

Alberti's "Bosch": Ekphrasis as a means of return

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In 1939, the Spanish Fascist forces, lead by Franco and aided by Mussolini and Hitler, defeated the Republicans and Rafael Alberti, along with many of his countryfellows, was forced to leave Spain. García Lorca had been murdered in Granada; Antonio Machado had died in a refugee camp in Colliure, France; and Miguel Hernández had been imprisoned. From March to September, Alberti lived in France, but when World War II begun, he was forced to leave; on February 10th, he took the *Mendoza*, where "completamente a oscuras y sobre una mar infestada de submarinos" (Alberti, 1972: xvi), he sailed with his wife to Argentina for an exile that was going to last for almost forty years.

At the beginning of his exile, while he was still in Paris, he started writing *La arboleda perdida*, a nostalgic account of his life. "In Argentina he continued to write in this nostalgic mode for many years, mourning his lost country and his lost comrades. As late as 1952, when he published *Retornos de lo vivo lejano*, hauntingly beautiful poems that evoke the people, places, and emotions of his youth, and even as late as 1954, when he published *Baladas y canciones del Paraná*, he was still looking backward to Spain" (Tipton, 1997: xvii).

A la pintura, the volume that includes the poem I am going to analyse, grew from this overwhelming feeling for his past: his lost country, his lost youth days when he himself was a painter and spent most of his time at the Prado Museum in Madrid. This collection of poems was going to be his recreation of the beauty of the Spanish Museum, it was a return to a place and time that were lost. Just consider some lines of the poem that opens the collection:

Mil novecientos diecisiete. / Mi adolescencia: la locura / por una caja de
pintura, / un lienzo en blanco, un caballete (l. vv. 1-4).

The book grew out of his desire to make of the past a living presence.
Lines such as:

¡El Museo del Prado! ¡Dios mío! Yo tenía / pinares en los ojos y alta mar
 todavía, / con un dolor de playas de amor en un costado, / cuando entré
 al cielo abierto del Museo del Prado (III. vv. 1-4).

Lines such as these make us remember his very first two collections of poems: *Marinero en tierra*, imbued by the nostalgia he was feeling for the sea, being then in Madrid, and that was an “imagistic evocation of the indigos, aquamarines, and whitewash, the kelp and shells of the seaside world of his childhood” (Tipton, 1997: xiv); and *Sobre los ángeles*, “written during a time of despair and torment, when he had come to feel that the world, whose myriad voices he had formerly interpreted, no longer spoke to him” (Tipton, 1997: xv).

As you see, the theme of a return to lost times and lost places was recurrent in Alberti. But, in *A la pintura*, it acquired some particularities because, as Tipton has stated, the volume is more than nostalgia, “for it is not just a re-creation, but also a creation, a deft and lovely shaping of reality. Alberti has said that he hoped *A la pintura* might contribute, in some small way, to the reemergence of beauty, harmony, and order in his ravaged world [...] The collection, published in 1948, was fashioned, Alberti has said, ‘after all the chaos’ and set up in opposition to it; this is why he first offered it as an ‘homage to peace’” (Tipton, 1997: xix). Let’s see with a specific example, how poetry became a way to re-shape reality, how writing about the lost paradises of the past was going to be a way to free himself from his dark demons: “Mis oscuros demonios, mi color del infierno / me los llevó el diablo ratoneril y tierno / del Bosco, con su químico fogón de tentaciones / de aladas lavativas y airados escobones” (Alberti, 1972: 689). Here is the complete version of the poem “El Bosco” (Alberti, 1967: 739-742).

El diablo hocicudo,	
oijpelambrudo,	
cornicapricudo,	
perniculimbrudo	
y rabudo,	5
zorrea,	
pajarea,	
mosquiconejea,	
humea,	
ventea,	10
peditrompetea	
por un embudo.	

