

Life's Impossible Death

Bruce-Novoa*

“Always the same route:
it's about knowing
that 'the impossible is.'”¹

La errancia sin fin

JUAN GARCÍA PONCE

“The impossibility of dying,” Juan García Ponce wrote in an eponymous essay, “is an attribute of life. He who dies ceases to be alive; so, since we are alive we cannot die. While in the place of life, death's territory is forbidden us.” Situating death across a non-negotiable chasm, far from denying it reality, affirms its persistent, even necessary, presence as life's other: “Death is an inaccessible state for our condition as men. It is its radical otherness.” To literature he attributed similar otherness, residing as it does in the imaginary—words representing the absence of the objects they name—and he turned his own into an effort to comprehend, feel and perceive the entire continuum of existence. García Ponce positioned himself in a territory he called radical literature in which death continually appeared to reveal its role as absolute other, and more than any writer of our time explored the experience-enhancing possibilities death offered life.

In his earliest works, however, death erupted as a numbing trauma not only for individual victims, but also for others near them. “Amalia” (1963) and *Figura de paja* (Straw Figure) (1964) ended in suicide that cut off promising love affairs and left the survivors alone and

unsettled, or worse, doomed to mediocre normality. In its traditional role, death, like a monarch in a classical play, appeared to reinstate the rule of social order by punishing those who dared alternative behavior.

When the family patriarch unexpectedly dies in his second novel, *La casa en la playa* (The House at the Beach) (1966), the response, however, differs. Elena, a young career woman, must decide if she will accept her summer lover's offer to marry her. Precarious mortality stirs in the lover a need to reaffirm familial propriety by legitimizing their passionate affair. Elena rejects the offer, refusing to trade the freedom and intensity of asocial love for domestic security. Consonant with the 1960s counter-culture sexual revolution, García Ponce struck bourgeois society at the heart of its repressive order by rejecting death's symbolic function. Like his protagonist, he, too, left it behind with social realists by taking his work to a rarefied place where alternative lifestyles could be pursued. Literature need not respect repression. By exploiting the virtues of imaginary space where even the impossible is possible, he could confront death in less traditionally restricted terms.

In the late 1960s he armed a multi-volume attack on another pillar of social convention: individual identity. His narratives featured characters in relationships whose fulfillment depended on third, non-human subjects—dogs, a cat, a plaza, a forest, a seagull, a book or a mountain cabin. Their emotions and sensations triangulated in space through non-human agents; the protagonist's identity freed itself from the one-to-one, person

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/body relationship, the senses swelling beyond the usual human physical and psychological limits. Thus, with identity detached from a particular body, the significance of corporeal death must necessarily undergo redefinition.

La cabaña (The Cabin) (1969) brought the series into dialogue with death, opening with Claudia reading a postcard her husband mailed shortly before his accidental demise. The novel recalls the story of her youthful search for love. Her first husband and a series of lovers always alienated her from her body and the world, leaving her searching for herself in memories of the sensations felt during sex. Her second husband alters all this, making her feel one within a harmony of being in

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the world. With his loss, the emptiness of absence threatens to impose its familiar order: time, distance, individuality. At this point, García Ponce goes beyond rejecting death's traditional function by leading Claudia on a desperate, dangerous venture to retrieve the sensation of unity with her husband. She returns to a cabin where they experienced their most intimate encounters. But instead of turning it into a tomb and monument to the past, Claudia feels physically and mentally driven to live in the present, in the material world outside of memory. Yet, since death is bodiless, Claudia must liberate herself from her body while simultaneously offering its space for the apparition of her husband's presence. The search leads her to a forest clearing where she displays herself to two woodsmen—described like animated trees—and in the sexual exhilaration of anticipation, even fear, she retrieves the sensation of unity and wholeness her husband had given her. The intensity of

transport, in which she exceeds her limits and starts to fuse with the world, is her husband. Their union is facilitated by Claudia's willingness to relinquish her individuality—her subjectivity—in order to open her body to another's materialization as it flows in the world. The sacrifice of the subject's integrity does not erase the life-death opposition; rather, it exploits it.

