



ANNAPURNA



THE EMPIRICAL MOUNTAIN

(Fables of a Quasi-Metaphysical Civil Servant)

— Igor Barreto —

Foreword by Gina Saraceni



▷ Translated from the Spanish by Rowena Hill ◁



Alliteration

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THE EMPIRICAL MOUNTAIN (FABLES OF A QUASI-METAPHYSICAL
CIVIL SERVANT) | IGOR BARRETO

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FLOWERS OF SNOW:
VIRTUALITY AND WRITING
IN IGOR BARRETO'S *ANNAPURNA* *

A climber is a mark on the snow

IGOR BARRETO

Annapurna is the tenth highest mountain on Earth, one of the eight-thousanders that rise in the Himalayan and Karakorum ranges in Asia, and its peaks form a massif which is one of the most dangerous in the world to climb. The first successful ascent of this mountain was made by the French team Maurice Herzog and Louis Lachenal, who reached the summit on the 3rd of June, 1950.

Annapurna is also a vanishing line that poetry opens up in language, 'a sort of athletics practiced in flight and organic deflection' by 'indirect' and 'molecular roads'¹ that can lead to exhaustion, necrosis and amputation. The poet is a climber who faces the crest of language not knowing what he will find on reaching the summit, what will happen after the ascent when the rock runs out.

Annapurna. The Empirical Mountain. (Fables of a Quasi-Metaphysical Civil Servant), by the Venezuelan writer Igor Barreto, speaks of how poetry can be an experience of two opposing positions: verticality and horizontality. Through a language that transposes and traffics with knowledges and memories, the author, a river navigator and professional breeder of fighting cocks, comes and goes from the plains to the city, 'from the countryside to the elevator', from small town bars to the office and, through these movements, traces links between the things he sees and the stories he hears, between distant and present,

national and foreign, real and virtual, oral and visual. This action of bringing together unconnected spheres of reference requires on his part taking up an uncomfortable position within language, placing him in an area where representation goes into crisis, crashes, and the limits of sense deform and expand. From the threshold and the interval, Barreto assembles his poetics like a montage of parts and documents that unfold the history of a place - San Fernando de Apure, the river, the plains, the country - which is also the history of a way of hearing and feeling culture:

a poet should take the risk of placing himself within those strata, in those zones of greatest ambiguity where times meet and blend; and attempt from within the confusion and the stammering to rehearse a singing voice, expanding the possibility of a different kind of lyric².

According to this fragment of *The Blind Plain*, writing means putting poetry ‘beside itself’, taking it out of its limits and placing it close to life and other knowledges and discourses. In this sense, Barreto’s poetry belongs to a trend common to certain contemporary Latin American works, conceiving of literature as an expansive field, which in its instability and ferment infringes upon the very notion of field as a static and closed space³ and which, besides, escapes from form and posits aesthetics as a device for making life⁴.

Barreto’s work, throughout its different stages⁵, delivers a poetry in dialogue with materials outside or at the limit of the literary, which enter the poetic field without losing their singularity, implying a questioning and a rarefaction of the very idea of poetry. It is an oeuvre-archive, where journalistic texts coexist with oral testimony, technological references with the lexicons of the world of fighting cocks or climbers of eight-thousanders, reports with translations, geographical data with references to film which acquire a subjective dimension. From a formal point of view, different formats are also used - long poem, short poem,

fragment, essay, annotation, letter, *copla*, translation - which are taken up in order to be altered and thus to point to the power of variation and contamination that life exercises as it demands an interruption of and escape from form. Even from the editorial and graphic point of view, Igor Barreto's books, published by Sociedad de Amigos del Santo Sepulcro, which he himself directs, function as small 'sarcophagi' which, as well as holding the 'essential stories' of the common people, can be considered collective tombs for affects because they list on their flaps, as memorial and homage, the 'Honorable members of the Society', founded in 1820 in San Fernando de Apure, all deceased, among whom are a few people from the family of the Argentinean writer Sergio Chefej, a friend of the poet, and even his dog Laika. A list with no period at the end so it can be infinite as the text of tradition is infinite.

From the above a first reflection on Barreto's poetry can be deduced: his tendency to expansion and contamination; his binding power and his ability to move around and connect spaces, knowledges and subjects. Poetry becomes the closest thing to life, to common life, to affect as *pathos* and crisis. The wreck of a steamer, the murder of a horse, the flooding of the plains or a cock fight are the raw material of his poetry; the 'black zone of the concrete' where a man dies because a caiman swallows him or a climber does not survive an avalanche; at the threshold of indetermination where life exceeds and disarticulates itself, the poet 'rehearses' 'a different kind of lyric' which conveys the emotions of a particular community.

