

The Need for the Voyeur

Juan García Ponce's "The Cat"

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Drawings by Héctor Ponce de León

Yucatán-born writer Juan García Ponce summarizes the passion and discipline with which he has assumed his craft as follows: "Living and writing are the same thing. My life has been making books; my books have made my life." Born in Mérida in 1932, for almost 50 years this prolific writer has been faithful to his literary vocation. A student of writers Jorge Ibarguengoitia and Luisa Josefina Hernández, García Ponce appeared in the world of letters in the mid-1950s when in 1956 he won the Mexico City Prize for his play *El canto de los grillos* (Crickets' Song). Later, he would participate in the important group Poetry Aloud and in the *Revista mexicana de literatura* (Magazine of Mexican Literature), open to universal culture, which he edited from 1963 to 1965. But per-

haps one of the most intense cultural moments experienced in Mexico City were the years in which Juan Vicente Melo was director of the House on the Lake cultural center from 1963 to 1966. Octavio Paz's presence among the writers who gathered there was decisive. "He taught us that we had to open up," comments García Ponce, whose generation of writers includes Inés Arredondo, Juan Vicente Melo, Huberto Batis, Sergio Pitol, José de la Colina and Salvador Elizondo, among others.

Through the years, Juan García Ponce has collaborated in a great many magazines. He was a staff writer of *Plural* from 1973 to 1976 and of *Vuelta* (Turn) from 1976 to 1998. He also founded the magazine *Diagonales* (Diagonals) in 1985. He was awarded a fellowship from the Mexican Writers Center in 1957-1958, but when he was given another for the years 1963-1964, he refused it saying that "its literary demands were abom-

inable and ridiculous." He did accept fellowships from the Rockefeller Foundation (1960-1961) and Guggenheim Foundation (1971-1972). He has also received many awards, among them the Ninth Anagrama Prize in the Genre of the Essay (1981), the National Prize for Literature (1989) and recently, the Eleventh Juan Rulfo Prize for Latin American and Caribbean Literature (2001).

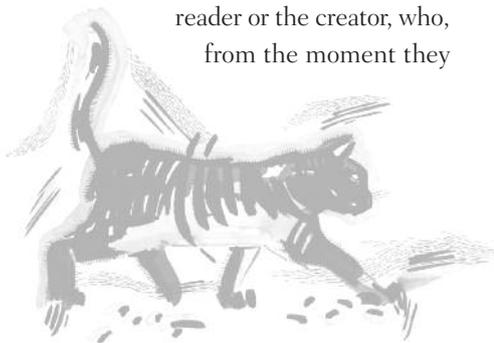
If it is possible to imagine divisions in the vast body of his work, work characterized precisely by its profound unity and coherence, its constant reference to the themes that have always pursued him, it can only be in accordance with the world view that he has tried to fashion. The author himself once noted a revealing change in his narrative: while the stories from *La noche* (The Night) (1963) are, in his own words, "inspired by a world view that can and should be considered negative," his next works, without abandoning his concerns, offer

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us “another vision of the world,” an essentially affirmative one. Little by little, García Ponce became convinced that the writer’s craft “should be used to show the virtue of ways of life condemned by society, by prevailing moral values.”¹ This virtue corresponds to the erotic, life-celebrating impulse that his main characters show on making visible the fact that certain sexual behavior that is part of eroticism and the transgression of conventional morality is not in the last analysis bad for anyone, but, to the contrary, pleasurable. The pleasure principle underlies these stories because in intimist literature there is no pretension at all to objectivity or social or political commitment. For example, D’s work in the story “El gato” (The Cat) is “comfortable” because the character must live and experience his intimacy without social or work pressures. He has a methodical job that takes a few hours a day and for which he receives sufficient pay to live on.²

Intimacy is the space par excellence for the realization of love and eroticism, for the eruption of what traditional Western morality would classify—negatively—as “disorder,” but it is nothing other than the eruption of a fiesta of sensuality, of the celebration of the senses. This is why the word “innocence,” among many others, recurs in García Ponce’s vocabulary: not

the innocence of the critical reader or the creator, who, from the moment they



are situated outside the text, can never be innocent, but rather, the innocence of the characters’ erotic experiences. Octavio Paz says about the innocence associated to sexuality in García Ponce’s work:

It is not really a moral or scientific term, but a religious one: innocence is the plenitude of being in the same way that sin is absence. Innocence is abundance, sin is want. Lawrence knew this perfectly well and, referring to his novels in a letter to a friend, said that all of them turn around the enigma of sexuality “and have been written from the depth of my religious experience.”³

Precisely from this world view, the vitalism, the virtue of certain forms of life, innocence, is one of García Ponce’s most important books written: *Encuentros* (Encounters) (1972), made up of “The Cat” and two other stories, “La plaza” (The Plaza) and “La gaviota” (The Sea Gull). “The Cat” is undoubtedly one of his most representative and “fruitful,” since from it emanate over several years a series of links with other works. In effect, when he saw the possibilities and expressive richness of this story, Juan García Ponce used it as the basis for his novel *El gato* (The Cat) (1974)—in which D becomes Andrés and his friend becomes Alma—and also certain passages in his play *Catálogo razonado* (Reasoned Catalogue) (1982) and in his novel *De anima* (1984).

