

On Literary Heroism Or Art as Ceremony

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In 2002 and 2003, my visits to Juan García Ponce became much more frequent because his work was to be published by the Fondo de Cultura Económica. For him, the announcement that the publishing house was going to take on this project was as thrilling—or even more so—as winning the Juan Rulfo Prize for Literature in 2001.¹ Designing the plan for publication took days, weeks, months, and would not have been possible without the help of his collaborator, María Luisa Herrera, his ex-wife, Mercedes Oteyza de Felguérez and his son, Juan García Oteyza.

Juan García Ponce had been ill for years, paralyzed by multiple sclerosis that crept up silently like an invisible line that petrified him a few millimeters more every year. He received me in his austere home, accompanied by María Luisa, his helper, secretary and translator, a young woman of about 30 who had an attentive and affectionate relationship with him. When I got to his house and rang the doorbell, the innumerable images I have of Juan García Ponce would go through my mind. First, the memory of his voice on University Radio programs, around the early 1960s, about French and German literature. Then, that same voice hovering like a bird of prey above an issue—let's say Thomas Mann's novel *Dr. Faustus*—in his literature seminars at the National University's School of Philosophy and Letters; then evening conversations in his home where friends like the now deceased poet Roberto

Vallarino would show up; and always his relations with the editor and reader I have been: *Inmaculada o los placeres de la inocencia* (Inmaculada or the Pleasures of Innocence), *Pasado presente* (Past Present), *Encuentros* (Encounters), *Figuraciones* (Figurations), *Crónica de la intervención* (Chronicle of the Intervention), to mention only those published by the Fondo de Cultura Económica. Memory is not quite as orderly, and so other images cross over these: Marcelo Uribe and myself interviewing Juan García Ponce; Huberto Batis introducing me to Pierre Klosowski's work; the covers and boxes of different books by Juan García Ponce that I collected on the bookshelves in my library long before I met him; and so on.

Juan always dressed in black: gabardine pants and a black pull-over. He welcomed you, smiling and polite and, without wasting a minute, began working, going to the heart of the matter, reviewing pending matters. In the last period, it was no longer easy to understand him, and you had to be as patient as María Luisa or Mercedes Oteyza or myself to understand what he said.

An ascetic writer, inconceivably disciplined, the possessor of a more than iron will, a writer practically genetically programmed who lived by and for literature and understood himself as a pure writer, Juan García Ponce knew how to give himself over to the invention of a vast verbal continent and give his life shape; he knew how to organize his existence around an idea of literature and art. But García Ponce was above all alive, a

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caustic and ironic observer who had managed to find in the roots of loneliness the grove of community and solidarity. He had the civic pride of having supported himself as an independent writer, of having paid the nurses who took care of him, of having paid Eugenia, his self-sacrificing housekeeper and two other women, coin for coin, word for word. For Juan García Ponce, Rainer Maria Rilke, Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, Franz Kafka, Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille, Henry Miller, Jurichiro Tanizaki, Heimito von Rederer, Hermann Broch, Jorge Cuesta, Xavier Villaurrutia, Jorge Luis Borges, Octavio Paz and a few others were not the haphazard names of unknown authors, but rather a presence whose work and life he knew by heart. They were voices that had left an imprint on his work and mind and whose books and portraits lived in the small house in Coyoacán where, every morning, after some physical exercises he did—not without certain effort—a sick, immobile body was transformed into an eloquent chalice, a presence from which other presences emanated. The Rulfo prize somehow pulled him out of oblivion and abandonment, and confirmed for him that the road he had begun walking more than a half century before in his native, beloved Yucatán had and still has the shared meaning of reading and what is readable.

During those long morning sessions with Juan García Ponce and María Luisa Herrera, I was present several times during the correction of *Inmaculada*. Suddenly, I had the impression that, by wanting to rewrite that ending, Juan allowed himself to go back to who knows what mystical, secret place—but evident to the reader—where the two characters are found making love. That is, they come back to themselves through the desire written between the lines in casual words. As I have said, it fell to me to be relatively close to Juan García Ponce in the last years and to discover, for strictly editorial reasons, up to what point Juan dominated his own work and knew what, how, why and when he had written every line. This overwhelming lesson confirmed for me—as if it were necessary—that Juan is an immense writer.

