

Plot and Variations in the Writing Of Aline Pettersson

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*Human beings waver between the effort to
exist and the desire to be.*

PAUL RICCEUR

Her name notwithstanding, Aline Pettersson is a Mexican writer who occupies a prominent place on the horizon of her country's twentieth-century literature. Born in Mexico City in 1938, her first novel *Círculos* (Circles) was published in 1977, although she had written it many years before and did three drafts that she corrected and fine-tuned until she decided it was ready to publish. From then on, she has

written nine more novels, three books of poems, two books of short stories, a considerable number of essays of literary, social and political criticism and on other extremely varied topics, in addition to a sizeable quantity of children's literature. Clearly, her body of work is not small, and her writing is not brief.

Both her poetry and her narratives are tight, spare, with a careful style which neither displays excess nor lacks anything. The demand to describe minutely, a constant concern with plain-spokenness, with the precise, strict use of nouns and adjectives, an abbreviation of lexicon and syntax and the care to not go overboard in creating discourse make her writing well-honed and fortunately condensed. However and despite—or perhaps due to—the constant linguistic and rhetorical subjection, the lyrical, metaphorical, sensual and heuristic registers both in

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Drawings in this section by Héctor Ponce de León.

her fiction and her essays never disappear, consequently giving her work great strength.

Delving into her narrative and poetical work implies penetrating an interior world in which the emotional registers, the moods, the internal vicissitudes take center stage in the enormous drama of life, far from any lightweight, superficial conception. In it, tragedy plays a preponderant role, coming to the foreground and pushing everything naïve, obvious, immediate out of sight.

Daily life is the stage on which the characters act and existence is resolved, but that field that seems so familiar suddenly becomes sinister. Chance, illness, madness, death, the unexpected all burst in by surprise to upset the apparent calm and security that daily events seem to offer and introduce uncertainty and peripeteia, at the same time opening up the possibility for memory by promoting evocation and yearning. As a result, a discourse of enormous flights of lyricism flourishes (*La noche de las hormigas* [The Night of the Ants]), contrasting with thematic, stylized, colloquial speech (*Querida familia* [Dear Family]). In both registers, Aline not only carefully handles and polishes her language, but, much in the manner of a musical composition interpreted by two or more voices, the melody and the rhythm mate while singing. An effect achieved through the harmonious combination of sounds, the construction of unexpected meanings through the creation of original tropes, of surprising thoughts, of visions in which that tragic feeling of life previously referred to crouches, intertwines and is embodied. This happens thanks to the author's profoundly developed capacity of perception, suggested to her characters, who by unfolding, like in the case of the main character of *Circles* (1977) or *Sombra ella misma* (Shadow Herself) (1986), or by a counterpoint of voices in *Dear Family* (1991), *Mistificaciones* (Mystifications) (1996) or *The Night of the Ants* (1997), to cite only a few of her novels, create that polyphonous multiple-voiced-ness that gives the characteristic texture to all her stories:

Get up, Ana. Good morning, grandfather, a very good morning to you. I'll get ready fast. I like coming with

*you. The early walk. The fresh air. It's been so many years. So many years of walking through Forgetfulness. So many years. I would like to dance listening to the birds, looking at the clean, bright morning. It seems like every day everything is new at this time. How much time has gone by! Today everything seems old to me. The same. The wet plants. I love to stand on the wet grass. To feel the cold. To wake up. I wish vacations would never be over, grandfather. To be able to stay here. Forgetfulness...I still remember the countryside as though it were full of music. It made you want to dance or sing. No, grandfather, I'm not going to trip.*¹

Adelina, the main character in *Shadow Herself*, writing in a diary that she will later destroy, says:

If I said it was a fifth of May, it might be true, but it might not be. Things can't be dated like that, even though I do it just for convenience, because in the stationary shop I have no choice. But, I insist, despite the fact that everything belies what I say, that things never start on the day they're registered. And, nevertheless, it was a fifth of the month, of that there's no doubt; I was on my way to San Luis because it was a holiday, and later I started counting the time; it was the day before yesterday, four days ago, Thursday of last week, Thursday two weeks ago, three weeks ago, the fifth, the fifth. Well, I must admit that Thursday and the fifth ended up standing out from the rest of the numbers or the days. But that's how everything is; I'm sure the paths taken begin before and continue without taking into account the date. It's as though I said that the tuberoses began to change their smell tonight.²

In *Dear Family*, Sara, an old maid whose niece lives with her, keeps up a constant monologue directed at her maid, Soledad, with whom she talks, fights and argues even though we never hear a single word come directly out of the maid's mouth. However, when Sara talks, she repeats, questioning, the lines or fragments of lines that Soledad has said:

By the way, what did you tell me the other day about Rosita? That they're going to throw her out of her

house? Landlords have no heart, don't you think, Soledad? And then her own children don't take care of her. Days go by and I don't see anybody go in or out; the poor thing is always so alone. Her life is as sad as ...What's the name of that woman in the soap opera? I'm forgetting names; I used to have such a good memory. Do you think Mr. Lust will like them? Maybe after supper he'll sit down and watch TV with us. But foreigners have other customs, even though the stories are so interesting. ...Let me tell you something, Soledad, I'm going to be ashamed if I start crying; you cry, too, you silly, don't tell me you don't.³

In *The Night of the Ants*, Alfonso Vigil, a successful doctor, is mugged and fatally injured in a Mexico City park. In the time it takes him to die, he remembers and reconstructs his life and the people he is emotionally tied to: his teenaged son and daughter, his ex-wife, his lover, Eloísa, an artist, a tapestry weaver. Eloísa is making a tapestry called "Iphigenia's Wedding."