In this sense, representation as an obsessive insistence on themes and situations in García Ponce means a quest through art and communication among the arts, all of which produces a mix of reality and fiction.

In all these works, except *The Night*, the cat is present and, as a whole, they constitute a *mise en abîme*, a game of mirrors, in which the center or only sign is the woman open to the exterior, not like a thing, but as an object in the sense of finality and quest: an artistic object abandoned to contemplation. We read in “The Cat”:

Whenever D was by himself remembering his friend, he imagined her... offering her body for contemplation with a total abandon, as if the one reason for its existence was that D admired it and in reality it did not belong to her but to him and perhaps to the furniture in the room as well and even to the branches of the trees on the street, which could be seen through the windows, and to the sunlight entering through them, radiant and diffuse.

Now, both in this story and in the novel of the same name, the sign for the encounter is precisely the cat, whose sensual entrance into a Sunday morning like any other separates the couple from the day-to-day world, from the “profane” world in which they live their lives, to unite them with its gaze so that the animal not only gives meaning to the erotic-love relation-

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ship, but also makes it possible, just like the viewer makes a work of art possible with his/her gaze, or the priest, a ritual. In the story, the cat’s attitude, surprising and ambiguous, becomes necessary. Sitting on the woman’s breasts, the cat touches her nipple with one of its paws and D sees how it gets hard and pointy “as when he touched her while making love.” Then D also feels the desire to touch her. She accepts the cat to the point of comparing her body’s reactions to it to those that she has under her lover’s hands. The woman’s compassion when she refers to the cat saying, “Poor little thing!” is inverted when the cat leaves: now it is she and her relationship with D that is a poor little thing. “I need it. Where is it? We have to find it,” murmurs the woman.

Let us look at the necessary triangle of desire caused by the cat. When talking specifically about animals in an interview, García Ponce says that their sexual connotation has “the conceptual value of forgetting oneself”.⁴

In “The Cat”, the animal opens up the vacuum that existed in the couple to definitively unite them in impersonality: “And so it was the cat, the presence of the cat, that filled the void that seemed to gape open inevitably between the two of them. In some way, it united them definitively.” There is a triangular relationship marked by the gaze of the feline, but also by the tracks that the cat leaves in the woman’s back. When the cat leaves, she waits for it; she cannot sleep or rest; she needs

the cat because it is practically a part of the couple itself: the element that breaks up their loneliness, their tedium, the boredom and their day-to-day existence, that discovers and invents it, that makes it be. In the end, the cat “comes back to life”: “Then the two of them heard the long plaintive meows immediately outside the door in a transport of ecstatic happiness.”

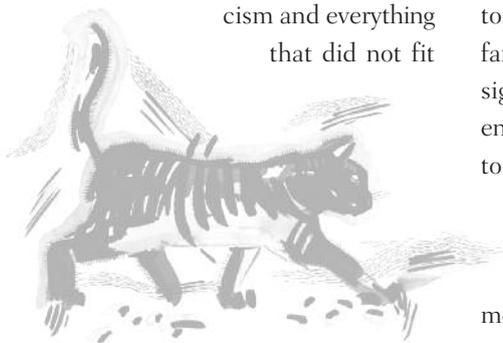
The author aspires to conceiving this allegorical meaning as a concrete fact: making the possibility of the lovers come about. To do that, the total destruction of the personal self is indispensable since love is located outside the self, which is projected and dissolved in it. Nothing more impersonal than animals, that Rilke used to talk about “what was open,” what did not belong to the world but rather is the world: the impersonal, the immortal. It really does not matter who the cat belonged to, the cat that seemed to belong to the whole building, because it is like the dark brown hair of D’s friend, like art or like the body itself: something impersonal. The narrator in “The Cat” refers to the woman’s body saying, “there was something remote and impersonal about her body’s deliberate self-abandon and its surrender to contemplation.” In the same way, while it is true that it is an animal, when acting as a “third party,” the cat, with all its sexual connotations, spiritualized the relationship, testified to it and therefore, drew it away from its pure animal nature by intensifying its eroticism as ceremony, ritual, representation.

