



Marosa Di Giorgio and Joyelle McSweeney: Two Necropastoral Poets

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Much has been said about the eclectic world of Marosa Di Giorgio, where all species merge and all divisions blur to make way for the exploration of a world without bounds. An interesting perspective to study this world can be found in the notions of the "Necropastoral," a term coined by the American poet Joyelle McSweeney. From this episteme, it is possible to elaborate on the intersections and parallel elements found in the poetry of these two authors and to learn what they reveal when they inhabit the "Necropastoral zone."

McSweeney's Necropastoral reinterprets the pastoral as an area of exchange, obscuring its greenish hues with death, violence and destruction. It is defined by its paradoxical reworkings, mutations and perforations between the inner and outer world and the wild and idyllic world when they attract one another or go beyond their limits. Considering these ideas, the writing of Di Giorgio reveals Necropastoral features as the monstrosity of nature constantly lurks and the pastoral tranquility of settings is often interrupted by gnomes, mutant flowers and murders. Most importantly, in Di Giorgio's work this concept explains the configuration of a textual fabric defined by openings, a text that is simultaneously present and absent, or rather, neither absent nor present, but *protoplasmic and spectral*. In this sense, the underlying political force of the Necropastoral lies in its ability to stage *strange meetings*¹ with beings from other realms and/or with the dead, as well as between authors, thereby undermining literary influences elaborated according to false hierarchies and historical divisions.

The following scene taken from Di Giorgio's universe depicts some of these occult meetings:

Vine a buscar lo que se quebró; vine a llevar lo que trajiste. Vengo por las resurrecciones. Nadie llegó ni contestó. Aunque había como una música lejana, voces de campanas. Fui a otro aposento y a otro y otro, y todos con el mismo adorno, y vacíos. Y llegué a la nada y empecé a bajar los escalones de la nada, no sé cómo, de regreso; volví a la tierra, sus grietas, sus rosas y sus nardos, las casas de siempre. Me senté al lado de mamá. Le dije: -Mamá, aún no comienzan las resurrecciones (336).

Paradoxically, in this effort to be surrounded by Death, the textual search of the author begins; the search is initiated only if this aesthetic need can be expressed. In nature reside all the anarchic energies leading to death, which in turn affirm life, in a constant and infinite process. Thus, in the last chapter of *Los Papeles Salvajes*, the section that refers to the death of the mother, "Clementina Diamelas Medici," the lyrical subject refers to her mother as Blodeuwedd, god of flowers, owl, swan and/or butterfly to thus equate her with the erotic and deadly force of nature:

Mamá, querido cisne, vamos a discurrir por la Naturaleza,
que fue nuestro ámbito desde el nacimiento.
Aquellos siempre verdes prados,
aquellas azucenas (607).

This natural erotic force can explain death because, as Bataille states in his paradigmatic work on eroticism, life is a set of suppressed forces on the brink of explosion: "beings given life whose explosive force is exhausted shall make room for fresh beings coming into the cycle with renewed vigor" (59). This almost trivial statement is the one that explains the ambiguous desire for death: death horrifies but attracts for the calm of its timelessness, and for the life existing because of it. Attraction and repulsion interact as during intercourse, in the pleasure emerged from pain:

Desprendía una herminia de los árboles. [...] Era carne deliciosa, misteriosa, de manzana con otra cosa; tenía por ahí espinitas y esto la emparentaba también a los pescados. Luego, ella sacaba unos segundos, la lengua angosta, roja y movable, y se relamía, mirando si nadie la divisaba. Volvía a las operaciones extrayendo otros armiñitos, desde las hojas infinitas, tupidas y vitales. La pasión era tanta que sufría espasmos y alguna gota de sangre bajaba de su sexo (Di Giorgio 640).

