

The Charles Manson chicks

Dionisio Cañas

The American writer Charles Manson had a relationship with the penitentiary system from the age of 17: when accused of orchestrating the murder of eight people in 1969, he had spent almost the whole of his adolescence, since 1951, in and out of prison for all kinds of crimes.

Manson's letters and poems are one unending book because they belong to the America that writes about itself as a double history of blood and light; more or less as if the Statue of Liberty concealed a butcher's knife within its torch. But it would be too simplistic to think that Manson's texts are just a reflection of America: they also reflect the dark animal we all carry inside ourselves.

Manson's letters are poems, and Manson's poems are letters because all his life is writing aimed at a known recipient, America, and also at a broader recipient: all human beings. Txuspo Poyo's pieces that shape "The brides of C. Manson" contain the image in the writing: what was written by the poet's hand appears as if they were bars, passageways, through which the images of an entire life escape; because, whether we like it or not, writing always imprisons the individual who is writing: we say more or less what we are thinking, we think far less than what we say and, writing, we conceal as much as we reveal.

The idea of writing as "liberation", or revelation, is one of those western clichés that calm the individual as an insatiable consumer of myths of love and death, produced for their momentary satisfaction, but the only liberating capacity that writing possesses consists in stopping writing.

Stopping writing is the matter pending for any good writer, and silencing what is written by those who attack the rotten ruling class is a constant task for those in power. Charles Manson is not a nice boy who has fallen victim to the system. Charles Manson is, without any doubt, a dangerous delinquent, but no less dangerous than many political or religious leaders in the history of what is supposed to be civilisation. The intolerable messianic discourse of Manson is no worse than the terrifying religious fanaticism of George Bush: indeed Manson's poems and letters are far more interesting than the speeches of Bush.

Like Walt Whitman, Manson writes with the voice of one who addresses a country of debatable ethical and political frontiers, America. Whitman was the voice of revolutionary passion (French-style) for a nation that came into being to change the old monarchical society of Europe. Charles Manson is the voice that confirms that Whitman's American dream has become a nightmare, not just in the odd Hollywood film, but in daily life. Both writers transform the United States into a collective reader towards whom they direct their written voices: Whitman as praise, Manson as elegy.

Txuspo Poyo, thirty years after the imprisonment of Manson, in 1999, wrote about the society of the time: "The squinting states of evil in his words generate an ambiguity that is applicable to the system under which we live, from the family nucleus and its most troubled relationships –between married individuals and their children–, to behaviours of psychological ritual, enlarged by ethical contradictions. I don't wish to look at it in terms of symptoms of madness, but rather in terms of anxiety"; the creative anxiety that runs through all the written work of Manson.

In US culture, as in almost all cultures, society is divided up into goodies and baddies, but what marks out American culture is that, for the first time in the history of civilisation, what remains alive in the collective imagination is the most violent, egoistical crime. It is no mere coincidence that the film "The Godfather" (in its different instalments) is the favourite film of the average American adult.

It must be stressed that the family nucleus is central, of course, in the concept of the Italian-American mafia, and it is also an obsessive idea in general in American society as a whole and in Manson's writings in particular. The family is important precisely because it enters into conflict with two of the fundamental values of capitalist democracy in the United States: individualism and mobility. That is to say, the selfishness of the "self-made man" and of the man who, in order to climb to the heights of success, does not feel tied to his family, or to his place of birth, because that would stand in the way of the mobility he needs for social and economic ascent.

It is not surprising then that Manson, referring in one of his letters to American cinema and television, writes: "they glorify fear and violence, but when they break out they hate it" (July 24, 1985). These declarations are clearly as genuine as they are ingenuous, because who would fancy going out for a pint with a psychopathic poet, or with a schizophrenic artist? And yet we too "glorify" the aura of doom and states of alienation without thereby accepting that they burst into "our reality".

In an epistolary poem from the preceding year, 1984, written for his editor, Richard Ragsdale, Manson writes: "I had to learn everything all by myself. / The first thing I learned was: don't trust anyone / no more than you do yourself". Strangely enough, this maxim is very typical among convicts, but it also applies to any businessman and to the world of the economy in general. Nevertheless, Manson's victimist and messianic discourse (society is always to blame and he is the redeemer) is more relevant and worrying now that we are having to put up with all kinds of redemptory fundamentalisms, amongst them that of the actual President of the United States who always speaks "Bible in hand".