Annapurna. The Empirical Mountain (Fables of a Quasi-Metaphysical Civil Servant) is one of his most political books - together with *El Duelo* (Mourning) and *Carreteras nocturnas* (Night Roads), both 2010 - and expresses Barreto's unease and disagreement with what he calls 'the accursed circumstance of the present everywhere'. Starting from references to particular experiences and multiple knowledges and discourses, he conveys the implications and consequences of the present Venezuelan

political situation for the life of the people. For this purpose he uses the antipodes as a figure based on the comparison and opposition between spaces and events which can show the disaccord between the poet and reality. And *Annapurna* is the place where this figure acquires an extreme forcefulness.

The traveler of the plains, navigator of the River Apure, breeder of cocks and bettor on their fights, is now a civil servant in the Ministry of People's Power for Culture, who spends his days shut up in an office where Monday is like a 'coffee stain' and Friday is the same, and who seeks to escape through the computer which offers him the chance to attempt one of the most daring enterprises that a human being can face: climbing Annapurna. The civil servant has 'nothing to do/ unless to travel by Google Earth', because the desolate routine of administrative reports and papers casts him into the most radical boredom and leads him to undertake a virtual journey through remote regions: 'I fled to 10,000, 20,000 meters altitude/ and strayed toward the stagnant desert of Pakistan (...) And if the salary runs away by a filthy ditch/ I swear I will never descend from Annapurna:/ - to the hills of Towerterrible/ tedium -'.

I want to emphasize that the first edition of *Annapurna* includes some images that I am not going to analyze but over which I will pause briefly, because they provide additional evidence of the gestures of appropriation, intervention and contamination in Barreto's poetry. The book is square and opens and closes with a black page which, together with the white of the cover, alludes to the death of the mountain. This is followed by: a digital photo of the aerial view of the territory of Annapurna, a negative of the mountain and a black page with the outline of a white triangle, on the back of which is a calligram, also triangular, dedicated to Carlos Drummond de Andrade; both images seem to simplify the image of the mountain and turn it into a geometrical figure. At the end of the book, beside the penultimate poem entitled 'Final declaration of a civil servant', there is a negative of the Torres del Silencio, the

site of the office that functions as an antipodes- image of Annapurna. Finally, the book closes with an appendix entitled 'Photographs of a civil servant': a photo in color of the office and the dead archive of the museum which shows, together with the image of the author, that of the designers of the book, the corrector, Yolanda Pantin to whom the book is dedicated, Alfredo Herrera (a poet and friend of the author), the ghost of his dog Laika flying, and two images of a computer screen with Barreto's hands in the foreground 'framing' the photos of the two climbers who were the first to reach the summit of Annapurna.

In this book, Barreto performs one of the most daring experiments of his aesthetic project, constructing what I want to call a *geopoetic machine*, a verbal device capable both of connecting distant, real and virtual geographical spaces, which thus become co-existent and simultaneous, and of infecting and linking modes of speech, terms and words which are at the same time specific and not specific to a particular knowledge because they have been carried to the limit of their capacity to signify. The athletic power of this machine draws together the office in the ministry and a block of ice, an administrator and a climber, a climber and a poet, bureaucracy and trekking, Buddha and the acting head of the dead archive, the crest of Annapurna and a tropical sunset, and even succeeds in making Annapurna 'a piece in a Lego/ bought at the American Toy Store/ in Colinas de Bello Monte, Caracas, Venezuela'.

The civil servant-poet-climber is in his office in Caracas, which is at the same time the mountain, 'the shoulder of the planet,/ its back'. This linking brought about by the geopoetic machine is the result of the appropriation of lexicons belonging to mountain climbing, geography, cinema, medicine, Buddhism, bureaucracy, all necessary to stage one of the borderline experiences of the human body, which is also an experience of the limits of language: to ascend the mountain, like the climbers, it has to make a huge effort and runs out of oxygen. 'Putting on the outfit is an act of depersonalization', says a line

in the book. Besides drawing attention to the alteration in the appearance and faces of the climbers, this refers to the rarefying of language itself, which has to ‘outfit’ itself with other vocabularies, other word ‘harnesses’, to be able to face the highest rock in the world. This practice of contaminating poetry with specialized terminologies is a core aspect of Barreto’s poetry. As he expresses it in *The Blind Plain*:

I would like special attention to be paid to proper names, a lexicon of seasoned resonances and recondite toponimies. What’s involved is a verbal archaeology. Although those words have lost their meaning for many, they go on resounding in the hidden ear of the language: they will bejewel the verse, giving it atmosphere and sonority⁶.

