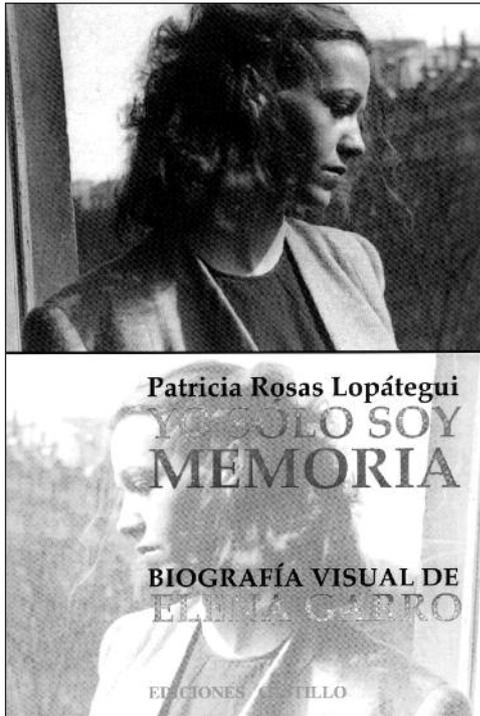


Reviews



Yo sólo soy memoria. Biografía visual de Elena Garro
(I Am Only Memory. A Visual Biography of Elena Garro)
Patricia Rosas Lopátegui, ed.
Ediciones Castillo
Monterrey, Mexico, 2000, 130 pp.

The title of this pictographic homage to Elena Garro resonates with the thematic obsession ever present in her life and literary work: “Yo sólo soy memoria y la memoria que de mí se tenga” (I am only memory and the memory that you have of me), as quoted from *Los recuerdos del porvenir* (1963) (translated as *Recollections of Things to Come* [1986]), her best known novel, for which she won the prestigious Mexican literary award Xavier Villaurrutia in 1963.

A memory, however, is not all that lingers of Elena Garro, one of Mexico’s foremost twentieth-century women writers, as this, the only exclusive and authorized pictorial biography of the author, reminds us. Garro, one-time wife of Mexican poet laureate Octavio Paz, returned to Mexico in 1993 after 21 years of self-imposed exile that began after her conflictive participation in the events related to the

1968 student movement. Known as a polemical and defiant intellectual, and a feminist ahead of her time, Garro nonetheless died three years ago in Mexico without due literary and personal recognition, in the company of her daughter and faithful companion, poet Helena Paz, and her many cats. As history has often proved, however, it is literary worth which is finally the measure of a writer and which endures after all else is reduced to memories and recollections.

And there is no doubt as to the quality of Garro’s literary talent. The force of her best poetic prose is entrancing, relying on shifts in consciousness and conveying a kaleidoscopic sense of time and space in language that lingers as pure magic, yet is carefully crafted. The aforementioned novel, *Los recuerdos del porvenir* (1963), and a short story such as “La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas” from the volume entitled *La semana de colores* (1964), to offer a couple of examples, are unquestionably classics. With the exception of the short plays collected in *Un hogar sólido* (1958), most of her other works remained unpublished until many years after they were written, such as her novels *Testimonios sobre Mariana* (1981), *Reencuentro de personajes* (1982) and *Mi hermanita Magdalena* (1998), the novellas *La casa junto al río* (1982), *Matarazo no llamó...* (1989), *Inés* (1995), and *Busca mi escuela y Primer amor* (1996), the volumes of short stories *Andamos huyendo Lola* (1980) and *La vida empieza a las tres... Hoy es jueves... La feria o De noche vienes* (1997), as well as the play *Felipe Ángeles* (1979).

Garro, an avid reader from an early age and defiant from the word go, was considered something of a child prodigy as well as a promising literary figure. At 17, having studied with one of Pavlova’s dancers, she became choreographer of Julio Bracho’s University Theater and was attending literature courses at the National Autonomous University of Mexico at a time when not many women in Mexico went to the university. One day, on her way to a Latin exam, she decided to go to the public registry and marry Octavio Paz instead. Life changed for Garro after that in both positive and highly challenging ways. In this pictorial biography that contains illuminating unpublished material, the early and lesser known part of Garro’s story comes to life, continuing with episodes that are better known but can now be seen anew within the graphic context offered by *Sólo soy memoria*.