At the same time that her dying lover experiences a stream of consciousness, she does the same while she weaves her tapestry. Both discourses intertwine through memory:

Yes, Iphigenia, you're afraid. Afraid of the beings that people the night, and you once again implore Artemis for her protection. But your soul also stirs at the future that is about to come into being. What will Achilles be like? What will your life be like at his side? Will there also be a place in his heart for you?...

And will the hand that drop the sword at night be able to find in its touch the softness you desire? You know your mother's strength, and you know that you come from a line of fearless women. But, will you also be as strong?

The man is frightened by the sound of his own voice that he does not seem to recognize. In his clamoring for help, he has called for his mother with the blind trust of childhood. Alfonso Vigil, inflexible, hard, who rejects sentimentality, has called for his mother. But anyone would have under these circumstances. Because, with time distorted, only the voices remain, the moments in which parental protection is omnipotent.⁴

Despite the constant linguistic and rhetorical subjection, the lyrical, metaphoric, sensual and heuristic registers both in her fiction and her essays never disappear, consequently giving her work great strength.

Aline is thus a virtuoso not only in the musical handling of the language, but she is skilled in perception and capturing the dimensions of meaning that life offers or that each person (as a human being, as a character) is capable of constructing. Aline, who possesses an exquisite ear and enormous anxiety, endeavors—and fully achieves—as a writer to imprint on her literary work that combination of the desire to be a writer, a woman, a lover in the full meaning of the term, and the difficulty of existing. That day-to-day existence in which no great events seem to take place, in which we see no spectacular actions, but only that flow of going to the market, waiting on people in the stationary store, being an employee in an institution, being a professor, taking responsibility for the housework, writing, weaving tapestries, reading, being a doctor, talking to your grandfather, your aunt, your friend, your cousin, your male or female lover, your parents, your spouse, which suddenly becomes strange, sinister. And everything can happen to reach that dimension that animates and pervades tragedy, even when here it is not a matter of characters that belong to royal families, heroes or demi-gods, but of ordinary people who have a conventional, established, in any case, petit bourgeois life.

The minimum details perceived by the magnifying glass of her sensitivity, the smells, the tastes, the sounds, the images, the touch configure a world based on the interiority that is projected on the scene of a supposed exterior reality that at the same time refracts on consciousness. Memory, woven by nebulous strips of uncertain remembrances, re-elaborates moments, situations, characters, fragmented stories. In the same fashion, discourse is engendered by a free flow, a space of different

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voices, perspectives, times, relations, a throng of circumstances in which sensuality gambols, fights and triumphs. The female characters' point of view usually prevails and moves in circles both on the level of the action and that of thought itself. In these revolutions, we move through a labyrinth that is difficult to get out of and in which at every turn, the monster of one's own consciousness threatens, ready to devour unmercifully the meager sustenance that is given on existing. And in this fragile world built in and by the interiority, the promising, hopeful threads that lead to the protagonists plunge them, paradoxically, into heart-rending loneliness. And then, death in that same day-to-day existence happens not as a far-off event, something in the future, alien, but as a facet of this same circular existence, present at each moment: biological death, psychic death. Death of the being that is consumed and consumes in existing. One's own death in the death of one's child (*Los colores ocultos* [The Hidden Colors], 1986); in the freedom of suicide (*Shadow Herself*, 1986); through madness (*Dear Family*, 1991); caused by murder (*Dear Family*) or by a terrible earthquake (*Piedra que rueda* [Stone that Rolls,], 1999); hidden in illness (*Proyectos de muerte* [Projects of Death], 1983); allied to Eros (*Shadow Herself*, *Dear Family*); inseparable from day-to-day events, instantaneous in life, experienced as an obsession, delirium, interior voices...framed in the dynamic, changing existence, in which no moment is the same as any other and moods follow one another in an arbitrary and contradictory manner.