The poetry that ascends Annapurna from a ministry office becomes a ‘language minting machine’, where the residues of languages settle and accumulate, as on the mountain the waste that the climbers leave on the snows settles and accumulates: ‘remains of sleeping tents, cellophane biscuit packets, and also corpses’.

In Barreto beauty is always the place of disaster and of the greatest vulnerability, as if there was an intimate defect in the beautiful related with its durability. In these mineral and white landscapes which surprise with their grandeur and their radical otherness, death reigns. Maurice Herzog, Louis Lachenal, Iñaki, David Sharp, Scott Fischer, Chantal Mauduit, Laila Rosemberg, Amy Cubert, Leo Feltrinelli, Juan Ignacio Apellániz, Narayan Sherrestra, Atxo, little Alessio, great climbers who summited or died in the intent, form a community of desire: their greatest aspiration is to reach the most difficult summit in the world, and after succeeding to descend and dream of a fresh ascent. ‘How can a rock inspire honor/ and call to the spirit?’ the poem asks these men who seek a ‘way of elevation’ and fight against every kind of physical, geographical or atmospheric adversity that could take their lives. ‘We are

minute scraps of flint/ descending by a white sea'... 'A man is nothing but no one/ tied to a rope'.

In the same way as the Apure river in Igor Barreto's previous books is the tomb of the people who drowned and disappeared in its waters, Annapurna is the tomb of the climbers whose ambition was to bring 'the cardiogram of the heart' to 'breaking point', and who died because of an avalanche, an edema, a necrosis, a septicemia, a gangrene, or because they fell into the void 'like a robin fledgling/ from an unsafe nest'. Beneath the glacier the same shouts echo as are heard under the waters of the river; before it was the sailors, now it is the climbers, and poetry reaches where neither rescue teams nor helicopters can reach: 'I write the ridge, the flowers of ice dropping,/ the force of gravity/ that leads me to the body that will not be found'.

The poet who belongs to this reckless community is at the same time a civil servant who tries daily to defend himself against a routine that diminishes and humiliates him, as he looks at 'a ministry building/ like a mountain in Nepal'. Like a climber, every day he ascends his concrete mountain in the elevator to the summit of his office where, as on the eight-thousanders, it is an effort to breathe. But, in contrast to the mountain which grants fame and satisfaction to those who climb it, the one in the Torres del Silencio in Caracas is an 'empirical mountain' which rises over the disaster of an inoperative system and is threatened by a death zone which shows daily the void of which it consists. The civil servant works in the abyss. 'Nothing to do' is the work he faces every day. 'I lead my stark life/ in this office/ where the changeless feature/ is a green/ taro vine'. From tedium and despair he goes in and out of the image that the computer offers him, breaking the barrier of temporality and spatiality. But his aspiration to ascend the mountain and reach the summit is nothing more than the experience of the horizontality of a sequence of photographs unfolding. 'There is no greater degradation of experience, there is no

greater desolation’, Barreto says. ‘The civil servant believes he escapes from his exile by consuming a protocol created by a transnational company and through the illusory virtual reality of the technology industry’.

In this sense *Annapurna* shows how the way of escape that Google Earth provides for moving round the world is only the realization of the impossibility of an encounter with a reality not mediated by the ever more sophisticated and hyperreal representation of the media. On his digital journey, the civil servant touches the shoulder of the planet, but ‘Annapurna/ is nothing but an image on a/ computer screen./ But how it hurts!’ This exclamation reveals the pain caused by the horizontality without accidents of the digital image and the absence of organic evidence in the photos, which in their turn are also the horizontality of the wall of the present where no satisfaction is possible. The poem is hurt by its athletic fitness which lets it ascend ‘chunks of snow ice’ and listen to the ‘crash’ of avalanches, because in reality what its hands are touching is ‘administrative documents’ and its eyes are frozen on the computer screen with its ‘chromatism’ and its ‘well calibrated shine’. ‘Nothing to do, nothing to do/ unless to travel with Google Earth’ is what the poem repeats and what the poet-civil servant does every day to defend himself from the miserable salary and from life itself which is collapsing like the ‘flowers of ice’ that drop from the most difficult mountain on Earth.