The idea of "destiny", inseparable from our western culture, so absurdly praised by theologians, philosophers and poets, turns into a nightmare with no way out in the case of Charles Manson as a writer, or rather scribe, because it seems that all that he does and writes comes from someone who orders him to do or say certain things. Thus, in his poem "Completion", we read: "I wouldn't know what it is to be lonely / I wouldn't understand it / I've never knew what it's not like to be lonely / I can call loneliness alot of feelings/ alot of pain, sadness, a passion / for the existence of poetry / as if I were to write a book / to say I've done the best I can for / what you've sent me to do / I completed it all". The "you" that Manson addresses himself to is a confused being who, according to a letter the former wrote, in 1986, might be God, Satan or Abraxas.

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Las novias de Charles Manson

Txuspo Poyo

This was the title chosen for a project presenting a series of documents published by Charles Manson from San Quentin State Prison, California, in 1984. Manson was serving a life sentence there, accused of first-degree murder for the death of the actress Sharon Tate and five of her guests in Los Angeles in 1968. The Living Color Magazine and Worldwide Understanding launched a series of publications consisting of letters and poems written by Manson, in which, in a rather sordid fashion, he exposed his complex personality to the world. We must not forget that, since his arrest, Manson had been a “phenomenon” popularised by the information media, who transformed his crime into a myth which was to occupy a place of privilege on the dark side of human existence, where he was attributed no more and no less than the role of “disciple of evil” due to his violent and cruel nature as a wild animal.

A reading of his poems immerses us within a pathological state, where there are allusions to marginal states of paranoia and a powerful charge of sexual content... I decided to tackle the subject from the media-feted “phenomenon” perspective, and from their control over the interpretation of the events that made Manson an omnipresent figure within the cultural framework of those times. “Wall-eyed states of evil” (we deduce from his words) produce an ambiguity applicable to the system we live in, ranging from the nuclear family and the most troubled relationships it involves -between married individuals and their children-, to psychopathic ritual behaviour, amplified by ethical contradictions.

I do not wish to focus on these questions as symptoms of madness, but rather in terms of anxiety.

The priority the media gave to holding on to maximum audience figures was accompanied by a marked impetus towards overvaluing accident-induced catastrophe, generating an almost schizophrenic sense of expectation in their secondary emphasis on anxiety, by inspiring a desire for inclusion. Such positioning vis-à-vis criminal acts spattered with the gore genre is accepted by insatiable spectators, with hypnotic consequences veering between admiration and revulsion, resulting in the adoration and mythologising of the act for its own sake, wrapped in a backcloth of fantasy (due more to the beauty of the images than to their content) or in the proliferation of musical groups with diabolic names -amongst them the notorious Marilyn Manson-, given to appropriating the paraphernalia of Nazi costume (Manson has a swastika tattooed on his forehead) and playing with satanic ritual gestures. To this must be added a spectacular growth of organisations or sects that employ similar methods and attract adepts willing to compete within an astrological apology for a future brimming with uncertainty.

Occultism -with its ritual ambiances of camaraderie and secret pacts- hermetically seals a fervent confrontation with all that surrounds its adherents, reaching the fanatical peaks of a holy brotherhood. Idols and leaders share an exclusive space in the media, on the crime and accident pages and on MTV, where we move at zapping speed, projecting an accumulation of facts and events that trigger an anxiety that cannot be satisfied. The Charles Manson Chicks or Daughters of Charles Man-Son -Father/Son- was made in infrared colour film, using the electrical charges the media give out, with all identifying insignia eradicated, though setting and place can be recognised, while the project is transmitted through the gaze of the person composing the events in his poems. An imaginary context in which his characters wander in a hypnotic state, emptied of content and with clinical identities, bled dry -like the Fu Man Chu girls- or ready to seduce in the case of female Agent 007, possessed by a supposed master on a mission to destabilise. The beings that appear in these photographs are in a narcotic state of hypnosis... a frozen moment, waiting for the committing of the act that might momentarily soothe their angst.

Txuspo Poyo. Bilbao. 1999