

A QUESTION FOR THE PAINTER HERNÁN CORTÉS MORENO

BY RAFAEL ARGULLOL

The digital camera has recouped, with an unprecedented firmness, the idealization of the portrait. Traditional photography deferred the unknown quality of the captured countenance to the moment of the photo's development, and what appeared in the darkroom, below the red light, was hardly modifiable. The negative had fixed a rigid image of an instant snatched from the incessant parade of time. Consequently, along with its many aficionados, the *Polaroid*, whose technique was far from perfect, provided a sort of instant developing that was tinged with something epiphanic. To some degree, the digital image has inverted the terms of the relationship between painting and photography. When the latter was invented in the XIX Century it was immediately considered more realistic than the former, while painting, as it is not the work of a direct, technical reproduction, necessarily trails a stroke of romanticized elements in its wake. Yet, in recent years, the rapid imposition of digital photography has changed the landscape in such a way that it has promoted an *à la carte* service whereby it is the one being portrayed who chooses an image among the many taken by the portrait artist—now reduced to the role of passive author.

This is a substantial issue, considering our present position: That the link between the portrait artist and the portrayed is, I believe, the determining factor when it comes to judging the portrait in the painting, just as much prior to the introduction of photography as after. I've spoken often with Hernán Cortés regarding the question of the portrait, particularly throughout a rather long stretch of time in which he was painting my portrait and we had time to converse on the matter during the sessions. I learned about a great many things of which I was unaware, about techniques as well as aesthetics and psychology. But I never posed a question, never asked him anything; perhaps, because it had yet to dawn on me.

In brief, the question would go something like this: Would not the portrait always, despite innumerable variations, be the outcome of a tense game of give and take between the portrait

artist and one being portrayed, so that the painting, the portrait, is indeed a small yet intense field of battle upon which several skirmishes are carried out, including the exchange of duties? Could it be that prior to putting brush to canvass, the portrait artist demands of him/herself, as a necessary, albeit imaginary condition, to paint his/her own self-portrait, thus morphologically colliding with the features of his/her model and that, only after putting this gamble to rest, the other countenance may emerge? If this is the case, then the other countenance is, at some point during the process, the very countenance that steps off the path in order to look upon itself through the eyes of another, the eyes of the model being painted. That alone would provide the painter with new knowledge of him/herself, a knowledge even greater than that which a proper self-portrait could provide.

I don't know what Hernán Cortés would say about this proposition on painting; at this stage, however, with respect to literature at least, I'd say it has been proven beyond any reasonable doubt. The autobiographical tale is richer and more radical when it abandons the loops of solipsism in order to press forward among those other lives which, ultimately, reflect one's own. In poetry one always speaks of oneself, but the poem draws closer to perfection when it shatters the manacles of monologue so as to introduce the magnificent interplay of polyphonic voices. In narrative as well, one always speaks about oneself, but the acquisition of literary genuineness hinges on an author's capacity to relinquish the "I", take on other guises and, thereby, enrich the masked-waltz of existence. This is borne out deftly in novels of initiation—in the wake of Goethe's *Werther*—where the author dons the protagonist's skin as camouflage, as well as in novels that strive for total objectivity, the kind postulated by Flaubert but that failed in hindering his confession that "*madame Bovary c'est moi*". Writers continuously need different models in order to gain certain knowledge of themselves. At the end of their lives, their complete works, whether extensive or short, constitute a self-portrait.

And to me, it does not seem to be that different for the painter. In this regard, one sees signs of an implacable coherence in the already long career of Hernán Cortés. If I may, I would also assert that his collected works stand as his own self-portrait.

It is in this facet that the character of the portrait artist proves to be essential. The mere pragmatic artist is of the same ilk as the mechanic of digital photography, as the indulgent hack. There is an utter dearth of tension being played out between the portrait artist and one portrayed. The upshot is complementary, whether it be a sort of servile trivialization or a limping idealization.

Until the emergence of photography, painting, for centuries or better still millennium, had taken up the onus of expressing what man feigned to be. Consequently, we have inherited an enormous amount of paintings, largely locked away in the infernal vaults of museums, in those which give testimony to reverential painting. The portrait is unnaturally exalted when it depicts someone who unlawfully holds power. In the second half of the XIX Century photography appropriated this role and, subsequently, we have also inherited reams of photographed busts that lie in newspaper archives. Indeed, one could compile an authentic history of the bondage of the human gaze with those mountains of vanity lauded by painters and photographers. Almost never, in these cases, is the creative play preserved.

From the beginning, what piqued my interest in the works of Hernán Cortés is his scrupulous respect for the rules of this game and, as a result, what that implies regarding subversion. From his point of view as painter, there is always an enormous risk centered on the complexity of relationships between the subjects involved. Although his style is sober and austere—or better: because his style is sober and austere—the process underpinning his portraits is of a deep-seated subtlety. It is difficult to define. I imagine him, with each painstakingly crafted portrait, plunging himself into a labyrinth of forms so as to later, without being trapped by the Minotaur, find an appropriate egress. To us, his paintings seem elegant, neat, with an emotional expression on the verge of exploding but always contained within the precise moment. If we could, however, go beyond that, we would find ourselves smack in the middle of the foregoing chaos wrought out of struggles and potentialities that get filed down until the befitting form emerges.

Thanks to his artistic mastery, Hernán Cortés has painted men of power as though they were not men of power: that is, simply as men, to whom he neither concedes reverence nor belittles. As is done with all the rest, in whose portraits also appear both greatness and misery, yet always

contained by an elegant language bereft of cruelty, hatred and brazen mordacity. Perhaps it is that veil of irony alone which must encircle the “posture” of a human being in order to stymie the imposture.

Hernán Cortés carries on the grand European tradition of portrait art, spanning from Giovanni Bellini and Hans Holbein to Velázquez, and from there to Otto Dix and Lucien Freud. With any of these masters of said tradition the respect for the tensions between the portrait artist and the portrayed is evident, thus preventing them from leaning on serialization and repetition. The form of one’s countenance is, after all, the psychological depth of the individual.

Likewise, in the works of Hernán Cortés there is never a trace of serialization, not even in his recent, far-reaching polyptychs. A lesser artist would have surely succumbed to the temptation of self-copying. Yet, Cortés has applied to his fascinating choral mosaic the same creative principle that he puts into his individual portraits, with the addition of a superbly well-thought-out, composite architecture.

The history of the portrait is the history of painting. Yet this premise could also be formulated inversely: the history of painting is the history of the portrait, for what the artist has sought in nature or in abstraction is to discover man’s countenance. His own countenance, perhaps.

That is the question, and the beginning to a reply. Am I on the right track, my dear Hernán?

TRANSLATED BY ANDREW MORROW