Gina Saraceni

NOTES

* This text was published with slight changes and under a different title in *Revista de Literatura Hispánica* n.º 87-88, primavera-otoño, 2018, pp. 272-282

1 Gilles Deleuze. *Crítica y clínica*. Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 1996, p. 6.

2 Igor Barreto. *The Blind Plain*. Portland: Tavern Books, 2017, p. 223.

- ³ Florencia Garramuño. *Mundos en común. Ensayos sobre la inespecificidad en el arte*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2015, p. 43.
- ⁴ Fermín Rodríguez. “Latin American Psycho”. In *Entre el humo y la niebla. Guerra y cultura en América Latina*, pp. 291-314. Pittsburgh: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Latinoamericana, Universidad de Pittsburgh, 2016.
- ⁵ ¿Y si el amor no llega? (1983), *Soy el muchacho más hermoso de esta ciudad* (1989), *Crónicas llanas* (1989), *Tierranegra* (1993), *Carama* (2000), *Soul of Apure* (2006), *El llano ciego* (2006), *El duelo* (2010), *Carreteras nocturnas* (2010), *Annapurna* (2012).
- ⁶ Igor Barreto. *The Blind Plain*. Portland: Tavern Books, 2017, p.277.



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*to Yolanda P.
office partner*

*As the mountain swept me up in its flight,
I suddenly saw open before me,
on the other space,
the golden door of Memory,
the way out of the labyrinth.*

THE POEM OF THE ARCANA O.W. LUBICZ MIŁOSZ

*I sing a song
for a white
temple.*

TIBETAN POPULAR SONG

*Así que la montaña me hubo arrastrado en su vuelo,
vi de pronto abrirse ante mí,
sobre el otro espacio,
la puerta de oro de la Memoria,
la salida del laberinto.*

EL POEMA DE LOS ARCANOS O.W. LUBICZ MIŁOSZ

*Canto una canción
para un templo
blanco.*

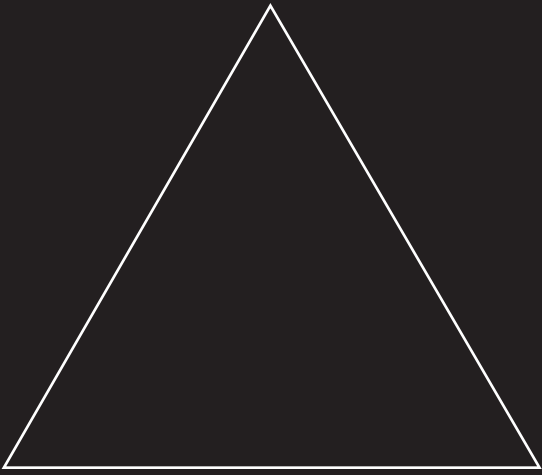
ANÓNIMO POPULAR DEL TÍBET

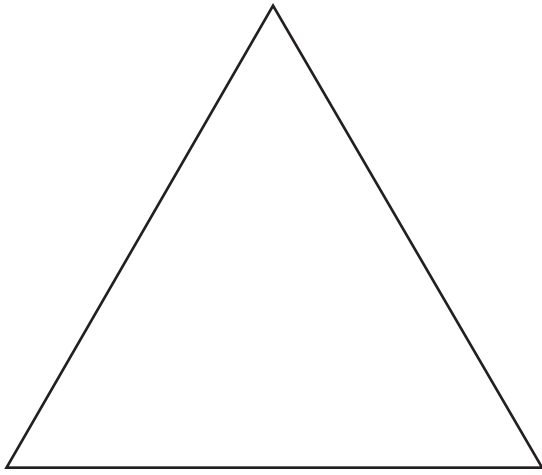
A
hora soy
un funcionario
público. Y el Annapurna
es apenas una imagen en la
pantalla del ordenador. ¡Pero cómo duele!

(CALIGRAMA PARA CARLOS DRUMMOND DE ANDRADE)

I
am now
a civil servant.
And Annapurna
is nothing but an image on a
computer screen. But how it hurts!