Amar y danzar, beber y saltar, cantar y reir, oler y tocar, comer, fornicar, dormir y dormir, llorar y llorar.	15
Mandroque, madroque, diablo palintroque.	20
¡Pío, pío, pío! Cabalgo y me río, me monto en un gallo y en un puercoespín, en burro, en caballo, en camello, en oso, en rana, en raposo y en un cornetín.	25
Verijo, verijo, diablo garavijo.	30
¡Amor hortelano, desnudo, oh verano! Jardín del Amor. En un pie el manzano y en cuatro la flor. (Y sus amadores, céfiros y flores y aves por el ano.)	35
Virojo, virojo, diablo trampantojo.	40
El diablo liebre, tiebre, notiebre, sipilitiebre, y su comitiva	45

chiva, estiva, sipilitriva, cala, empala, desala, traspala, apuñala con su lavativa.	50
Barrigas, narices, lagartos, lombrices, delfines volantes, orejas rodantes, ojos boquiabiertos, escobas perdidas, barcas aturdidas, vómitos, heridas, muertos.	55 60
Predica, predica, diablo pilindrica.	
Saltan escaleras, corren tapaderas, revientan calderas. En los orinales letales, mortales, los más infernales pingajos, zancajos, tristes espantajos finales.	65 70
Guadaña, guadaña, diablo telaraña.	75
El beleño, el sueño, el impuro, oscuro,	

seguro	80
botín,	
el llanto,	
el espanto	
y el diente	
crujiente	85
sin	
fin.	

Pintor en desvelo:	
tu paleta vuela al cielo,	
y en un cuerno,	90
tu pincel baja al infierno.	

In the poem “Bosch” (1450-1516), Alberti plays, sings, creates. Nursery rhymes and songs are mixed with surrealistic words and images so that the poem emulates *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, “an absolute and universal enigma”, as Marjiniussen has called it (1996: 12). Let’s first approach the painting with an account made by Antonio de Beatis, an Italian who traveled in the Netherlands in 1516-1517, and saw it hanging in the palace of the Counts of Nassau. Beatis writes:

And then there are some panels on which bizarre things have been painted. Here, seas, skies, woods, meadows and many other things are represented, such as those [figures] that emerge from a shell, others that defecate cranes, men and women, whites and blacks in different activities and poses. Birds, animals of all kinds, executed very naturally, things that are so delightful and fantastic that it is impossible to describe them properly to those who have not seen them (cit. by Moxey, 1994: 113).

It is interesting that the XVI century traveler mentioned that he could not find words to describe the painting to those who had not seen it themselves. This muteness has been analysed by W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) when he describes our way of reading ekphrases, that is, verbal accounts of visual representations. The critic calls this first moment of our reaction to one of these texts “ekphrastic indifference” because it is based on the belief that a “verbal representation cannot represent—that is, make present—its object in the same way a visual representation can. It may refer to an object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do. Words can ‘cite’, but never ‘sight’ their objects” (151). The next moment of our response to

an ekphrasis is called "ekphrastic hope", and it is when "the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor, when we discover a 'sense' in which language can do what so many writers have wanted it to do: 'to make us see'" (152).

This is clearly the project behind Alberti's *A la pintura*: to make us see the paintings in the Prado, to find a "sense" in which language, that is verbal language, might be a means of return, a means of recovering, in our example, Bosch's painting and, with it, the museum in Madrid and his youth days. But, how is it that his words become a "means of return"? What is this "sense" that, according to Mitchell, is able to overcome the impossibility of making us see what is represented?