Around this time García Ponce published "El arte y lo sagrado" (Art and the Sacred), a key essay in his vast opus in that it defined his understanding of literature as the sacrifice of the world to transform it into an alternate order of existence and hold it outside time's movement. This deathlike state differs from death itself in that it remains permanently present and available to the living, yet exhibited as life's opposite. This affirmation of life in death—a definition of eroticism we might note—García Ponce called the sacred. The heart of the essay is a dense paragraph in which he considers concepts of the sacred and art held by Rilke, Hölderlin, Heidegger, Blanchot and Bataille, weaving them into an intricate network of fluid references and mutual dependencies from which García Ponce's position surfaces, in which his voice, while relinquishing authority to those multiple others, bespeaks itself as silence through which the Other speaks.

For Maurice Blanchot, Hölderlin's word is the reality of the sacred in his work. But also we just saw how Bataille assumes that the sacred is not the death ritual within the sacrifice, rather the element that arises from the ritual. For Heidegger, however, the work is the mediation through which the sacred can be reached...What remains now is to see the relationship between the work, between art, and sacrifice implied by the death of its object. In this regard we would have to return to Blanchot. Whatever artist concerned, be it the poet in relation to the word or the painter in his treatment of images, he strips both the world and all beings of their

appearance, of their particularity, to turn them into words or into images. Yet for this, as Bataille has seen at a point where we must distance ourselves from Blanchot, it is indispensable for this particularity to exist, that it be a reality; but having accepted this—the equivalent to accepting the world, its apparent reality—what the artist actually does is sacrifice the world. Through his act, reality dies to transform itself into a new life. Reality is devoured by the work, by the image, so these can show it to us as another life. But it is a dead life that precisely has been excised from time, stripped of its continuity, leaving it forever held simultaneously outside and inside of life. In this is found the secret and power of permanence of the work of art.²

This minimal tour de force anticipated his Anagrama Prize-winning book *La errancia sin fin* (The Unending Errantry) (1981), a lengthy treatment of Musil, Borges and Klossowski that fuses them and the author in its textual flow. García Ponce's essays, in short, staged the same sacrificial ritual, allowing his body—his voice, writing, work, name, identity—to incorporate the spirit of other authors. And his narratives followed suit. Like Claudia freeing her body into a multi-spirited space—or the wonderfully daring, promiscuous protagonists of his last novels—García Ponce opened his body of work into a territory where the individual voice delivered itself to a free flow of sensations and thoughts disseminating into a process of polymorphous life in continuous movement.

One would like to say that death makes no sense when recast in these terms, and yet it does. Its own sense, or non-sense. Which is the point. García Ponce came to treat mortality as more and less than simple disappearance. It is the space itself of art. To create, to live what he called radical literature was to reside in that life-death chasm where, with normality suspended, the impossible is possible. Perhaps we could attribute his willingness to dispense

with the formalities of identity to García Ponce's protracted illness diagnosed in the mid-1960s—the first of his generation to begin to die. Of Nietzsche he once wrote, "No one can experience more directly life's inherent discontinuity like someone in whom illness has devastated the sense of unity his body could give him."³ But this does not adequately explain his unwavering determination to keep his work in that liminal state and to render the experience an affirmation of the need—the absolute destiny he called it—for art. Now there he remains, his phase in the process complete though not ended. The rest depends on those capable of continuing the project. As he often reminded us, art can await those ca-

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pable of appreciating it. They will arrive to renew the ritual. Art retrieves what time inevitably steals, a possibility of reemergence that returns life to life as death's sacred impossibility, *la aparición de lo invisible* (the apparition of the invisible)... a radical literature few understand ... so there it waits for those who can. ■■■

NOTES

¹ All translations of Juan García Ponce's fragments from the Spanish by Bruce-Novoa. [Editor's Note.]

² Juan García Ponce, *Apariciones. Antología de ensayos* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987), p. 376.

³ Juan García Ponce, "Sobre el pensamiento en Pierre Klossowski," *Apariciones*, op.cit., p. 63.