The textual protoplasmic tissue resulting from this combination of nature-decomposition, pleasure-pain, life-death can be read as an implicit questioning of a unique form of sexuality and a recognition of sexual autonomy, especially for the female. In Di Giorgio's universe, pleasure is experienced through this tissue and is configured as a non-conformist ideological element. Usually, pleasure equals self-pleasure and an exploration of femininity is sought in connection with departed women. In her essay "Princess Abandoned," Kim Hyesoon, a Korean feminist poet whose aesthetic is similarly identified with excess and death, introduces the motif of the woman-poet as the abandoned or *Paridaegi*. In Korean mythology, Paridaegi is the daughter from a royal family who is abandoned and left to roam through the past/underworld, in a dark area, hearing the dead:

Then she reaches a point where she can name her own death. She accepts the conception of death which is similar to painful childbirth. At that moment, somewhere within her, she can feel a sense of opening of a woman's world that has the hearing of death. She is hearing the femininity.... In the world of hearing, she learns that she is more conversational and performative. In the numerous repetitions of the symbolic processes, the going back and forth between the inside and the outside, through this spiral process, she discards the identity imposed on her and begins to feel the transformed identity she now has—the identity coded by a different method that can only be named within the connection with death (11).

According to McSweeney, the woman-poet begins to wander through a "limitless zone, a zone charged with paradox, anachronism, and occult potentiality, decomposition, contagion, and black fecundity. Such a zone—spasming and spectacular, black-lit, floral and florid, rife with eructations and declivities, which hosts strange meetings, denaturalizes hierarchies, produces inversion and translation, sheds Art—I call the necropastoral" (*The Necropastoral* 19). In this zone more language, art and excess (=violence) are produced. Thus, for Marosa Di Giorgio, the power of reproduction is only possible in a spectral world that takes shape in the poem. Within the poem, the daughter can give birth to images of her mother, the departed women and the holographic garden. The "lyrical I" becomes a subject as long as she can create ghosts, gore, violence and disturbance:

El gladiolo es una lanza con el costado lleno de claveles, es un cuchillo de claveles; ya salta la ventana, se hinca en la mesa; es un fuego errante,
nos quema los vestidos, los papeles. Mamá dice que es un muerto que ha resucitado y nombra a su padre y a su madre y empieza a llorar.
El gladiolo rosado se abrió en casa.
Pero, ahuyéntalo, dile que se vaya.
Esa loca azucena nos va a asesinar (89).

The staging of a metastasized and disturbing aesthetic introducing mutant flowers and impending danger for the sake of bringing into aesthetic immanence a suppressed political event is the signature of the Necropastoral. Usually, however, erotic impulses that end in destruction and death become beautiful. Desire and pleasure simultaneously signify consumption and fear, as if life's horrors were precisely what make it magical.

The following poem by McSweeney summarizes her aesthetic:

Yellow River IX

The Yellow River
a coverlet a lit-up



starlet or starling's high
swollen breast a lisping
silty cover song

winding
sheet
music
pierced
for the player piano's
rodent
teeth to read

gold teeth line the gut
the revolving gas canister
is sleeping on its spool the scissors slip
from the sleeping hand
and the hair grows on
unbridled
over the bier and
out the window

golden hair
wake up
choke up
here's the pitch
fate's gut shot
for which your gorge has risen

miss unimbibable miss
vomiting beauty miss
swing-and-a-miss.
(Beijing Plasticizer 20)

The Yellow River swallows yellow silt. To swallow that river is to be choked by it, to be choked by one's desire for art. A reflection upon the asphyxiating desire to reach (pastoral) beauty and the inability to arrive at it. The poem begins with a succession of sibilant /s/ sounds that creates a pleasing and smooth atmosphere. The images, however, are not idyllic, beautiful or pleasant. Beauty is also elusive and discouraged through the abrupt change to single words in the second stanza. The rhythm becomes agitated before the third stanza, where the sibilance is recovered and the rhythm regains some of its original calm. These transitions help build the Necropastoral aesthetics, along with the consecutive lines forming "winding sheet music". This phrase, composed of two different expressions ("winding sheet" and "sheet music") can be taken as representative of the spasmodic Mobius strip into which

composition- decomposition, human-nature, life-death, beauty-repulsiveness coexist. Similarly, in the expression “vomiting beauty” both author’s aesthetics coincide: life’s horrors are precisely what make it magical, or rather, in beauty and magic, horror is hidden.

