

Review of:

Jack Mircala. *Siniestras Amadas: 22 Delirios necro-románticos de Edgar Allan Poe*. Madrid: Ediciones Sinsentido, 2009. 135 pp. 18 euros.

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In Spain, Edgar Allan Poe's work enjoys a particularly high profile, both in university milieux and among the reading public, and in 2009, the year of Poe's bicentennial celebrations, Spain has been one of the locations where the largest number of homages and events have been organized, both academic and cultural. The roll call of Spanish academic conferences devoted to Poe over 2009 includes those held at the University of Castilla-La Mancha (Albacete campus; 3-6 February), the University of Alcalá de Henares (Madrid; 21-23 May), the University of Extremadura (Cáceres campus; 19-21 November), and the University of Valencia (2-4 December). In January, the Madrid bookshop Tres Rosas Amarillas organized the event, "Una noche con Poe" ("A Night with Poe"), a "terrific nocturnal reading" of tales by Poe with a fancy-dress party, and in the same month, a play inspired by the author's life, *Sombras y preguntas* (*Shadows and questions*), was produced in Getafe (Madrid). Poe also featured in the program of the *Semana Gótica* (Gothic Week) held in Madrid in October. In the publishing world, too, a number of commemorative volumes appeared in 2008 and 2009, notably a reissue of the complete tales in the already celebrated translation by Julio Cortázar in an edition conceived by the writers Fernando Iwasaki and Jorge Volpi that includes a commentary on every tale, each the work of a practicing Spanish or Latin American short story writer.

As part of this flurry of bicentennial activity, we now review a particularly original homage to Poe, offered by the artist Jack Mircala. *Siniestras Amadas* is a volume of "graphic poetry," which, in a format combining text and illustrations, aims to capture the essence of Poe as poet and writer of tales. The project embodies an old dream of Mircala's, which began to take shape in 2003 – the year of birth of his son, who was, curiously, born on the same day as Edgar Allan Poe. The theme of the whole volume is woman – the pale, moribund woman so often portrayed by Poe in his writings, at times with an anxiety verging on necrophilia. With that image guiding him, Mircala selected a total of twenty two works by Poe, all in the "neco-romantic" vein that leads us to the heart of their creator's darkest obsessions.

In his introduction, Jack Mircala confesses to "una afinidad moral con el espíritu melancólico de Poe que ha alimentado ese sentimiento de fraternal afecto capaz de atravesar siglos y fronteras" ("a moral affinity with the melancholy spirit of Poe, which has nourished a feeling of fraternal affection capable of crossing centuries and frontiers"), adding that "el Poe que conquistaba mi corazón, era un ser apasionado, sensible, doliente y frágil" ("the Poe who conquered my heart was a being passionate, sensitive, invalid and fragile"). Starting out from this perception, Mircala offers us Poe's most romantic side, in accordance with a nineteenth-century aesthetic. The

selection includes tales (four) and poems (eighteen, or nineteen if we include “The Conqueror Worm,” the poem in “Ligeia”). Across those texts glides a phantasmagoric procession of women – some real, from among those who in one way or another left profound traces in the writer's sensibility, others imaginary, created to inhabit his writings. Each text, poem or tale, bears a woman's name. The tales selected are “Berenice,” “Eleonora,” “Ligeia” and “Morella.” Of the poems, some already bore such a name in the original (“Annabel Lee” or “Ulalume”); others have had their titles modified and/or hispanicized (the first “To Helen” becomes “Helena,” “Lenore” mutates into “Lenora,” “For Annie” is shortened to “Annie”); others again have been given completely new titles. These changes reflect a desire to unify the titles in conformity with the main theme of *Siniestras Amadas*: the pallid Romantic woman. This decision feels correct, especially if we consider that the general orientation of Mircala's work is more artistic than literary. A few of the poems – those here titled “Mary Winfree,” “Rosabel” and “Isadora” – appear to belong to the Poe apocrypha, since they are not included in Thomas Ollive Mabbott's Harvard edition (Mabbott includes “They have giv'n her to another,” the poem here called “Rosabel,” as a possible source for Poe's “Bridal Ballad,” but does not consider it to be by Poe). Has the selection been guided more by the feminine criterion than by the search for absolute accuracy?

The texts have been translated into Spanish by Mircala and illustrated in a series of remarkable cardboard designs. Every so often the sequence is interrupted by a set of comments on the texts, under the heading “Un paseo con Edgar y Jack” (“A walk with Edgar and Jack”), signed by Txema Muñoz, of the short films section of the Filmoteca Vasca, the official film library of the Basque region. Muñoz, a friend of the artist's and a lover of art and the fantastic, explores, for each of the texts, the sensations transmitted by Poe and re-created by Mircala. Thus, this volume places in dialogue the intersecting and overlapping visions of two artists, Poe and Mircala.

Jack Mircala's translations have been carefully realized and are highly attentive to Poe's atmosphere, for both poems and tales. In the poems, the translator makes no attempt to reproduce in Spanish the formal characteristics (rhyme and rhythm) of the originals; nonetheless, on some occasions he introduces alliterations and assonances that are felicitous replacements for those in the originals. Thus, in “Ulalume,” “ghoul-haunted woodland” becomes “fantasmagórica frondosidad” (129), and in “Annabel Lee” “sounding sea” is rendered as “rumoroso mar” (10). However, two of the included poems that Poe conceived as acrostics have been stripped of that quality and therefore of their *raison d'être*. There are also a number of mistranslations: in “The Sleeper” (here titled “Irene”), “vault” is translated as “bóveda” (overhead vault) when it should be “sepultura” (funeral vault), and in “Ulalume,” “immemorial” is incorrectly rendered “digno de ser olvidado” (forgettable) instead of the opposite, “inolvidable” (unforgettable). Despite these occasional lapses, in general, it can be said that the translated poems succeed in retaining and communicating Poe's melancholy and ethereal sensibility.