We have seen how Antonio de Beatis couldn't find a way to do it and this also seems to be the case with many other critics. Some interpretations of "The Garden of Earthly Delights" suggest that its visual forms are "symbols that can be explained through recourse to esoteric knowledge, which was part of Bosch's historical horizon but which is unknown to us today. As a consequence, the literature is characterized by attempts to explain his imagery in terms of astrology, alchemy, rare forms of heresy, illustrated puns, and so forth" (Moxey, 1994: 105). What is clear is that a unique interpretation of it is impossible, that the painting is much more than just strange figures performing strange and horrendous activities. Keith Moxey, instead of thinking about it as made of symbols and trying to explain each of its parts, uses the notion of the "world upside down", as well as that of fabricated monsters, in order to explain the general idea of the painting. Based on recent scholarship that suggests that Bosch was trained as a manuscript illustrator rather than as a panel painter, he mentions how the illuminators inverted the relationships among classes, occupations and the sexes in order to entertain the aristocracy that was going to own the manuscripts. So, they painted knights attacked by hares; apes performing ecclesiastical activities; knights, again, defeated by women wearing jousts, and clerics seduced by nuns. In Bosch's painting, humans are dwarfed by birds and animals, which by the way are feeding the former; the subversive consequence of this inversion is that human activities are marginalized due to the centralizing of the presence of birds and fruits. It seems that humans are captive to their sensual desires. "On the right panel, musical instruments, usually a source of entertainment and sensual enjoyment, are transformed into instruments of torture; one figure is stretched across the strings of an enormous harp, while others are forced into choral singing led by a monster who reads music that has been tattooed onto the behind of one of the unfortunates in his power" (Moxey, 1994: 130).

The imagery at the margins of the books also inverted relationships in nature: rabbits would execute dogs or hunt human beings. It could also include

“monsters or hybrids composed of various combinations of human and animal forms. Such monsters engage in improbable activities that mimic forms of human activity or demonstrate the limitation of their own curious forms” (Moxey, 1994: 121).

However, these fantastic forms were not just used to illustrate the margins of manuscripts or by painters such as Bosch. Just think of the decoration of ecclesiastical architecture and furniture, and of the objects of decorative art that were part of that tradition that was going to end in notions of the grotesque that would run parallel to mimetic trends of the Renaissance. As a late example of this tradition, consider the gardens made at the end of the XVIth century where, as Simon Schama (1995) has stated, the humanists played with “the teasingly indistinct boundary between the sacred and the profane”: at Bomarzo, a sacred wood was created “in the midst of a genuine forest, where the ground was littered with monstrous heads, and figures either in tortured combat or threatened by wild beasts [...]. Visitors startled by the gaping mouth of hell might have noticed the significant amendment to Dante’s ‘Abandon all hope, all ye who enter’, which at Bomarzo has become ‘Abandon all thought’” (535).

In France, Bernard Palissy thought of a garden of “natural secrets”, where the primordial structures of creation would be comprehended: brick furnaces would melt with enamel inserted into unpolished rocks suggesting primitive organic forms; primitive tree columns “would suggest the sylvan origin of architecture, while ceramic salamanders and lizards would writhe inside the rocks which formed a pool where the real reptiles crawled in and swam” (Schama, 1995: 536). Palissy thought, as Schama reminds us,

[...] that the world conformed to sublimely interlocking but mysterious laws. The variety of natural form ought, if correctly discerned, to correspond to the many faces of God [...] If the right formulae of inquiry were applied, those laws (and the countenance of Divinity) could be revealed to the learned. [...] His secret garden was a route to knowledge [...] but for the same reason was also dangerous: a wizard maze rather than a gardener’s patch (537).

The illustrations of late-medieval manuscripts, the gardens at Bomarzo and that projected by Palissy might help us explain how Alberti’s poem becomes a “means of return”. If he had just tried to describe “The Garden of Earthly Delights” (as he does in lines 12 and 13, or in stanzas 3 and 5, for example), perhaps he would have ended, as Beatis, commenting on the impossibility of understanding it completely. So he writes rhymes and songs to call upon the power of his language. As his words would not be able to describe everything

on the panels, he forgets the rules that state that a poem should use correct words (or at least words that do exist) and he invents them: the poem beelzebubbers, fart-trumpets and takes form; a spell is cast so that an assholeipped, annus-eyed, caprihorny devil will appear, emulating the figures painted by Bosch.

