

Humanism in Suso de Toro's *A sombra cazadora*

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Abstract

This paper examines Suso de Toro's *A sombra cazadora* (1994) as a postmodern update of Renaissance humanism. From a Bakhtinian perspective, in de Toro's narrative the epic quest for a lost paradise—an ideal past represented by the dead mother—is conveyed through an environmental and supernatural discourse which channels the epistemological primacy of *A sombra cazadora*: a humanist approach to life and existence. De Toro's dystopian society is eventually subverted by an epic return to the aforementioned mythical paradise, envisioned as a humanist and rural geography represented by Nature, the image of the mother, and the nurturing of the body. Another humanist trace in *A sombra cazadora* is the use of classical sources and myths (Plato's allegory of the cave and the Cretan labyrinth) to account for the emotional isolation caused by the overwhelming rule of mass media in postmodern societies. At the end of the novel, all these elements work together to restore core humanist ideals such as tolerance, dignity, optimism, generosity, positive relationships, cooperation, and a sense of community.

Key words: Suso de Toro, *A sombra cazadora*, humanism, ecocriticism, (post)modernity

Resumo

Este traballo examina *A sombra cazadora* (1994) de Suso de Toro como reformulación postmoderna do humanismo renacentista. Dende un punto de vista bakhtiniano, de Toro articula o motivo da viaxe épica mediante unha epistemoloxía humanista que combina preocupacións ecolóxicas co enigma metafísico do sobrenatural. A sociedade distópica retratada por Suso de Toro é desprazada por unha xeografía humanista simbolizada polo retorno á antropoloxía da natureza e o feminino. Outro compoñente humanista de *A sombra cazadora* é o uso de mitos clásicos (a caverna platónica, o labirinto de Creta) para dar conta da alienación emocional do suxeito contemporáneo. Deste modo, *A sombra cazadora* restaura nun escenario (post)moderno e apocalíptico valores típicamente humanistas como a tolerancia, a xenerosidade, o traballo social e a dignidade persoal.

Palabras clave: Suso de Toro, *A sombra cazadora*, humanismo, ecocrítica, (post)modernidade

A sombra cazadora (1994) tells a coming-of-age story concerning the social need to implement an educational system based on a humanist understanding of life and the world. Suso de Toro's novel portrays an apocalyptic society where technology and the hyperreal devastate human identities by entrapping individuals in what Jean Baudrillard has defined as «simulacra and simulations» (1981). As opposed to this overwhelming presence of images, computers and TV screens, *A sombra cazadora* confirms the necessity of promoting critical and creative thinking to question the invasion of virtual reality in our everyday lives. In «Humanismo contra a invasión do irracionalismo», Suso de Toro regrets how the dehumanized power of mass media and the degrading influence of contemporary entertainment such as action movies, video and computer games reduce violence to a visual spectacle. According to de Toro (2005: 41):

O noso tempo [...] é un mundo no que os medios de comunicación e todo tipo de soportes de imaxinación virtual, como os xogos por ordenador, son o espazo no que se crían e no que viven os nosos nenos [...]. Expresan [o sentir] da nosa civilización, unha civilización violenta [...]. ¿Qué imos facer fronte a todo iso? Máis nada que a imaxinación e a vontade. Non hai máis [...]. Porque diso se trata: trátase da loita da cultura e os ideais humanistas por sobrevivir a unha invasión de irrealidade virtual.

Following Suso de Toro, contemporary education needs to foster not only the rational and scientific imagination of modernity and postmodernity but also —and fundamentally— the humanist spirit of ethical responsibility and natural creativity. Accordingly, de Toro's *A sombra cazadora* highlights the importance of recovering human values such as positive relationships, individual dignity, and cooperation in the community. Moreover, core humanist ideals such as tolerance, optimism, and generosity are represented in the novel by the feminine, not the masculine. In *A sombra cazadora*, the figure of the absent (dead) mother opposes —both thematically and allegorically— the character of the dark father. By remembering their mother and by recreating the past, Clara and Teseo —the young protagonists of the novel— undergo a spiritual and emotional journey towards self-fulfilment and self-discovery. In addition, by helping and taking care of their peers, Clara and Teseo restore their mother's humanist legacy, which soon becomes a mythical paradise where the characters return to find the comforting shelter of home, love, and family. Furthermore, in *A sombra cazadora* the figure of the Mother is the representative of literature, languages, nature, storytelling, and music (the Arts). In *A sombra cazadora*, therefore, Clara and Teseo's mother channels de Toro's vision of humanism as both *studia humanitatis* and «the belief in the dignity of man, and, more generally, with human or secular [...] values» (Burke, 1990: 2). Contrary to the character of the father —who symbolically epitomizes the human failures of a dystopian, high-tech society—, the mother truly embodies the voice of the humanities and functions, figuratively, as a contemporary update of the Renaissance *humanistae*.

