

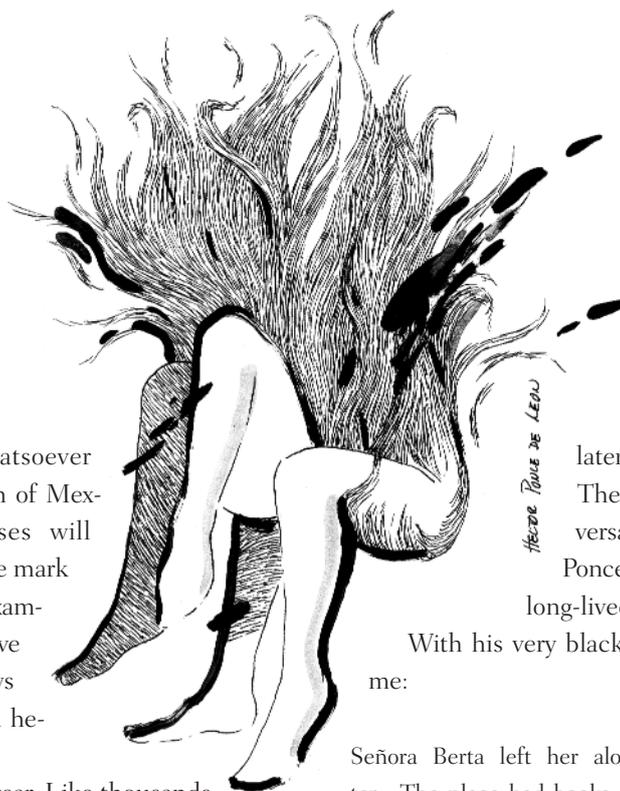
# A Truly Posthumous Homage

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I have no doubt whatsoever that the construction of Mexico City's overpasses will leave a uselessly indelible mark on our memories. I, for example, as a consequence, have become addicted to news programs with their own helicopter.

It was the end of the year. Like thousands of other vacationers, I was driving home, patient and bored, when the substitute announcer's voice informed me of the death of Juan García Ponce. Involuntarily, I thought, with nostalgic humor, learned from my teacher, "This is as far as Columbus got; this is as far as his caravels got."

The first time I had a conversation with Juan García Ponce was in his house in Coyoacán. By then, I was a kind of groupie of his: I went to all the lectures he gave; I had read all his many books, sought out faithfully in libraries, book stores —of both the new and used variety; and, with a Salvador Novo Grant, at the Mexican Writers Center, I was writing my essay *Pornografía del alma* (Pornography of the Soul) (about *De ánima*), which would



later become my first book. The first time I had a conversation with Juan García Ponce, then, I was turning a long-lived dream into reality.

With his very black humor, he dictated to me:

Señora Berta left her alone with Doctor Ballester....The place had books, too, the desk where the doctor was seated when she and Berta came in, and another high table with a typewriter and different office materials, with a chair that looked like it went with the desk and another one across from it.

"Shall we sit down, Inmaculada?" asked the doctor.

Inmaculada walked in front of him and sat down in one of the armchairs, immediately crossing her legs. She put her bag down next to her, beside her thigh, and put one of her arms on the armchair. Dr. Ballester went to sit on the end of the sofa, very close to Inmaculada. There, he explained to her —as they must have already told her— that the job consisted in his dictating and Inmaculada typing. He added that he would write books, books on psychiatry and that the place they were in was his study. Inmaculada decided that the most appropriate thing would be to look around her and then out the window. Dr. Ballester just looked at

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her. It was also strange to be with him, but Inmaculada liked it. Working in that study with the figure next to her, going every day to that house and having Señora Berta open the door for her. She said that that was what they had told her, what she expected. She also knew how to type very well. If the doctor wanted, they could do a test. He did not seem to be in a hurry. First he told her that his previous assistant had been called Alicia and she had become ill. Arthritis. "You know what that is, don't you? A very distressing disease. Poor Alicia." But for Inmaculada, Alicia's disease and Alicia herself were nothing more than what made it possible for her to be there.

What made it possible for me to be there was, in effect, that Juan García Ponce needed an assistant to finish *Inmaculada o los placeres de la inocencia* (Inmaculada or the Pleasures of Innocence) and to write whatever came up. He explained to me that he worked every day from twelve to two and he was kind enough to change his schedule by half an hour so that it would not conflict with my master's program studies, which, of course, he made gentle fun of.

So, during the writing of *Inmaculada* —and *Apariciones* (Apparitions) and *Lectura pseudognóstica de Balthus* (The Pseudognostic Reading of Balthus), in a beautiful edition by Equilibrista publishers, complete with dedication, that was ruthlessly stolen from me— every morning Señora Eugenia opened the door for me. I said hello to Angelina, overcame my allergy to cats, and, like Columbus, I plunged into the sea until the caravels touched port at one-thirty.

Inmaculada, just as Saint Inés del Españoleto says on the cover, is a book of illustrations, illustrations made not with lines and colors, but with words. A mocking intertext of the Marquis de Sade, Inmaculada is a series of innocently pornographic prints. Inmaculada and her daring came from a painting by Balthus, with her cat's eyes, her tongue, bitten by her teeth, as a sign of concentration (a gesture that has been marked with a footnote every time I find myself doing it). We spent hours at a time, Juan with a lectern on his table, looking at late-nineteenth-century engravings and describing them

in great detail so I could transcribe them in the beaten-up, portable, water-blue-colored Olivetti.

In those years, in the mid-1980s, the National Fine Arts Institute organized a great homage for García Ponce in the National Museum of Art. "I want you to name your essay 'Notes for a posthumous homage in life,'" he said to me. "That way, we'll take some of the solemnity out of the thing." And he guffawed thinking about the expressions on the faces in the audience when they heard my daring. Despite his observation, however, my essay was very solemn. And now, almost 20 years later, I think that in that maze of intertexts that is the work of García Ponce, we have lost sight of those mocking winks that characterized not only his person but his intellect. Perhaps this is the moment to do him justice and take the solemnity out of our reading of García Ponce, who wrote parodies, illustrated books, infinite intertexts, but always with playfulness, far from the solemnity of academe.

García Ponce gave me many things, as my teacher in much more than academic matters: my readings of Musil, Klossowski, Nabokov, Tanizaki; the discipline that makes the writer; the ability to look at a painting in detail; the smell of the magnolia tree in his patio; Merida; and he also gave me Balthus, Felguérez and Rojo. A beautiful story is that I was able to shock him when I gave him a copy of David Lynch's *Eraserhead*; his only comment was that that was why I was going crazy.

I open *Inmaculada* and on the title page find a note in a crooked hand that is not mine. In blue ballpoint pen, he has written, "For Graciela, accomplice before I knew her and effective secretary without whose help this book would not be in her hands. With deep affection, from Juan." And I still remember what the other one said, in the now gone, slim volume about Balthus, published by the Equilibrista: it said, "For Graciela, with her hand that is my hand..." Accomplices. That is what all readers must be for our favorite authors. Amidst the insanity of December traffic, I think of the complicities García Ponce granted me as a groupie, as a reader, as an essayist, as an amanuensis. "This is as far as Columbus got; this is as far as his caravels got." **MM**