

# Soft Matter, Lila Zemborain

A Review by Juan Andrés García Román

In *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), Roland Barthes stated that contemporary poets are in an impossible situation. On the one hand, they are unable to “satisfy” an expectation because if they do, then their writing would not differ from the merchandising that provides our desires with response and death. A poet's totally unprecedented writing, on the other hand, has no way back; it can only be thrown as a suicidal, autistic enunciation. The Celanian concept of *engführung*, or “narrowness” is closely related to that idea and, beyond that, *Homenaje a Maria Callas* (1978), in which the Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann shares that she saw in the Greek singer the absolute embodiment of art—an art that played Russian roulette between life and death, or between the possible and the impossible.



The poems of *Materia blanda* (2023), *Soft Matter* in English, by Lila Zemborain are also held in the void. Although logically they do allude to a tradition—the opposite is impossible—they seem to suppress everything written before them; they annihilate it. Those poems introduce their own time rather than being presented as writing. In fact, they are not poems; they are fragments of prose fitting perfectly regular boxes, in some way akin to the screen of a primitive computer, the mix of ones and zeros, the Morse code, the scribbles of the Rohrschach test, or, of course, the representation of a mental image of the very ability to represent, like a mirror: “Pythagorizing breath is in a certain sense to measure it, to be in contact with it, in the actions surrounding an identity diluted among so many orders and wastelands intermittently expanding in a fleeting, confused to-and-fro. Oh yes, the thread. When the thread momentarily maintains its proper balance, how momentary the void, how fragile and indecipherable it is when nothingness rises. . . ” (p. 41). *Soft Matter's* intuitions are bold. In fact, the imaginative power of the book is one of its most resounding qualities, even though it often seems wrapped in its placenta. They are proto-images. They refer to the source of the figurative representation itself, like attempting to portray the brain, the soft and gray matter where thought is... generated? Are these brain-flow X-rays?

It makes sense to talk about radiography as these texts issue a certain scientific aspiration. Lila Zemborain places herself with such a colossal book at the forefront of a certain type of writing that aspires to poetry from an almost essayistic standpoint; it somehow reproduces the objective language of science while moving it, bending it, and making it tremble – just like poetic proposals such as those of Chantal Maillard, Alba Cid, Ruth Llana, Anne Carson or the *Three Poems* (1972) by John Ashbery, all of which have their original source in the marginal writing by Derrida or Blanchot. In all these cases, the poetic language is a reflection of its own insufficiency and, simultaneously, an expression of protest that does not

conform to the space, *delicatessen, bouquet*. It addresses its (as Francis Ponge would say) "rage for/of expression" to the waterline length of Western thought. At some point, this thought divided us from the cosmos to call us subjects, *in-dividuum*, as Hans Robert Jauss recalled.

It is said that Lila Zemborain typed her poems with her eyes closed in front of the computer screen turned on, yes, like a mirror. It is said that she wanted to portray herself at the moment when she was convalescing from an illness. Closed eyes—"like swallowed eyes," as Rainer Maria Rilke put it—watching the inside to express who we are, what we ultimately are, and what distinguishes us from nothing. The result is a poetry of knowledge that not only does not abandon sensuality or visionary and powerful evocation but also does not hide its experimental nature—its situation somewhere between here and there, between reality and the conduit or means of its symbolization, between the text and the possibility of language. This is metaliterature with a capital M.

Since these language cubes are also hollow, they are like spaces of origin that tend to define humans by being present or absent. Some of the cubes are not "filled" with poetry but with drawings made by the author or number concatenations. "The rest is mere commemoration. A broken bond that opposes the light that those bodies would issue if they were alive. The dark background does not interfere with the tonal variations of a thought. The framed reflection, also the monument, is all that remains, along with the whisper of the water spilling without shame over the edges" (p. 63).

Formerly, I put on hold the question of whether the brain is indeed a generator of consciousness, as conventional science understands it. Yes, I left the door open to other concepts, but that breach or question does not refer today to a superstitious or fanciful idea. There are already many speeches from scientists and philosophers—I recall Roger Bartra's essay "Anthropology of the Brain"—who are beginning to consider the possibility of a non-local consciousness, meaning a signal equalizer brain. The truth is that never before has medicine achieved so many and such radical cases of "resuscitation" after a cardiorespiratory arrest. Therefore, more precise technological equipment begins to approach the question of "what are we?" As Lila Zemborain well knows, death and conscience are no longer just questions for poets. She also remarks that other forms of the same question are possible: the spectacular and even alarming development of artificial and computational intelligence; the possibility that technology aspires to transhumanism—the extrapolation of the human beyond the physical body; the more detailed analysis of complex animal intelligences (Derrida already saw it coming in his posthumous essay *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008)); the need for a global and planetary response to the challenge of a planet Earth in danger; and the more than probable discovery of life, at least microbial, in other corners of our solar system. *Soft Matter* is, without a doubt, poetry of the limit and on the limit. "I call it a reaction, or so they have called it. The oscillation in the cortex—not the one we share with the fish—is what separates us from the monkey. Perhaps we don't yet have the ability to call it by its name. Intuition, unconscious, eyes open, the night of time" (p. 27).

Definitely, this book introduces something new. When you read it, it feels like you are in a place of no return. It feels like vertigo, one similar to the one that accompanied other stellar or catastrophic moments of our humanity: the discovery of the 'Self' in the era of the Montaigne family, Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, or the early Romantics; the Renaissance; the

world wars and their particular relationship with poetry, making possible a poetic discourse of beauty itself... Theodor W. Adorno stated that writing a poem after Auschwitz was a barbaric act, although the topic—poetry in a destitute time—came from Friedrich Hölderlin's verses and had passed through the Heideggerian "forest paths". Finally, poetry was written after Auschwitz and no, it was not a barbaric act. In fact, it was the reconciliation of the human being with its language. Even so, poetry was never exactly the same after the Jewish genocide and the disasters of war, just as it will never be the same again after this planetary crisis. Of course, there will also be a before and after in Spanish poetry regarding this prideful *Soft Matter* currently available at Quantum Prose.

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