Clara and Teseo's mother is, to begin with, the symbol of the healing power of words. When she dies, Teseo becomes a stutter (due to the emotional shock of her death), but recovers the ability to speak properly when he imagines his mother calling him «fillo» (de Toro, 2004:

33). Also, Teseo is a nameless character at the beginning of the story. It is his mother who eventually reveals his son's name. Her power to name (the power to give an identity) parallels her extraordinary ability to cure with the language of affection, love, and tenderness. From a humanistic perspective, this connection between the mother-figure and the primacy of language emphasizes the relevance of speech and rhetoric in social leadership. María Morrás, in her book *Manifiestos del humanismo*, explains that proper speech and accurate oral skills were essential constituents of the humanistic self. According to María Morrás:

Una buena parte de los primeros humanistas fueron retóricos profesionales, los primeros hombres de letras que vivieron gracias a los resultados de su pluma [...]. Alcanzar una cierta posición social o política [...] dependía fundamentalmente de la capacidad de expresar de modo elocuente los puntos vista. (Morrás, 2000: 11)

El humanismo [...] deriva del convencimiento de que el lenguaje es la puerta de acceso a la cultura, a través de la cual el hombre realiza su potencial humano. (Morrás, 2000: 163)

A responsible leader is, by definition, an efficient speaker and, accordingly, an insightful and creative reader. Thanks to literature Clara becomes —emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually— an outstanding and perceptive leader for the other characters. More specifically, she enjoys reading stories that her mother used to read, such as *David Copperfield*, pirate novels, and detective fiction. She has a preference for fictional accounts concerning the search for truth and personal identity through travels and adventures, which is also one of the main topics of *A sombra cazadora*. In fact, once Clara leaves home with her brother, she manages to explore the external world with the survival skills that she has learned through fiction. In Suso de Toro's novel, then, literature, as in humanism, is a source of experiential knowledge, as opposed to the empty and fake realities of the invading screen. As Erich Fromm argues in «El hombre moderno y su futuro: la enajenación como enfermedad»:

El hombre moderno queda constituido por las cosas que él crea. Lo ilustraré con una observación cotidiana: cuando vemos una vez en la realidad a alguien que conocemos por televisión, decimos: «¡Es igual que en la televisión!». Porque la realidad es el televisor, y a través de esa realidad medimos si nuestra percepción es acertada o no. La realidad está en la cosa de afuera, y el hombre no es más que una sombra de esa realidad. (Fromm, 1998: 29)

In Erich Fromm's vision of (post)modernity, television alienates contemporary individuals from human reality until they become «shadows of the real», such as the oppressive, hunting image that threatens Clara and Teseo in Suso de Toro's narrative. The totalitarian and tyrannical screen in *A sombra cazadora* —a Big Brother-like character inspired by George Orwell's *1984*— demands submissive viewers who are passively «hypnotized» (de Toro, 1994: 175) by the hostile presence of TV monitors showing, for the most part, images of human violence: «Tes que deixar de ollar para a pantalla», Clara warns her brother, «estaste aparvando [...] Nas pantallas está o noso inimigo» (de Toro, 1994: 119). In order to counteract

the emotional isolation caused by the overpowering rule of technology, Suso de Toro shows how literature, languages, and music engender committed citizens and creative, independent thinkers such as Clara and her mother, who distinguish themselves by an exceptional ability to lead, survive, and protect. Their desire to transcend the limits of their everyday lives through the enlightening power of the arts corresponds to Suso de Toro's humanistic view of promoting social change through imagination and critical thinking. De Toro's vision of a promising future in a global and multicultural world includes, first and foremost, a contemporary renewal of the humanities (de Toro, 2009: 30):

Si renace [= progressive hope for social change] tendrá que hacerlo desde la gran tradición europea del Humanismo, pero abriéndose también a las corrientes humanizadoras que nacen en este nuestro mundo abierto [...]. Pues la melancolía, la imaginación de otra vida mejor y la crítica y el deseo de cambiar lo que parece injusto anidan en seres humanos de cualquier parte, no sólo de Europa.