McSweeney’s Necropastoral writing, however, is not generated by delving into memory or the world of the dead in order to satisfy a “lyrical I” that needs to retrieve eternity in order to create an ideology or her own self. Rather, the Necropastoral is fundamentally a political-aesthetic zone and, unlike Di Giorgio’s, the depredations of humanity cannot be separated from an experience of “nature,” and it is at that intersection that anthropocentric horrors are revealed in the form of Death and the obscene comes to light. The staging of a suppressed political event is precisely what defines the Necropastoral.

[...]
if there’s a silver lining to this now it’s
nothing.
if the people can see the problems in the nation now nothing.
if starting over will mean a brand new order then
nothing.
nothing.
spread out the problem and get in lines.
what solve everything is time and tide. time and tide leave no man
behind. (Percussion 119)

Regarding another aspect, the “vomit” in McSweeney is not simply a fluid externalizing some kind of pleasure, as with the bleeding in Di Giorgio’s poem. The vomit brought about by the river stresses how the human is inseparable from the environment. If in Di Giorgio’s universe bodies “mutate” magically from one being to another, in McSweeney’s the body is a porous substance allowing contaminants, plastics and poisons in and out: it is a trans-corporeal substance. McSweeney herself has suggested the term “soluble person” to describe this reality, explaining that the “I is an anti-binary or zonal body which allows characters to be alive-and-dead, male-and-female, singular-and-plural, self-and-not” (“Playwright”), which does not imply a blurring of the “I,” but rather its existence as a strange and haunting presence.

In the following poem by McSweeney, an infectious agent (prion) enters the body of the subject and possesses it. With a perforated and permeable

autonomy, the "I" is perceived uniquely as a strange and paradoxical non-presence, a ghost that haunts the machine (Hoooooooo). While in Di Giorgio's work the subject mutates and reproduces as flower, animal or grass, in McSweeney's, the fusion articulates a wide range of elements including various parts of the body, zoonotic diseases, Hollywood, fashion retro, Patti Smith, other writers, and puns for the I:

—Hooooooooo
Crepe'd up a knife blade ladder on
Spectator shoes or gladiator sandals
Cut to the glut, Fata Androgyana,
To the fat of the matter (Percussion 22).

However, if there is an unmistakable element of surrealism in the preceding text, McSweeney's main concern is not the unconscious (surreal) or the erotic imagination and memories as can be found in Di Giorgio, but the material reality, the difficulty of dealing with a reality not necessarily showing a form that we can capture in words and concepts. As Graham Harman argues, all objects possess a mysterious aspect imaginable only via speculation or aesthetic creativity. Therefore, multiple levels of reality, sometimes even contradictory, can coexist. Once again, the political power of the Necropastoral is revealed.

Having analyzed both aesthetics, it becomes clear that in the Necropastoral zone meetings are timeless, capable of generating multiple and exorbitant effects as in the case of the poetry of these authors. Thus, the poets themselves meet in order to invite us, each in its own way, to inhabit that zone performatively, on the opposite edges of reality, articulating the power and enjoyment that comes with degeneration. We then become active participants and penetrate the fake walls separating illusory worlds. The strange meeting in the Necropastoral between Di Giorgio and McSweeney breaks away from models of literary tradition that depend on separation, hierarchy and linearity. It revises notions of genre and geography, languages and contexts, and reveals that results are never definitive, and sometimes they even produce retrospective effects, thereby changing a previous and remote location.

Between the universes created by McSweeney and Di Giorgio there is a protoplasmic membrane allowing their poems to converse and perform. In the light of McSweeney's Necropastoral theory we understand a universe where death both enriches language, imagination and identity and gives insight into the language and context of writing. Inspired by Di Giorgio's anti-pastoral setting, McSweeney takes this condition to the extreme by staging contemporary poisons and threats, though agreeing on the inevitability of death and the falsity of pastoral comfort.

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Notes

¹The idea comes from Wilfred Owen's poem "Strange Meeting", which gave McSweeney the model for thinking about the necrotic, decomposing, hole-y membrane of the Necropastoral as a meeting place for strange political meetings—that is, unstable, queer, spectral meetings unanticipated and unprescribed by conventional political rubrics.

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