In addition, for many of us he was something more than a writer or a teacher of literature: he was—and this is no exaggeration—a being of platinum discipline. He was a kind of anti-Faust who had to—and knew how to—renounce all the gifts of this world except love, experience and the memory of love, and love of writing. And, as if that were not enough, he read and read; he was up to date on novels and gossip, the polemics and shenanigans of the people he was interested in. The development of the project of his *Complete Works* became an obsession for him, and after a certain time, one of his points of contact with reality. I visited him no fewer than 20 times to talk about the content of each one of the first 20, and then 10, volumes of his works. He received me in his wheelchair, hair perfectly combed, bathed and in good humor, very avid to see how the project was advancing. I never stopped being surprised at the awareness that man had of the tremendous responsibility it was to organize his work in the best possible way for the reader, in the most readable, ordered way. And so, we would spend hours and days making lists of the titles of books and essays, coming up with tentative drafts, hypothetically putting together volumes and seeing which was the best, most didactic and transparent way of presenting his enormous—almost monstrous, obsessive and masterly—body of work.

My admiration for Juan García Ponce as a person is almost as vast as my admiration for the writer of novels, essays, short stories and articles. A few years ago, Juan still gave himself the luxury of receiving his friends like a great lord: he organized small parties with wine and food and sometimes dishes from his native Yucatán. After having worked every morning of every week and having gone over in his sleepless head the scenes from his novels or the arguments from his essays, after having read or listened to someone reading, Juan liked to listen to gossip and jokes and take part in the conversation, sometimes only in monosyllables, sometimes with longer sentences that he repeated again and again until he made himself understood, and then a big smile

would light up his face as though he had just witnessed the birth of a new civilization. Juan García Ponce was a writer by definition; all his contemporaries and friends in Mexico recognized that, beginning with Octavio Paz or Alejandro Rossi, as well as those from abroad: Pierre Klossowski, one of those he truly admired, José Blanco, Gabriel García Márquez and Rafael Humberto Moreno Durán. He was a good disciple of Robert Musil and Thomas Mann. During the first years when I knew Juan García Ponce in the School of Philosophy and Letters, he encouraged and led a seminar in German literature where massively and in detail, with the incisive slowness of the archaeologist and the precision of a surgeon, selected works by Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, Thomas Mann or Elias Canetti were analyzed. I remember in particular the number of sessions that we spent analyzing Kafka's story "The Burrow," a work whose imaginary density grew as each of us read and reread it at home. I bring up these sessions, because, as the reader will remember, in the work, Kafka evokes the silent buzzing that encourages the construction, that is, the acoustic phantom that runs through the work as though it were his own invisible double. Well, I must confess that in very few works of contemporary literature written in Spanish—or in any language—is that rumor as perceptible as it is in Juan García Ponce's. It is a rumor that is made of work and silence, of observation and history, of anecdotes and an enslaving will to give them form and unity through literature, through literary writing. It is not strange that Juan García Ponce became a cult as a writer. The public, even the least cultured, he who drinks in pornography without noticing theology, cannot but feel and follow the incessant dance of the passions and the bodies that are glimpsed and separated like in a kaleidoscope where everything falls of its own weight into place, every time in a new and fascinating way. And at the immobile center of this silent music, of this dance of the passions that meet in fires of dangerous relationships, in the breast of these carnal quartets and quintets, in the axis of these symphonies of love,

is love, the idea of loving passion in all of its fullness and all its rawness, the hunt for the passions body after body, the quest for salvation by and in the language forced to say the impossible—love, the world enchanted by it—the slow description of those instants that, to invoke Marcel Proust, make up life, real life, life realized and caught up with at last, a life really lived, that is, life lived and saved through the literary form.

Juan never stopped reading and writing, overcoming the evil beasts of distraction with his unbreakable spirit. He wrestled from one day to the next, always sportily and ironically, with death, with weariness, with discouragement, with his own dry—and ever more dried up—body, and with his increasingly clumsy mouth and lips. By the end—let us admit it—he spoke with difficulty, and it was not easy to understand that voice so like an injured animal's that only a faithful few knew how to find some meaning in. The literary, critical, moral and aesthetic greatness of the work of Juan García Ponce is, of course, undisputable; what might be open to debate is its meaning and staying power. This body of work, practically impossible to comprehend as a whole, will continue to grow in time and is called upon to turn into an exemplary place of the imagination. A few weeks after the death of a writer who, while still living considered himself posthumous, it is too soon to try to measure his power of expansion, his ability to transform the idea and practice of the literature of a country like Mexico. Although we had the fortune of being close to him and, in a certain way, to recognize him, we know that many of Juan García Ponce's readers and critics are still to come and that his work somehow represents the anticipation of what a writer's own vocation can make of him when he gives himself up to it unreservedly. ■■■

NOTES

¹ The Juan Rulfo Prize for Literature, given every December during the Guadalajara Book Fair, is one of the most prestigious awards for literary achievement in the Spanish language. [Editor's Note.]