The chronological focus proposes five prominent spaces temporally and thematically: “Infancia: bajo los signos de la magia, la imaginación y los libros” (Childhood: Under the Signs of Magic, Imagination and Books): 1920-1934; “Adolescencia y matrimonio con Octavio Paz” (Adolescence and Marriage to Octavio Paz): 1934-1963; “1968: el signo de la calumnia” (1968: The Sign of Slander): 1963-1972; “El silencio y la soledad en el exilio” (Silence and Solitude in Exile): 1972-1993; and “El reencuentro con México” (Re-encounter with Mexico): 1993-1998. Each of these chapters (as they are labelled) is given a short biographical introduction by Patricia Lopátegui, Garro’s U.S. literary agent and a Garro scholar for many years, followed by a captioned pictorial narrative.

In this visual testimony Garro reluctantly poses as a child, looks naively arrogant as an adolescent, is caught dancing or offers dramatic poses for the eye of the camera: she stands with her daughter as a baby or next to her as a young woman, poses, nonchalant, smoking a cigarette or with her cat in her Mexico City house or standing on the balcony of her Paris home; she also appears, smiling, among some *campesinos* or in Xochimilco and Chapultepec with friends and intellectuals. Other photographs show her next to Octavio Paz and yet others in the company of such figures as Carlos Fuentes, Picasso or Bioy Casares. The older Garro also makes her appearance, no longer caring to pose, perplexed still by the animosity leading to her exile.

Yet there is a certain recurring, haunting and haunted gaze, an almost wistful look that tells a story all of its own. Glimpses of a deep and complex inner world are revealed, a sure and unsettling knowledge that all is not what it seems and that this remains essentially unshareable—except, perhaps, in her most poignant writing—as if she were a permanent exile from the surrounding world, perpetually on the razor-edge of anguish, often translated outwardly as perplexity, intellectual cynicism or even haughty nonchalance.

One also notices inevitably that she is rarely smiling, even in photographs taken during her childhood, although she describes those years as being “*tiempos felices, aventureros y gloriosos*” (happy, adventurous and glorious times). In the strange magic at the core of her work, in its sense of sad inevitability, it is as if she clairvoyantly perceived her story as some kind of fiction and history as a narrative told by others than the true protagonists. As if, with equal clairvoyance, she perceived this simultaneously as a highly sensitive child-woman and as an intellectual critic able to

bring apparent contradictions together within the realm of fiction transmuted into a reality depicting the unsaid and the not-seen. Much of her narrative reminds us that magic realism, in its inception, has deep, dark roots in Mexican soil and comes closer to unveiling the truths of the unsayable, the unwrite-able, than what is perceptually and intellectually superimposed as “possible.”

An interesting feature of this fascinating book on Garro’s life is the way many of the captions under the 130 or so photographs become a means for an unusual self-narration within a biographical setting and with editorial intervention, since Garro’s direct commentaries on some of the photographs were taped by Lopátegui. And these commentaries in addition to the inserted fragments from her work take their cue precisely from memories—in resonance with Garro’s concern with memory and time that the book’s title also echoes—memories shaped directly from photographic images frozen into (or, one wonders, out of?) time and in a specific space where the pictorial is allowed to write its own narratives, for once dis- and re-placing the word from the realm in which Garro was a true sorceress. This volume, as Lopátegui explains, is soon to have a sequel in which the word will take its rightful place in relation to Garro’s literary work and status.

Worthy of mention in *Sólo soy memoria* is the graphic design: by picking up fragments of images and repeating them, printing several copies of the same photograph, inserting, juxtaposing and clipping images, a different and playful reading is suggested, keeping the reverent mood company, a game Garro herself might have enjoyed playing, in fact.

For anyone interested in Garro, this book is a good companion to her written work, not only because of the unpublished material it affords the reader, but due to the different kind of stories it tells. Roland Barthes claimed in *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography* that through photographs the dead return, and we could say that Garro returns—quite hauntingly so—in this pictorial biography to claim her right to memory.

(For inquiries about the book you may contact
castillo@edicionescastillo.com,
www.edicionescastillo.com
or patricia@lopategui.com)

Claire Joysmith
Researcher at CISAN