Four stories have been rendered in a lucid and expressive Spanish, respectful of the original and free of excessive hispanicizations (in “Berenice,” “Egeus” appears as “Egeus,” but not “Egeo;” in “Morella,” “Presburg” (Bratislava) is kept rather than becoming “Presburgo”). However, the integrity of the texts has been undermined to a certain degree by the removal, in all four cases, of the epigraphs, although, by contrast,

Poe's idiosyncratic italicization has been retained. In the first paragraph of "Morella," "her society" has been mistranslated as "su círculo social" ("her social circle") when it should be "su compañía" ("her company"). The tale that obviously posed the most translation problems is "Ligeia," the most complex of the four. When the narrator speaks of the couple's joint reading, "letters" (of the alphabet) appear incorrectly as "pliegos" ("sealed documents," as if something out of "The Purloined Letter"), and in the paragraph evoking Ligeia's titanic struggle against death, "more than womanly" is translated as merely "femenino" ("womanly"), obscuring her superhuman characteristics. Despite these and other minor failings, it may be affirmed that as translator of both prose and poetry, Mircala has succeeded in capturing and communicating the sensibility of the American writer.

With his illustrations, Mircala offers a fine example of the perfectionism that endows his work with an impeccable finish. It is here that he has invested his creativity in the deepest fashion, in many cases filling out the absence in the texts of descriptive elements for Poe's characters. Starting out from a sketch serving as a model, Jack Mircala creates his cardboard designs (this material is particularly apt for molding and conferring volume) and retouches them with multicolored crayons until he achieves the desired effect. This three-dimensional format gives his drawings an unusual depth lacking in more conventional forms of illustration. Once he has defined his scenario, he photographs the drawing under a basic light and without on-screen retouching, thus marking the finished end-product of a long and arduous labor. He still keeps his original maquettes, and indeed at the beginning of 2009, those for this book were exhibited at the Sinsentido bookshop in Madrid; in addition, on 23 April, Day of the Book, the Madrid Athenaeum (Ateneo) hosted, in a "first" for Spain, a "cartoon concert" combining musical and vocal interpretations of Poe's tales by (respectively) Felé Martínez and José Ramón García with Jack Mircala's illustrations, with the artist himself displaying a number of his maquettes *in situ*.

Mircala's aesthetic approach partially recalls that of another devotee of Poe, Tim Burton (as in his first animated short film, *Vincent*): both employ the angular features and elongated figures that are perfectly adapted to Poe's macabre sense of detail. However, beyond personal affinities, and as Jack Mircala has recognized in various interviews, his style ultimately derives from movements such as German expressionism, with its known influence on various Gothic-oriented artists. There is no doubt that *Siniestras Amadas* bears the personal and recognizable stamp of Jack Mircala, who is attracting ever more admirers. Within a consistently maintained Gothic line, he confers a special identity on each of the women whose features he molds: one appears desperate, another mysterious, a third defiant and vengeful ... One, the last of all, appears not as herself but as her tomb: Ulalume. All, though, are *sinister beloveds*.

Before *Siniestras Amadas*, Mircala had evolved his style in works such *El acertijo de Valpul* (Ediciones Sinsentido; Lazarillo Prize for Illustration, 2000), *Ciudad Monstrualia* (Hiperión, 2001) and *Gamusoides Mircalianos* (Hiperión, 2004). He has also published a tale in verse, *Verlián y el talismán extraviado* (San Sebastián, 2007), available in a bilingual Spanish/Basque version. He is currently working on a new project, *Eclipse en Malasaña*, still in the Gothic vein but with an innovative touch of local color. Like *Siniestras Amadas*, these works testify to Mircala's status as a multifaceted creator, a writer-cum-illustrator fully at ease in both formats, in a combination of talents that is rarely found. In some of those other works, Mircala had

already paid homage, overtly or covertly, to Edgar Allan Poe, with hints aimed at those able to recognize allusion to a raven or a certain kind of prophetic rhythm. *Siniestras Amadas* is, then, the manifestation of a passion and the consummation of a homage that has been time in the making.

What we find in this volume is a highly original creative achievement employing multiple artistic approaches in which Poe's (and Mircala's) women take on life in an alternative world made out of paper. Jack Mircala has focused on a highly specific aspect of Poe, a many-sided author whose work also occupies other and very different spaces (notably the detective story and science fiction, within which fields too – as in “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade” – he has women protagonists, remaining, though, outside the scope of this project). What is beyond doubt is that, in his selection, Mircala has embodied the most necro-romantic side of Poe, condensed in twenty-two images of women, each with her own individuality and identity. As translator and illustrator, Mircala reveals himself as an artist marked by sensitivity to detail and with an immediately recognizable creative personality. This volume is a remarkable contribution from Spain to the 2009 bicentennial celebrations: Poe, re-created and brought up to date in Mircala's vision, remains eminently alive for our day.

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