to communicate anything: the interaction was exhausted in a hedonistic (and aestheticist) monologue. They are extreme. And the work of Aixa does not move in the extreme, but in the balance. Her work communicates, and at the same time moves us (knowing what or where he moves requires the active participation of all actors), a message articulated in balance, harmonious, captivating.

Coda.

I could not end this text without referring to the concept of *Poiesis*, so present in her work, illuminated from the sense Plato gave to the concept; where it is identified as the passage between the -to be or not to be-, reflecting the generative capacity of transforming the unformed into form, capable of manifesting itself, as per Heidegger's understanding, as enlightenment, in its own terms and advancing from previous approaches:

“Everything resides in that we think about take-here-forward in its full extent, and at the same time in its Greek sense. A take-here-forward, ποιήσις, is not only the artificial confection, it is not only the artistic-poetic take-to-appear and take-to-the-picture. Also, the φύσις the exit- from-itself, is a take-here-forward, is ποιήσις”⁷.

From there to the discovery of the ‘poetic reason’ displayed by the Malagueña philosopher, thinker and essayist Maria Zambrano (1904-1991), a kind of method of self-discovery of being through one's actions and, in the case of an artist, it transcends and reveals the soul through their works. Therefore, it is something more than matter, and parts of their creator's spirit are encompassed. We find light in her words: “Poetry and reason are complete and require one another”. Poetry would become the supreme thought to capture the intimate reality of every thing. The fluid, moving reality, the radical heterogeneity of being”⁸ That mystical sense of reality, and the possibility of finding the transcendent and ultimate truths through poetry, mythology, ancestral and sacred narration, the mysteries of religion, the irrational and illogical, has been very present, at different historical moments, in Andalusian creative thought, first in its Al-Andalus roots, then under singular Christian interpretation.

It is true that Aixa Portero's works transcend the heritage of an artistic tradition of such power and historical journey as that of Andalusia, which as a means of transmission of a powerful pictorial school of thought with Baroque roots, was revitalized from the eighties in the last century with neofigurative currents, and has been reinvented and projected towards the world precisely by questioning and subverting those roots. After a superficial reading, the work of the Malaga-born artist could seem alien to these spheres of influence, due to its installative nature, aesthetic appearance far from complexes and for a style that, without being vindictive, is very aware of its own reality and vicissitude, and that of the woman as an artist (in this way vindicating the constant presence in her works of bridal tulle, pupae, wedding pins, butterflies...) which justify her long

research and professional journeys, leading her to reside in Belgium, Switzerland, Holland, USA, Ireland, France...

However, an analysis of greater depth, without denying the obvious international contributions, speak to us of contextual nuances that claim not so much their belonging to the latest generation of Spanish artists (although it would be possible to fix their beginnings in relation to a neoconceptual recovery that emerged in Spain in the mid-nineties, it would be impossible to go into depth in these brief lines) but its ascription to vernacular aesthetic parameters that have their roots in the secular past. Among them, the constant search as a creative horizon, the taste for the brilliance of the results (which can be, and show themselves as, anti-lyrical), the intrinsic capacity to recombine extra-artistic materials, the integration of genres and techniques, the subtlety in the conformation of the messages of which the work is channel and that hide much beyond the obvious, the conviction that all artistic work is finalized by the viewer, and a deep, almost ascetic, spiritual sense that underlies the whole work, in which life and death are everyday sides of the same coin.

1. STEINER, G.: *Gramáticas de la creación*. [Grammars of Creation] Barcelona, 2002, p. 160.
2. OVID: *Metamorphoses* [Book XIII, 399-401]. Madrid, Alianza, 2001, p. 386.
3. LOTMAN, I.M.: El símbolo en el sistema de la cultura. *Forma y función*, 2002 (diciembre), p. 89. (<http://redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=21901505>)
4. CIRLOT, J. E.: *Diccionario de símbolos*. Barcelona, Círculo, 1998, p. 373.
5. CIRLOT, J. E.: *Op. cit.*, pp. 89-90.
6. LOTMAN, I.M.: *Op. cit.*, p. 93.
7. BRAVO DELORME, C. from: "El sentido de la Poiesis en El Banquete de Platón. Una contribución al problema de la esencia de la técnica" [The sense of Poiesis in Plato's Symposium: a contribution to the problem of the essence of technique]. *Alpha*, n° 38, 2014, p. 228
8. ZAMBRANO, M.: *Los intelectuales en el drama de España y escritos de la guerra civil*. Madrid, Trotta, 1998, pp. 177-178.