

FROM “LA HIJA DE LA VOZ” TO “LA HIJA DE MI VOZ”. AN ANALYSIS OF ALEJANDA PIZARNIK’S POEMS COLLECTION *LOS TRABAJOS Y LAS NOCHES*

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The Jewish-Argentinian poet Alejandra Pizarnik was born in Buenos Aires in 1936. Her parents, a Russian couple, had been forced to leave the country due to the hostility of the locals against the Jewish community (Serafín 192). In Europe, apart from an uncle who survived in the surroundings of Paris, the rest of Pizarnik’s relatives died in the Nazi concentration camps (Aira, *Alejandra Pizarnik 1936-1972* 10). Pizarnik developed a sort of obsession with death and tried to exorcise it through her poetry, a personal diary and several prose.

She decided to change her name from Flora to Alejandra, starting from her second collection of poems *La última inocencia* (Aira, *Alejandra Pizarnik 1936-1972* 39). The choice of adopting a pen name gave her the idea of using ‘Alejandra’ as a character and enabled the poet to keep a distance from her tendency of being autobiographical (Cataldo 29). In her early works, Pizarnik was hiding behind her character, but in *Los trabajos y las noches*, hedonism substituted the sense of tragic she used to convey in her poems.

I will try to demonstrate that, in the collection of poems *Los trabajos y las noches* (1965), Pizarnik abandoned her character and put into practice a poetic theory of her own. I will refer to the prose “Apuntes para un re-

portaje” (*Prosa completa* 304-306) that the poet wrote in 1964, as an answer to the question why do we need poetry today. With regard to Pizarnik’s writings, I will focus on the aesthetic and ethical notions of female poetry in the Twentieth Century.

In 1956, Pizarnik started to sign her collection of poems as Alejandra (Aira, *Alejandra Pizarnik 1936-1972* 39). Meanwhile she discovered psychoanalysis, to solve a stammer disorder. She had previously developed a predilection for the *poètes maudits*, who shared her attitude of self-marginalization from the world. This is proved by a verse of Rimbaud, which introduces *La tierra más* (Pizarnik, *Poesía completa* 9), her first collection of poems that she repudiated afterwards. She also appreciated the Austrian poet Georg Trakl who is worth to our investigation. In the opening words of *Las aventuras perdidas* that Pizarnik published in 1958, she quoted some verses of a poem of Trakl:

Sobre negros peñascos
se precipita, embriagada de muerte,
la ardiente enamorada del viento (*Poesía completa* 71).

Trakl took his inspiration from a painting of Kokoschka in which the artist portrayed the wind as a human who was cuddling his lover (Di Stefano 24). Probably, Trakl was thinking to his sister who shared with him an incestuous relationship. Incest is forbidden by the human laws, especially with regard to procreation, but Pizarnik wrote a lyric that she entitled “Hija del viento” (*Poesía completa* 77), as if her character were the virtual daughter that Trakl never had. While Pizarnik was testing her poetic skills, she feared she might not escape from being overwhelmed by the models of literature she had chosen to follow. In this sense, the daughter of the wind symbolizes that the character ‘Alejandra’ was trapped in the poem of another poet (Cataldo 42).

Pizarnik had a predilection for the aesthetic role of poetry. Such an attitude became soon a theory that she wanted to put into practice. Her first attempt to conceptualize her theory lays in a prose of 1964, in which she explained her ideas about the role of poetry and the poetic rules she wanted to follow. In that circumstance, Pizarnik used for the first time the term “hija de la voz” (*Prosa completa* 305), as if the daughter of the wind had been substituted by a new character. Few days later Pizarnik replaced it with “la hija de mi voz”

(306) and used again this expression in an interview she gave to Martha Isabel Moia in 1972 (*Prosa completa* 314), the same year she died. It can be argued that the passive role exercised by the character in the "Hija del viento" was different from the "hija de mi voz", since the latter was not referring to a character, but to Pizarnik's autonomous poetic inspiration.

