

MEMORY AND ELEMENTS OF TRADITION IN THE WORK OF ELENA GARRO

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— *Abstract*—

This paper intends to point out a certain aspect about the elements of the tradition that Elena Garro incorporates in her work: memory. In addition to indicating that the writer recovers the cultured tradition (literature of classical antiquity), the mexican popular (legends, sayings, proverb...) and prehispanic tradition, it is stated above all that the tradition in Garro's work is manifested not so much intertextually, but using his own memory. The traditions in Garro's work are recreations passed through of his own memory.

Keywords

Elena Garro, tradition, memory, literary inventiveness.

Understanding a work is a requirement to open up to what it tells us, even in contrast to our ideas. The work, then, proposes a dialogue. Hans Georg Gadamer, in continuity with the phenomenology and Husserl and Heidegger's hermeneutics, has pointed out that we are only capable of understanding from our historical moment, that is, from a tradition: what we consider valuable and worthy of being conserved. Thus, the understanding consists in recognizing the tradition that gave life to the text. Each era updates fragments of the remote, which another era will have forgotten. That is why the exercise of memory in the creation of a work encourages us to recover the tradition in which it was created, within the limits of our own.

The tradition inherited from Elena Garro was an amalgam of knowledge imbued from childhood, according to her own testimonies, and her constant concern to make literature with her memories. A literate tradition in which the characters of the Iliad were part of her daily life and a popular tradition, whose most visible aspect is found in the sentences, sayings and so-called *short stories*, "the bizarre farces, the ingenious facets and the impossible "happened"; the simple anecdotes, sometimes etiological, other simply humorous; or the memory's formulaic games"¹. The enormous communicative capacity of this type of speeches admired the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who in his analysis of discursive genres pointed out the existence of a dialogism between primary, oral, unofficial and secondary speeches, among them literature. For him, only certain writers are able to incorporate the primary speeches in the secondary ones. Cervantes, for example, is one of those authors who managed to absorb the voices of the community and incorporate them into what would be his masterpiece. In this sense, as Juan Rulfo or Juan José Arreola, Elena Garro achieved this incorporation of the cultured and popular tradition in the written literary text, in a way already distant from the official censorship present in previous movements such as Romanticism, indigenism and other nineteenth-century projects.

I will mention some examples of this use of the present tradition in Elena Garro's work in a way that does not correspond exclusively to intertextuality, but to memory, because it is not a direct use of a textual material transferred to the work, but of a fusion that transits from the memory's natural shape to

1 Rafael Beltrán and Marta Haro, "Presentation" to their edition of *The Folkloric Tale in Literature and Oral Tradition*, Valencia, Universitat, 2006, p. 11

the original story. I begin with the episode that raised this concern in me: the end of the author's most important novel:

I am Isabel Moncada, born of Martín Moncada and Ana Cuétara de Moncada, in the town of Ixtepec on the first of December of 1907. In stone I became on October 5, 1927 before the appalled eyes of Gregoria Juárez. I caused my parents' misfortune and my brothers Juan and Nicolás' death. When I came to ask the Virgin to heal me of the love I have for General Francisco Rosas who killed my brothers, I repented and I preferred the love of the man who lost me and lost my family. Here I will be with my love alone as a reminder of the future for ever and ever. (Garro, 2003: 292)

This final resolution of the narrative framework, capable of revealing the enigma raised in the title through the oxymoron "memory of the future", was already in the ninth chapter of the first part of *Quixote*, when talking about the finding of the portfolio that contained the gentleman's following adventures, whose authenticity is the reason for an argumentative episode about truth and history:

the historians must be punctual, true and not at all passionate, and that neither interest nor fear, rancor nor liking, do not make them twist in the way of truth, whose mother is history, contender of time, deposit of actions, witness of the past, example and warning of the present, warning of things to come. (I, IX)

Cervantes' definition is based on the Ciceronian topic embodied in *Del orador*: "Historia, vita memoriae, magistra vitae, nuntia vetustatis", according to the editor Francisco Rico. The topics have the particularity of joining the popular tradition: Garro, then, inserts it in the tombstone of Isabel as a message addressed to all the inhabitants of Ixtepec. If the author knows its Latin or Hispanic origin, she manages to bring that nuance of popular wisdom to it.

In good measure, many elements of the tradition incorporated in the work of Elena Garro have a similar sense of sentence, as a way of orienting the behavior of the younger generations. This is the case of the image of the seductive woman who loses men and appears in *El encanto, tendajón mixto*. The characters of Juventino, Ramiro and Anselmo walk tired and in the middle of the darkness until a store appears in which "Agreed to the counter, a beautiful woman smiles. She wears a yellow suit and her sumptuous black hair loose to the knees". (67) She is characterized by an enigmatic speech: "The man is born enchanted; and it depends on the woman that he stays that way or that later he only stares at the stones" (69). Anselmo, the youngest of

the three, accepts a drink offered by the woman, against the warnings of his companions. The store, Anselmo and the Woman disappear. The narrator states that "his friends went to look for him. The date May 3rd, of the following year." So they return to see the three: Anselmo is finishing drinking the cup. From Circe to popular tradition, in the form of a woman in white, witch or demon, this image of the feminine is found in popular legends and couplets. Actually, Garro only proposes a very poetic version of that legend.