Alberti also uses the notion of the "world upside down" and, instead of asking the Creator to help him (as the inscription on the back of the painting announced "*Ipse dixit et facta sunt —Ipse mandavit et creata sunt*" [He said and everything was —He ordered and everything existed]), he calls upon the Disturber. The poem contains stanzas closer to the left margin of the page; they are rhymes and refrains to call upon the Devil. By saying "Mandrake, mandrake, / The devil has a crooked stake" (vv. 20-21), "Cork, cork / The devil has a small pitchfork" (l. 30-31), and "Prickster, dickster, / The devil is a trickster" (l. 40-41), Alberti is able to make, as in the inscription, everything. The stanzas on the right side of the page would be the world created with the aid of the Disturber: a world where eyes gape-mouthed, dolphins flying and ears impaled are possible; a world where a different order rules.

But these are not the only consequences of his spell. The sounds and rhymes of his lines, the repetition of words, the creation of portmanteau words such as "cummingbirding", or nonsense words, such as "jackoffrabit", all of them and all the grotesque, obscenity and humour they imply, remind us that language has the ability to suggest "the dream and to express the irrational by effecting a synthesis out of opposite meanings, by freeing the signifiers congealed in stereotyped relationships with signifieds, by searching for 'words without wrinkles'" (Preminger, 1234).

The dream, the irrational, the grotesque, and those states where conscience is completely relaxed (remember the inscription in the entrance to Hell at Bomarzo: "Abandon all thought") make phrases flow, the words keep on rhyming, sounds sounding and, as Octavio Paz has stated: "La corriente no tiene fin: una frase nos lleva a otra. Arrastrados por el río de imágenes, rozamos las orillas del puro existir y adivinamos un estado de unidad, de final reunión con nuestro ser y con el ser del mundo. Incapaz de oponer diques a la marea, la conciencia vacila. Y de pronto todo desemboca en una imagen final" (Paz, 52).

Although Paz mentions that this final image is silence, let's now think that that final image produced by the stream of words of the poem takes us to Bosch's painting: "Pintor en desvelo: / tu paleta vuela al cielo, / y en un cuerno, tu pincel baja al infierno" (vv. 88-91).

Alberti knows that he needs to un wrinkle his words, to suggest the irrational and orphic character of the painting, to abolish a language unable to express what Bosch had painted, to demolish a reality based on differences between subject and object, here and there, before and after. The same effect obtained by

Palissy's garden, where stone reptiles crawled in the water where real reptiles swam, is produced; there is no difference between that which is represented and the representation, between the beholder and that which is beheld. The poem becomes the painting and the poet, the painter. Octavio Paz wrote that

[...] la actividad poética no es diversa del conjuro, el hechizo y otros procedimientos de la magia. Y la actitud del poeta es muy semejante a la del mago. Los dos utilizan el principio de analogía [...] la ambivalencia de la magia puede condensarse así: por una parte, trata de poner al hombre en relación viva con el cosmos, y en este sentido es una suerte de comunión universal; por la otra, su ejercicio no implica sino la búsqueda del poder (Tipton, 1986: 55).

Let's reconsider. The flow of language has made the poem become "The Garden of Earthly Delights"; similar resources to those of the painting, such as the notion of the "world upside down", have erased the difference between the observer and that that is observed. As in a spell, we are on a state of universal communion. We are reading the poem, and watching the painting, and we are in the Prado, in Madrid, before 1939.

We shouldn't be surprised that, getting back to Mitchell's description of our way of responding to ekphrases, after indifference and hope, he talks of "ekphrastic fear": a moment where

[...] we sense that the difference between the verbal and the visual representation might collapse and the figurative, imaginary desire of ekphrasis might be realized literally and actually. [... a moment where] the difference between verbal and visual mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative rather than [...] a natural fact that can be relied on. [...] Ekphrastic fear perceives this reciprocity as a dangerous promiscuity and tries to regulate the borders with firm distinctions between the senses, modes of representation, and the objects proper to each (Mitchell, 1994: 154-55).

Fortunately, on a "world upside down", everything is possible and nobody would dare to regulate any borders: the poet, imbued by the power words have given him, may write of a world "blubber-lipped, asshole-hipped, anus-eyed, tail-wide & caprihorny". With this marginal, subversive action, he may return wherever he wants to return: to 1917, to Spain, to the Prado, and to being a painter.

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