Pizarnik published *Los trabajos y las noches* in 1965, the year after she returned from Paris. In the four years she spent there, her reputation as a poet had increased by the publication of *Árbol de Diana* (1962), a collection of short poems with an introduction of Octavio Paz. Paris was a well-established center of culture that attracted many artists, especially from Latin America (Golisch 56). Pizarnik met there several writers and started to elaborate her own ideas about poetry.

Los trabajos y las noches is the outcome of a theoretical framework that Pizarnik shaped while she was writing her poems. In doing so, she put into poetic practice the statements she was recording in her prose and in her diary. In "Apuntes para un reportaje" (*Prosa completa* 304-6), Pizarnik gave three answers to support her faith in poetry.¹ She referred to the poetic ideal space, the role of the poet and the main features of writing.

With regard to the space of poetry Pizarnik wrote: "Necesitamos un lugar donde lo imposible se vuelva posible" (304) and the same year in her diary she stated: "Quiero escribir como una muchacha se desnuda y corre al lecho de su amante. Esa mínima distancia que atraviersa corriendo es la materia de mi libro. [...] Esa distancia será el objeto de mis palabras" (370). In the lyric "Fronteras inútiles" the poet tried to explain where this place was:

un lugar
no digo un espacio
hablo de
 qué
hablo de lo que no es
hablo de lo que conozco

no el tiempo
sólo todos los instantes

¹ "Apuntes para un reportaje" is an unpublished written answer to a survey made in 1964 (Pizarnik, *Prosa completa* 304)

no el amor
 no
 sí
 no
 un lugar de ausencia
 un hilo de miserable unión (*Poesía completa* 185).

Theoretically, the place of poetry was the desire before it had been accomplished. The poet could only pretend to feel the emotion, since she was merely describing it with words. In this sense, Pizarnik had no need to accomplish her wishes, since desire was the only thing she was looking for (Tembrás 158).

Nevertheless, poetry could place Pizarnik in any landscape she liked, via the gift of metamorphosis. In the lyric “Formas”, she summarized the main shapes she could take, according to the environment:

no sé si pájaro o jaula
 mano asesina
 o joven muerta entre cirios
 o amazona jadeando en la gran garganta oscura
 o silenciosa
 pero tal vez oral como una fuente
 tal vez juglar
 o princesa en la torre más alta (*Poesía completa* 199).

Here, there is a clear reference to the lyric she dedicated to León Ostrov her first psychiatrist, to whom she confessed her problems with her character by saying:

Señor
 La jaula se ha vuelto pájaro
 y se ha volado
 y mi corazón está loco
 porque aúlla a la muerte
 y sonríe detrás del viento
 a mis delirios (92).

These verses prove that Pizarnik was hiding behind the ‘wind’, because she was afraid of showing her real nature. Even when she took the decision to be herself, she had to fill the gap between a generic ‘hija de la voz’, versus a definitive ‘hija de mi voz’.

With regard to the role of the poet, Pizarnik wrote: “El poeta trae nuevas de la otra orilla. Es el emisario o depositario de lo vedado puesto que induce a ciertas confrontaciones con las maravillas del mundo pero también con la locura y la muerte” (*Prosa completa* 305). There is an analogy between this statement and the three lyrics that constitute the second section of *Los trabajos y las noches* - lyrics - which introduce the themes that Pizarnik will develop in *Extracción de la piedra de locura* and *El infierno musical*. For instance, in “Infancia” the poet is allowed to enter the world of death “con los ojos abiertos” (*Poesía completa* 176) and this is the main theme of *Extracción de la piedra de locura*. In “Antes” (177), Pizarnik imagines a “bosque musical” that will become in her last collection of poems the musical hell.

Pizarnik was used to keep a notebook where she registred any sentence she liked from other authors. She called it “Palais du Vocabulaire”,² the ‘palace of vocabulary’, which convinced her that only the exact verses were worth to build a green paradise:

extraña que fui
cuando vecina de lejanas luces
atesorbaba palabras muy puras
para crear nuevos silencios (*Poesía completa* 175).

While she was searching for the “Verde paraíso” she found silence instead, though, she never stopped searching for the pureness of the language (Aira, *Alejandra Pizarnik* 86).

