

Maria Luisa Ruiz

REDIFINING THE CONCEPT OF GOD: A REVIEW OF YVÁN SILÉN'S *LA MUERTE DE MAMÁ*



Silén's *La Muerte de Mamá* is a provocative and disturbing text. On May 27th, *La Muerte de Mamá* was presented in New York City at the Spanish bookstore Lectorum. As it could be expected, an animated discussion followed the presentation and readings of selected pieces of the novel. Since its publication in spring 2004, the novel has been received and hailed as a major event in the Latin American world of literature. After its first presentation in Puerto Rico in August 2004, the book sparked off discussion related not only to its content but also to the political and religious positions of its author.

Born in Puerto Rico in 1944, Yván Silén is a prolific and multi-faceted author. He has produced numerous poems, literary and philosophical essays, short stories and novels. In *La Muerte de Mamá* as in others of his works, Silén interweaves his passion for the creative process of writing with his mystical love for God. This dimension of the novel is very important, since it entirely participates in a subversive approach that its author has always claimed when speaking about his books. When asked how he reconciles his rejection of institution and his love for God, Silén answered in a somewhat iconoclastic way: his God is not the one that belongs to religious institutions but rather an undefined and multiform entity.

In *La Muerte de Mamá*, Silén uses a first person narrative to deal with the personal and individual appropriation of death as a counterbalance to social and

institutional expectations of politically correct behavior. The plot unfolds in a non-linear way: it goes back and forth within the memories of the main character, Ivanoskar, who is also the narrator. The story begins at the hospital located in San Juan de Puerto Rico right after Ivanoskar's mother died. The way he reacts to his mother's death is mentioned in the first sentence of the novel: "Cuando me enteré de la muerte de mamá no pude contener la risa." Ivanoskar cannot retain his laughter when he knew of his mother's death.

Readers are taken into the inner world of the main character and discover how he used to interact with his mother as an adolescent and as a young adult. The mother/son relationship is so possessive and absorbing that after the mother's death the bond survives and Ivanoskar cannot escape from it. In order to keep his mother forever, he decides to rob the dead body from the hospital and to bring it back to the family house where, according to Ivanoskar, the mother can get the funeral she deserves. Everything is done with the complicity of Migueleli one of Ivanoskar's brothers. He seduces the nurses' supervisor, has sex with her and gets her help to rob the body.

At the end of the novel, readers' expectations are shattered when Ivanoskar's possessive love for his mother leads him to devour her literally. Ivanoskar invites his brothers to a very special banquet: the dead body, previously cut with a saw, is exposed on the table and, with a spoon, he starts eating one of his mother's eye. Even though he knows he is doing something that is taboo, Ivanoskar must go as far he can to continue the possessive link with his mother beyond death. His desire to eat the body of the woman who gave him birth and fed him, leads to transgression and creates a universe where hallucinations become his pregnant reality.

In this hallucinatory space where images fade into each other like dreams, animals play an important role. Animals first appear on the second page of the novel and then at specific moments of the story. Dogs and horses punctuate the text according to the unbridled senses of the narrator. They function as figures that support the intensification of all five senses and open the doors to a world in which it is possible to interlace any kind of perceptions whether visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile or related to taste:

La jauría de los galgos rusos, de los galgos ingleses silenciosos, monótonos como sombras, jorobados sobre su propio peso, me deslumbraba. Verlos pasar como

enormes ovejas, deteniéndose a veces, esperándome, aguardando de mí esa orden que no acaecía, me impresionó profundamente. Eran dóciles como el amor maligno de algunas mujeres enamoradas. Eran peligrosos como el amor de las amantes y mamá lo sabía.

– ¡Cuidate de los perros! – me dijo.

(...) Entonces lo besé en los ojos húmedos. Estaban fríos, lagañosos. Tenían en ellos toda la belleza acumulada de la tarde y de la muerte y aquel sentimiento de mujer que los percherones poseían. Relincho quedo y oyó mi voz como si fuera cierta. Oyó mi voz como si me entendiera. Golpeo con su tremenda pata todo el polvo del mundo. Mi voz se perdió en su relincho y le dije al oído todo lo que se le puede decir a una bestia.

– – – He venido a contemplar la muerte de mamá.

Silén's novel is not yet translated in English. The quote above refers to the first appearance of dogs and horses. In this passage, the narrator is overwhelmed by the first vision of these strange animals, which seem to belong to the world of dark and yet unworded fears. Indeed, the last two sentences of the quote demonstrate the challenge to the narrator to examine the ineffable experience of his mother's death when he whispers words in the horse's ear, "He venido a contemplar la muerte de mama;" "I came to contemplate mama's death." Contemplation is an activity related to vision. This sentence, said at the beginning of the novel seems to announce the final scene where the main character starts eating his mother's eye, the organ of vision and also of contemplation.

Moreover, dogs and horses whether as real or hallucinatory figures, always appear in a borderline position: they first stand and wait for the narrator at the doors of the hospital, then at the doors of the family house where the final scene is going to take place. Dogs and horses represent the human psyche, made more sensitive because of the encounter with death, that hovers in the liminal space of the domestic and savage, known and unknown, familiar and strange, the world between the dead and the living where Ivanoskar lives psychologically.

At a literary level the dogs and horses work as a mirror of the process of writing itself. They allow images to unfold and stand at the surface of the deep wound inflicted

by the death of the mother. For the narrator, giving voice to his thoughts through writing has a therapeutic effect. Writing makes possible the transfer of and the transformation from frightening and unarticulated emotions to a symbolic enunciation. In this respect the animals are the guardians of an inner territory that needs healing, animals that writing will eventually transform into a piece of literary art, comparable only with a divine creation of the self.

There is a tragic dimension in *La Muerte de Mamá* that comes from the power of desire and the risk of following it in spite of the obstacles and the prohibitions. The final scene of the novel destroys taboos when it approaches incest in an unusual and powerful way. The death of the mother provides the opportunity for Silén to explore an explosive and subversive experience when a character becomes unusually familiar with the dead body of his mother in a monstrous act of love. Silén identifies himself as a “neomístico” writer who sees the love of God as the most revolutionary power in the world. It is this complex interweaving of his religion with his political identity that makes Silén’s writing unique among the production of contemporary Latin American writers. It is also the impetus behind his art, imbued with the same power as desire and unleashing the powerful emotions that transform his writing into that artistic creation we call literature.