The character of Ventura Allende falls into a similar deception: a pig invites him to a wedding, deceives him, or rather, seduces him with food. The party guests are sheep and horses. And, as "wedding without dance would not be a wedding," "the viper of the sea"² round begins, Ventura joins and is turned into a sheep. At the end, the Puerco advances to the center of the scene and closes the play: "This little game is over! I won a sheep! And they all lived happily ever after!" (61), in the end is revealed that the pig is the devil. This is a legend also common in various regions of Latin America and even today it is found on Internet sites. Both texts reconstruct, in a complementary way, the episode of Circe and Odysseus: hospitality — the bath and the banquet— which is, at the same time, a sign of danger —the guest is in a vulnerable situation— and the transformation of men into animals; like the woman from *El Encanto*, Circe kept Odysseus for a year. These elements are deeply rooted in popular tradition, as Aurora Galindo has pointed out:

Elements of the fabulist traditions of around the world are the sorceress who turns men into animals, the magic wand, the magic herb, the antidote, the liberation of enchantment, etc. Like many wizards, Circe lives in a valley in the middle of a forest, and her residence, wolves and lions domesticated by spells; servant nymphs and dazzling luxury, responds to the enchanted palace's folk pattern, very important also in the epic tradition. (Galindo, 47)

The assorted shop and the wedding fulfill the function of the enchanted palace in the middle of the forest. The damage, however, is ambiguous: the woman in the piece *El encanto...* has a seemingly positive sense, while the demon responds to the maximum damage according to Christian tradition.

2 Popular Mexican singing game

I take this topic to go to the next genre cultivated by Elena Garro: the story. The image of the devil in *The Tree*, both in its theatrical and narrative version, is a corporeal being, with continued zoomorphic characteristics of the medieval representations, similar to those Luisa recognized in the strange character: "a *charro* who breathed fire; he did not have boots but horse hooves and when walking, they drew fire. He had a whip in his hand and with it he whipped the stones and the stones lit fire." As for his appearance, from the first novo Hispanic references of friars on demonic appearances, the *Bad* used to wear luxurious outfits: *cacique* in the first years of evangelization, *charro* as the experiences of violence that began with the revolutionary stage implied for the regional peasant culture threatens and disorganizes; and as for the traumatic effects of the appearance, the "fright" is also a collective reference among certain rural groups, a disease, therefore, strictly real for those who claim to have suffered it³.

I'm going to close this outline with one of Elena Garro's most enigmatic stories: "The week of colors", whose symbolic references are difficult to pin down, to create an almost sinister story in a dream world. The girls Evita and Leli listen to the indigenous servants murmuring about a certain man, Don Flor, who severely punches Domingo, but they keep silent when one of the girls intervenes; both girls perceive the succession of the days differently than adults: "The weeks did not happen in the order that their father believed. Three Sundays together could happen or even four Mondays in a row. It could also happen Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, but it was a coincidence ". They observe Don Flor in the distance, despite the warnings of the women, while he talks with the days: "On Friday, leaning out of the window overlooking the corral, he called Don Flor and Monday." Despite the warnings, the girls come to see him and witness delirious events of violence against women named as the days. Fantasy, supernatural and reality limits are blurred in this story, with a possible relation with the indigenous tradition.

As it is known, this mythology has been adapted to the duality based on "a mythical, sacred time, of the numinous, of the supernatural, and the time of

3 Rogelio Luna Zamora analyzes references related to appearances of what he calls "the myth of the devil on horseback" among the population of the municipality of Cuauhtémoc, in the state of Colima, locating experiences similar to those of Luisa's character: the fact that such an experience manages to make sick those who suffer it: fevers and diarrheas that last for several days ("The construction of fear by social stratum", in Rocío Enríquez (coord.), *Home, poverty and well-being in Mexico*, ITESO, 1999, pp. 229 -259).

men",⁴ which was incorporated into the private and family rites that, since the first years of colonization, allowed evading the vigilance of the ecclesiastical authority. Traces of that temporal duality are found in this story, centered on the personification of the days of the week. The worldview of indigenous time, for example, the Maya, assigns to each day a specific color that represents a god. Days were conceived as living beings, with specific traits and attributes. For example, "*Imix*, the first of the days, connotes the monster deity of the earth, root from which everything proceeds. Among its symbols are the lotus flower [...] Next comes *Ik*, the wind and life [...] introduces the god of rain. *Akbal* is the darkness, connotation of the underworld, and the jaguar, the nocturnal sun that runs through it...".⁵ In almost all Mesoamerican calendars, there is the idea of hierarchy between the days and periods to which they are subordinated, as well as the divinatory possibility and, therefore, controllable by certain authorities.⁶

At a popular level, there is no evidence of an indigenous tradition related to a similar conception of time: the Christian calendar was adapted early to the pre-Hispanic festivities and the cultivation periods. However, the similarities between this personifying vision of the days and that of "The week of colors" are evident: the first reference to the matter appears in the voice of the indigenous washerwoman: "Don Flor beat Domingo until blood was taken and Friday also came out purple from the beating".⁷ Through the children's characters, the story of Elena Garro establishes a similar distinction between an objective and a subjective time; the women imprisoned in the story are distinguished from each other by the colors of their clothing, but also by their attributes: Sunday: "Lust" and "Largesse"; Saturday: "Laziness" and "Chastity". The precarious and violent conditions in which women live under Don Flor's domain recall the decline of indigenous belief.

4 Guadalupe Vargas Montero, "The worldview of indigenous people", p. 126 available at: <http://www.sev.gob.mx/servicios/publicaciones/colecciones/veracruzsigloXXI/AtlasPatrimonioCultural/05COSMOVISION.pdf>

5 Miguel León-Portilla, "Time as an attribute of the gods", available at: <http://americaindigena.com/portilla.html>

6 Federico González, "The Mesoamerican calendars" available at: <http://americaindigena.com/20calendariosmesoamericanos.html>

7 Elena Garro, *The week of colors*, Mexico, Porrúa, 2015, p.77.

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