This desire to reverse the emotional and social repression of an unfair status quo becomes Clara's driving force in *A sombra cazadora*. Particularly, Teseo realizes that his sister's intellectual enthusiasm for literature and the arts represents a significant part of their mother's legacy. He reaches the conclusion that «de vivir tantos anos encerrados na nosa finca sen ver o mundo de fóra [Clara] colleu afección a imaxinar como podía ser e inventalo [...] Así era a miña irmá, supoño que herdara estas cousas da miña nai» (de Toro, 2004: 19; 21). Clara herself perceives that her humanistic impulses are strongly inspired by her mother's affection for books and music: «Eu [Clara] creo que na desmedida afección da miña nai por ler novelas e en cantar era onde ela libraba as tensións e padecementos que aquela vida lle supuña» (de Toro, 2004: 30-1). Ultimately, this invaluable hope to reinvent everyday life through the humanities leads to an ethically responsible understanding of mankind. As Suso de Toro suggests, social change today involves a transdisciplinary integration of Renaissance Humanism and «las corrientes humanizadoras que nacen en este nuestro mundo abierto» (de Toro, 2009: 30). De Toro's holistic approach to humanism echoes a «dialogic, intersubjective understanding of ethics» (Nealon, 1997: 130) such as Emmanuel Levinas's, whose alterity ethics is based on assuming responsibility for the other. Regarding Levinas's ethics of the other, Tony Davies (1997: 132) agrees that «humanity is neither an essence nor an end, but a continuous [...] process of becoming human, a process that entails the inescapable recognition that our humanity is on loan from others, to precisely the extent that we acknowledge it in them». In de Toro's *A sombra cazadora* Clara's innate disposition to embrace human values such as friendship, solidarity, and compassion results in «dialogic intersubjectivity» (Nealon, 1997: 130-1) and the adventurous encounter between the self and the other. Clara's role as a sister, a friend, a mother, and even a teacher highlights the character's natural willingness to take immediate action and assume «responsabilidade» (de Toro, 1994: 25) upon unexpected challenges and demanding circumstances:

Meu irmán [...] nin sequera coñecera a mamai [...]. A mamai era alegre, cariñosa e intelixente e el case non a coñecera, de maneira que eu debía ser tamén alegre, cariñosa

e o máis intelixente que puidese para que el vise que na vida había persoas maiores así, que non eran todas mesquiñas e estúpidas, como meu papai dicía sempre que eran as do mundo exterior. (de Toro, 1994: 17)

Her gentle faith in human honesty eventually becomes the inspiring impulse that leads Miguel o Toco, Estrela e Clara herself to overcome their broken, dysfunctional families. Towards the end of *A sombra cazadora* Miguel admits that «a min gústame moito Clara, e a Estrela tamén. Non sei que nos deparará a vida, pero polo de agora eu nunca tan ben comín e a Estrela curoulle aquela catarreira que tiña» (de Toro, 1994: 218). In the «Epilogue» of the novel, Suso de Toro assigns a major role to the domestic space where Clara finally stays with her new family. The final chapter shows Clara baking their own bread and lovingly nourishing Miguel and Estrela; this last scene suggests a radical redefinition of the (post)modern notion of progress, whereby domesticity, natural resources, and a sustainable lifestyle effectively bring individual growth and social development: «Case todo [era] das cousas da horta ou dos animais que criabamos no noso curral, galiñas, parrulos, coellos e unha vaca» (de Toro, 1994: 24)¹. Their father reveals that his wife's strong desire to become pregnant was, after all, her personal, defiant response to the barrenness of a wasteland dangerously dependent on the abuse of technology: «A vosa nai sempre soubo que fronte á Imaxe había que afirmar a vida, eu creo que por iso teimou en tervos a vós por riba de todo» (de Toro, 1994: 76)². This focus on «crear vida nova» (de Toro, 1994: 76) generates constructive, positive human relations in everyday life and contributes to increase social justice and civic engagement³. In fact, «postmodern humanism» encourages citizens to take on community work in order to gain an in-depth understanding of human life. According to Todd Davis (2006: 32):

Postmodern humanism wishes to better the human condition because of the relative worth of all life and the potential that such life may hold in its proliferation of multiplicities [...]. For the postmodern humanist [there is] endless play, endless affirmation of life. The postmodernist does not believe in the perfectibility of humanity or a final, static position such as utopia; rather, the postmodern humanist concentrates on daily, local activity that may improve human life.