In the third section of *Los trabajos y las noches*, Pizarnik gave her answer by supporting hedonism versus ethics. Such a dispute started in Paris, when she became acquainted with the Italian writer Cristina Campo, who introduced her to the philosophical theories of Simone Weil (Golisch 60). In a passage of her diary, Pizarnik defined Simone Weil as one of the “geómetras de la virtud” (336) and confessed that she needed to provide evidence against Weil’s sense of justice (337). Her friendship with Cristina Campo and the harassment she got from Simone Weil, made Pizarnik think that it might be the time for “la tentación del salto de lo estético a lo ético”

² Pizarnik was used to refer to the “Palais du Vocabulaire” as “PV”. In 1970 she wrote in her diary: “Pienso que mi PV es una excelente idea. No importa si hasta ahora no he descubierto de que manera puede servirme. Pero es excelente como ejercicio de sensibilización del idioma” (491).

(338), though she decided to follow her own nature, by saying: “En el poema no hay lugar para la justicia porque el poema nace de la herida de la injusticia, es decir de la ausencia de justicia” (338). Pizarnik explained this decision with a dedicatory to her friend Cristina Campo in the lyric “Anillos de ceniza”:

Son mis voces cantando
 para que non canten ellos,
 los amordazados grismente en el alba,
 los vestidos de pajaro desolado en la lluvia.
 Hay en la espera,
 un rumor a lila rompiéndose.
 Y hay cuando viene el día,
 una partición en pequeños soles negros.
 Y cuando es de noche siempre,
 una tribu de palabras mutiladas
 busca asilo en mi garganta,
 para que non canten ellos,
 los funestos, los dueños del silencio (*Poesía completa* 181).

This section concerns language as a vehicle of reconciliation between the real self and the way in which others see us. A sense of compassion moved Cristina Campo toward Pizarnik that the latter could not understand (Gollisch 60). Eventually, Pizarnik opted for a clear solution, by leaving her hunger grow and planning a way to become the body of her poetry (*Poesía completa* 269).

In the third answer that Pizarnik wrote in “Apuntes para un reportaje”, she declared:

Mi tormento resulta de la profusión de las imágenes formuladas en la otra orilla por la “hija de la voz”. Asimismo, de una intensa necesidad de verdad poética. Doble movimiento simultáneo: libertar la fuerza visionaria y mantener un aplomo extraordinario en la conducción de esa fuerza. Quisiera realizar ese tránsito a la presencia fulgurante con una precisión tensa que me permitiría dominar el azar y compensarme de mi sumisión absoluta a ‘la hija de mi voz’, o inspiración, o inconsciente (*Prosa completa* 305-6).

In the lyric, that shares the same title of *Los trabajos y las noches*, Pizarnik wrote:

Para reconocer en la sed mi emblema
 para significar el único sueño

para no sustentarme nunca de nuevo en el amor
he sido toda ofrenda
un puro error
de loba en el bosque
en la noche de los cuerpos

para decir la palabra inocente (*Poesía completa* 171).

Pizarnik searched for the “verdad poética” and met “la palabra inocente”. In doing so, she had to substitute the meaning of love with its primordial semantic acception.

In concluding, Pizarnik composed *Los trabajos y las noches* to explain that she believed in all sorts of pleasure that hedonism could provide, though, in the ideal space of poetry, she found only unaccomplished desires. In order to leave abstraction and gain a physical space, she had to find the appropriate language through which she might express her passions. In *Los trabajos y las noches*, Pizarnik felt free to experience the beautiful things of life, but in order to accomplish her journey into poetry she had to experience craziness and death as well.

In an interview before dying, Pizarnik declared: “Trabajé arduamente en esos poemas y debo decir que al configurarlos me configuré yo, y cambié. Tenía dentro de *mí* un ideal de poema y logré realizarlo. Sé que no me parezco a nadie (esto es una fatalidad). Ese libro me dio la felicidad de encontrar la libertad en la escritura. Fui libre, fui dueña de hacerme una forma como yo quería” (Pizarnik, *Prosa completa* 314).

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