From *Circles* (1977) to *The Night of the Ants* (1997) there is a relish for detail markedly echoing Proust, that turning over on oneself (whether male or female), the intimate tone and the voices that people the stories, the poetry, the novels are heard intermittently from the chiseled interi-

ority and the reconstructed memory of the characters in a circular trajectory of eternal return:

Always beginning again; the memories gradually join an underground current, sometimes so cloudy that it seemingly cannot be seen, until the magdalen and those tastings make them emerge, luminous, on the surface. Like many-sided, polished diamonds that reflect the light of so many perspectives, to unify in the end in the solidity and unity of the stone, and thus they revive by living another moment. It is impossible to avoid what has been lived, what has been imagined. Perhaps it is imagined so; just so, and not in another way because of the memory behind it. Elena's happy moments with René, for example, were very happy, and she lived life again, like the first time, because at bottom, the previous happy moments also belonged, the others, remembered or not; it's all the same. Magical childhood moments of discovery. Nature that had the ability to exalt it, take it out of itself to throw it to the very bottom of her, of Elena, of nature. The ambiguity of words...⁵

The narrator of *Hidden Colors* says:

The memory inscribed on the mind but beyond it, on the body. "The body assumes what the mind does not reach."⁶

The body, humid in anticipation, was drying, but with a few words, in the next encounter, Daniel managed to excite her again....Skin is so changing, perhaps like the mercury of the thermometer, soft, smooth, fleeing, changed by the fingertips. And the same skin at another time, numbed under the day-to-day hand of Carlos, awakened with new contacts. The thermometer that from the freezing winter soars to summer.⁷

Starting from a stream of consciousness—as I said before—these memories engraved on the body before or more clearly than on the mind are scattered, following whimsically from one register to another of memory, of the past, meshing with the present, to project into the future in an imaginative pageant similar to the one effected by

memory, only to rectify and return, immersed in absolute melancholy, to their place in some present that perhaps, or certainly, never happened. And it often happens that in those internal journeys, the notion of being is frequently lost, along with the dimensions of time and space, the meaning of corporeality:

Not knowing where you are, what's happening. Nothing, nothing. Haven't you ever been riding in the car and you don't know where you're going? You look at the clock and you don't know if it's eight in the morning or eight at night? You look at the street as though you'd never seen it before? And every one of your steps takes you to other places where everything is clear, somewhere you can never return from, somewhere you never want to return from?⁸

In this way, consciousness becomes a fragile structure that is easily cracked, erased in the tangled plot of remembering. And lost there, in that instant, it makes anyone —man or woman— who ventures into the stream of consciousness not commanded by reason, the mother of all orders, seem lost.

The main characters in Aline's novels —mostly, but not all, women— often suffer from being “lost” in this way. Lost in their interiority, they move away from the day-to-day world that governs them and in which they are totally immersed to venture into a hell of anxiety and questioning, out of which they emerge because of the reminiscence expressed in supposed healing, pleasurable memories. And again circularity makes itself felt: you end up where you began, even though you can never start again because you actually never started. Writing, music, painting, the framework of tapestries are positioned, then, in the foreground. The literary intertextuality, the presence of colors, the forms, the volumes, the textures prodigiously configured on a canvas, a tapestry, in a piece of writing; the rhythm, the melody of the musical creation come to the fore to rescue you from the day-to-day grayness, the meaninglessness, the terrible anxiety of living, and become part of the re-creation of your very life,

the effort to exist as a possible promise of realizing the desire to be.

Aline Pettersson's writing is, then, a colorful, tight, virtuoso tapestry of figures taken from reminiscence, from melancholy, from the yearning for what was (?) and will be no longer, from a previous tableaux of sensations synesthetically perceived, transmuted into metaphors and brilliant but subtle oxymora, like the east of the pearls, by the touch of unique sensibility of the individual, as the mother-in-law of one of the protagonists says. A sheen given by the goldsmith, the trade of poet scribes,⁹ of reading, the “*silva de varia lección*.”¹⁰ Because Aline's writing is similar to the work of a jeweler: she creates her designs, and then, with infinite patience and firm, meticulous handling of the tools and instruments, she strings the gems, inserting links, providing clasps and tips, chiseling settings, polishing and burnishing her fine, delicate, exquisite pieces to display them before the expectant eyes of her readers. And in this gold work, the material of her designs comes from introspection, loneliness, the awareness of life and death, the demands of creation, the difficult, almost impossible task of living and the careful sheltering of memory. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Aline Pettersson, *Círculos* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1977), p. 22.

² Aline Pettersson, *Sombra ella misma* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1986), p. 73.

³ Aline Pettersson, *Querida familia* (Mexico City: Editorial Diana, 1991), p. 7.

⁴ Aline Pettersson, *La noche de las hormigas* (Mexico City: Alfaguara, 1997), pp. 79 and 58.

⁵ Aline Pettersson, *Los colores ocultos* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1986), p. 77.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹ The trade of poet scribes refers to the medieval trade of poetic creation, divided into that of popular poets (or troubadours) and cultured poets, many of whom lived and worked in monasteries. The text refers to the latter. [Translator's Note.]

¹⁰ “*Silva de varia lección*” is the name of a classic work of Spanish sixteenth-century literature by Pedro de Mexía, which was partially the basis for Marlowe's *Tambourlaine*. [Translator's Note.]