In his book *El erotismo* (Eroticism), Georges Bataille analyzes this phenomenon as something eminently human: animals lack eroticism because they have no awareness of death. Eroticism is sterile, uninterested in reproduction, interested only in pleasure: it is ceremony, ritual in which one body continues in another like the ocean’s waves; that is, discontinuity, individuality, the self is nullified to succumb to ectasis, which etymologically means “being outside oneself,” like someone who is absorbed in a painting. That is why it is paradoxical that García Ponce has used the metaphor of animals surely as a resource whose initial aim was to draw an “open” character in the Rilkean sense, and the eminently impersonal nature of animal-ness.

Both in “The Cat” and in the novel of the same name the third party in the triangle is the feline, the curious gaze that lands on the couple’s pleasure, a couple who finds meaning in their relationship thanks to that gaze: the cat is the presence, the apparition of the mysterious third entity that provokes a real encounter between the lovers. But the cat’s gaze is also the gaze of the narrator and the reader-voyeur, which testifies to the relationship and rescues it from oblivion through art. The cat shares the curiosity that arises from instinct, that makes moving and an unlimited quest possible. For all of this to be possible, however, the gaze must exist, related to

curiosity because it is often born of it. From the gaze comes the desire that maintains the characters in constant encounters, which often in the body of García Ponce's narrative are the retouched or more exact ritualistic, obsessive, reiterative repetitions of previous situations that have already been experienced. The gaze always spurs a transformation. While paying attention to Alma's figure, Andrés's expression in *The Cat* changes to one of love, tenderness and dazzled curiosity. The direction of the gaze is often the direction of desire. Underlying the title *Encounters* is precisely the role of the gaze, which brings us closer to the representation of the other and of ourselves through the other. Eroticism, like mysticism, puts us in contact with the other and, therefore, in ecstatic contemplation, makes us the others. The cat, then, is also the eruption of the sacred, the prohibited, of that third party that is included and disrupts the traditional monogamous relationship. In this sense, we should keep in mind that García Ponce, like other members of his generation, use as their starting point Nietzsche's statement that "God is dead," without abandoning, however, the notion of the sacred as understood in the time prior to Christianity. According to Bataille, Christianity is a religion that reduced the sacred to the idea of a good and loving God, eliminating therefore that which was "im-

pure" and sacred: eroticism and everything that did not fit



into a Christian world view, interested only in reproduction and alien to eroticism.

Pierre Klossowski substitutes Rober- te for God; García Ponce, the unlimited woman, regardless of her name. For the attainment of the erotic ritual, the presence of a voyeur is necessary; in the story in question, the voyeur is the cat. In other of García Ponce's works, the cat as voyeur will be substituted by a person or persons, often artists (photographers, painters or writers) who through their art testify to and fix the realization of the erotic ritual. This also happens in Klossowski's *Las leyes de la hospitalidad* (The Laws of Hospitality).

Definitely, the third included party, the curious gaze of the voyeur—such as that of the cat— plays an indisputable role, emerging as the first step in finding the other and for the self finding itself as phenomena of desire, intuiting the other as such, desiring him/her, penetrating him/her and trying to recover the impersonality that all fusions or unifications aim for, even though not for long, and for that reason the communion is repeated obsessively; its characteristics reiterated, repeated again and again, but never hopelessly. Only through the eyes, through the sense of sight, says García Ponce in his essay "La pintura y lo otro" (Painting and the Other), "can we find the spirit."⁵ He agrees at least on this point with the fifteenth-century Platonic author León Hebreo who in his famous *Dialogues of Love* says that sight is in effect a spiritual sense: grace enters us through sight and moves us to love beauty. In other words, the third party or the gaze in García Ponce is the intervention of art in life and of life in art, a fundamental theme of his entire body of

work. The function of the third included party is—and this should be emphasized—that of being consciousness, that of constituting a sexual relationship as something that transcends the purely animal nature of it to become an artistic image.

The phenomena of desire, a sensation that takes on material form, contain the meaning of its movement; and instinct, an eminently irrational and innocent force, does not allow these phenomena to be destroyed. It seeks the means to multiply them, regardless of the fact that they include the negation of the self, the dispossession, the separation or inclusion of the third party or voyeur. All this happens in "The Cat" and is repeated with other shades of meaning in a good part of the narrative of this prolific author. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Juan García Ponce, "El autor y su obra: *La noche*," *Textual* 4, vol. 1 (Mexico City), August 1989, p. 44.

² Juan García Ponce, "The Cat," *Encounters* (Higiene, Colorado: Eridanos Press, 1988). All quotes from "The Cat" are taken from this edition.

³ Octavio Paz, "Encuentros de Juan García Ponce," *Obras completas 4: Generaciones y semblanzas. Dominio mexicano* (Mexico City: Círculo de Lectores-Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996), p. 383.

⁴ Jorge Ruffinelli, "La perversa candidez de Juan García Ponce," *Plural* 39 (Mexico City), December 1974, p. 28.

⁵ Juan García Ponce, "La pintura y lo otro," *La aparición de lo invisible* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1968), p. 203.