¹ In this sense, *A sombra cazadora* can be interpreted in terms of «green studies» or «ecocriticism», defined by Laurence Coupe as a «new kind of pragmatics [...] in the sense of [...] invoking nature [to challenge] the logic of industrialism, which assumes that nothing matters beyond technological progress» (Coupe, 2000: 4).

² *A sombra cazadora* addresses humanistic issues regarding the supremacy of visual culture in postmodernity and its impact on our relationship with nature. Greg Garrard proposes the term «cultural ecocriticism», instead of «literary ecocriticism», to highlight a broader view of green studies: «As ecocritics seek to offer a truly, transformative discourse, enabling us to analyse and criticise the world in which we live, attention is increasingly given to the broad range of cultural processes and products in which, and through which, the complex negotiations of nature and culture take place» (Garrard, 2004: 4).

³ Steven Rosendale explores this transdisciplinary exchange between environmental criticism and the anthropocentric concerns of fiction, such as humanism, in *The Greening of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory, and the Environment*: «A growing number of scholars are clearly interested in expanding the purview of ecocritical practice by placing environmental criticism in a [...] productive relation with other, perhaps [...] humanistic, theoretical perspectives and critical practices» (Rosendale, 2002: xvii).

The modest, daily life of small family communities such as Miguel, Clara, and Estrela's shelters the flourishing seeds of a promising, hopeful future. The blooming fig tree that Teseo mentions in the «Epilogue» of the novel (de Toro, 1994: 221) represents the prosperous renewal of Renaissance humanism, which, as Francisco Rico reminds us, originates in «la palabra antigua [...], porque en latín se hallan todas las ciencias y artes del hombre libre» (Rico, 2002: 19; 20). From an academic and intellectual standpoint, humanism, indeed, refers to a fruitful return to the classics of Ancient Rome and Greece. Nicholas Mann (1996: 2) explains that humanism «involves above all the rediscovery and study of ancient Greek and Roman texts, the restoration and interpretation of them and the assimilation of the ideas and values that they contain». In *A sombra cazadora* de Toro revisits classical sources and myths such as the literature by Homer, Plato's allegory of the cave, and the Cretan labyrinth to account for the emotional isolation caused by the overpowering rule of technology, machines, and mass media. José Luis Charcán Palacios has described de Toro's novel as a contemporary recreation of Homer's *Odyssey*: «El argumento [...] nos descubre a dos hermanos adolescentes huyendo de una sombra virtual omnipresente, en un viaje iniciático por una ciudad alegoría del Hades que visita Odiseo en su dilatado retorno a Ítaca» (Charcán Palacios, 1999: 49). Similarly, in *Humanismo y nuevas tecnologías* José Luis Molinuevo defines Plato's allegory of the cave as the philosophical antecedent of the so-called «digital caves» (Molinuevo, 2004: 22), which imprison present-day humans in unreal spheres inhabited by deceptive shadows and illusory images. At the same time, Molinuevo echoes Martin Heidegger's vision of Plato's myth to introduce the comforting possibility of deliverance: «Heidegger, en *La doctrina platónica de la verdad*, afirma que el mito platónico de la caverna caracteriza la existencia humana, que vive originalmente en una situación de inautenticidad, pero que tiene la posibilidad de su liberación, de llevar una existencia auténtica» (Molinuevo, 2004: 21-22). The main characters in *A sombra cazadora* achieve this real, genuine existence when, after completing their outward journey, they finally find their lost paradise, namely a humanist geography represented by the feminine. In de Toro's novel it is the mother who symbolizes the nurturing of the body and a rewarding return to Nature. De Toro invalidates the dehumanizing effect of the empty shows projected on the «Screen» —a major character in and of itself— by focusing on physical, bodily needs and the healing power of the human touch —to kiss, to embrace, to hold hands. As Clara and Teseo's father tells his children:

Vós debedes lembrar sempre, sempre, que a realidade está fóra da pantalla, nunca dentro. As pantallas queren que vós entredes nelas e vos perdades dentro, no seu labirinto. Se vos atopádes en perigo beliscádevos, así acordaredes do soño da pantalla e decatáredesvos de que na realidade hai dor e a dor está na carne. Na pantalla non. Confiade sempre na carne e desconfiade das imaxes. (de Toro, 1994: 64)

Non podo destruír a Imaxe, máis quixera eu [...]. Se algunha vez vos vedes enfrontados a ela [...] lembrade que a vosa forza está na carne. (de Toro, 1994: 81)

Instead of *Cogito, ergo sum*, de Toro's novel presents the captivating principle of *Sentio, ergo sum*: «Frente a ese mundo de los sentidos en los que las percepciones son falsas, [en

A sombra cazadora] la carne actúa como base cartesiana sobre la que reconstruir la identidad del individuo [...] La angustia ante el incierto exterior es eludida mediante la celebración del cuerpo» (Pedrós-Gascón, 2001-2003: 397). At the end, the characters choose to live according to a humanistic reason that cancels the devastating consequences of the fake, virtual realities of screens. A bright and fearless future based on family values and the notion of home prevails over the underground world of the apocalyptic, urban spaces of *A sombra cazadora*. Furthermore, the «Epilogue» restores the Renaissance commitment to humanism and Nature by identifying Clara's own pregnancy with the idyllic, bucolic freedom of the rural. The hunting shadow (the so-called «Image») is eventually challenged by an epic rediscovery of a mythical paradise based on a humanistic view of everyday life. As a matter of fact, the novel opens with a reference to «Another Day in Paradise», a popular song concerning solidarity and charity by British singer Phil Collins (de Toro, 1994: 11). Likewise, a quote regarding peace, friendship, and love from Sophocles's *Antigone* introduces the «Epilogue» of *A sombra cazadora*: «Non nacín para o odio, senón para o amor» (de Toro, 1994: 219). Consequently, de Toro's novel opens and closes with references to humanistic ideals such as tolerance, dignity, optimism, generosity, positive relationships, cooperation, and a sense of community.

Traditionally, secular humanism rejects the supernatural and the irrational, as it focuses on improving human lives on earth, not in the afterlife. However, the humanistic epistemology of *A sombra cazadora* is partially revealed through a supernatural and science-fictional discourse that channels the epic quest of an ideal, golden past represented by Clara and Teseo's dead mother. Particularly, in Suso de Toro's novel the earthly message of humanism connects with Teseo's paranormal, magical abilities to talk to his dead mother and to perceive the spiritual halo of his peers. In *A sombra cazadora* de Toro successfully combines secular humanism and the belief in the metaphysical and the transcendental. In this sense, de Toro's novel updates the Renaissance legacy of Neoplatonic humanists, who, according to Anthony Grafton (1990: 101):

...came to believe [...] in a visible world which manifested [...] the beneficent intentions of its creator. And they proclaimed [...] that the wise man had the power to rise above the material world in which his physical body was embedded, by drawing down the powers of the stars through study and incantation. He could thus work wonders on earth and save himself from earthly corruption at one and the same time.

Similarly, Teseo's epic and invisible connection with the uncanny and the Beyond somewhat saves Clara, Miguel and Estrela from the earthly corruption of the authoritarian «Screen». In other words, the epistemology of *A sombra cazadora* comes both from Teseo's supernatural skills and the worldly, corporeal identities of the characters. In fact, Teseo's mystical spirituality mirrors emotional needs that have a direct impact on the here and now of his physical, empirical existence. *A sombra cazadora*, then, suggests an ethical synthesis of cosmic and secular humanism that anticipates Ana Gimeno-Bayón's definition of integral humanism in «Ser plenamente humano: visiones para el siglo XXI». In her proposal Gimeno-Bayón outlines a 21st century humanistic agenda based on «la integración de la dimensión

transcendente con la crítica a la credulidad mágica, integración que permita una experiencia no reprimida del Misterio y de lo sagrado, sin abdicar de la racionalidad nin reducir aquélla a ésta» (Gimeno-Bayón, 2003: 559). *A sombra cazadora*, therefore, shows an ironic structural discontinuity (a supernatural epic and an earth-bound epistemology) which, as Georg Lukács argues in his *Theory of the Novel* (56-69), is the determining and organizing principle of the novel as a literary genre.

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