(CALLIGRAM FOR CARLOS DRUMMOND DE ANDRADE)





Ícaro-Escalador
(En arriesgado viaje virtual)

*Desde aquí puedo ver la crisálida del Annapurna
gobernando la zona de muerte de los ochomiles.
Digo, que ahora vuelo como cualquier otro aro niquelado
de la esfera terrestre,
a 10.000 kilómetros de altura, mientras
fijo mi vista en la montaña que es una epifanía
de la Diosa de las cosechas.
Ella siega la cabeza de los escaladores, la corona de trigo
con las semillas germinadas
y las arroja al final de laderas y despeñaderos.
Una montaña es un emblema del reino mineral
—eso me han dicho—
pero la soledad y el vacío del espacio a esta altura
ha reinventado la tristeza por la ausencia de lo orgánico.
Creo que se trata de un pattern síquico.
Deseo ver a la tierra como una bellota,
como un fruto empujado desde su interior por una semilla
que es la cresta himalayística del Annapurna,
bordeando imaginarios lugares del Tíbet y Nepal.*

Icarus-Climber
(On a hazardous virtual journey)

From here I can see the chrysalis of Annapurna
ruling over the Death Zone of the eight-thousanders.
I say, now I am flying like any other nickel-plated ring
of the terrestrial sphere,
at 10,000 kilometers altitude, while
I keep my eyes on the mountain which is an epiphany
of the Goddess of harvests.
She shears off the heads of the climbers, the crowns of corn
with the sprouted grains
and flings them to the bottom of slopes and precipices.
A mountain is an emblem of the mineral kingdom
– so I’ve been told –
but the desolation and blankness of space at this altitude
have redefined sadness at the absence of anything organic.
I think it’s a case of a psychic pattern.
I want to see the earth as an acorn,
as a fruit pushed from inside by a seed
which is the Himalayan crest of Annapurna,
bordering imaginary places in Tibet and Nepal.

Destino

La montaña sólo espejea la oscuridad cósmica

mientras floto

en el área de rotación

antes de la noche:

*[Desde aquí puedo ver el orbe rodador de los cometas,
su ánima dispersiva.*

Veo las estrellas dividiéndose en un acto puro de replicación.

*Vi una lluvia de aerolitos que manchaban de violetas
y magentas - la bóveda].*

*Hay quienes hablan y sueñan con el Annapurna,
pero muy pocos conocen
la montaña empírica.*

Será preciso que entremos en el centro de una tensión antigua, / guiados por la fuerza de gravedad, y sólo con palabras: / como si estas fuesen alfileres en un tablero.

Destination

The mountain only mirrors the cosmic darkness

while I float

on the current of rotation

before nightfall:

[From here I can see the rolling orbs of the comets,
their will to disperse.

I see the stars splitting in a pure act of replication.

I saw a shower of aerolites that stained the vault
with violets and magentas.]

There are people who talk and dream of Annapurna,
but very few know

the empirical mountain.

We will be required to enter the center of an ancient tension,/ guided by the
force of gravity, and only with words:/ as if they were bishops on a chessboard.

Ciclos

*Antes de llegar la luz del día a la Piazza del Duomo
en Florencia
o a la retícula de un rascacielos
en el Financial Center de Shanghai,
se ilumina la cresta del Annapurna
y el sol calibra su cromaticidad con la montaña:
de un color neutro
a otro más saturado: del blanco al rojo. Simplemente amanece
entre juegos ambiguos.
Perfiló el papel para la copia de mis sueños himalayísticos.
Escribo la arista, las flores del hielo que se desploman,
la fuerza de gravedad
que me conduce al cuerpo que no será encontrado.*

Cycles

Before the light of day reaches Piazza Duomo
in Florence
or the grid of a skyscraper
in the Financial Center of Shanghai,
the crest of Annapurna lights up
and the sun calibrates its chromaticity by the mountain:
from a neutral color
to one more saturated: from white to red. Simply, it dawns
between ambiguous games.
I trim the paper for the copy of my Himalayan dreams.
I write the ridge, the flowers of ice dropping,
the force of gravity
that leads me to the body that will not be found.

Lección del auriga

*Un día, Buddha salió con su carruaje alado
conducido por un auriga,*

*era la primera vez que volaban
sobre los riscos altos de la montaña*

*y en el trayecto de ese viaje encontró a un escalador coreano,
a los que suelen acusar corrientemente de suicidas.*

*El escalador había muerto hace por lo menos cinco años
y aún conservaba sus brazos rodeando el pecho
como un último gesto antes de la congelación.*

*Durante largo tiempo sus pertenencias permanecieron intactas:
la cámara fotográfica, el abrigo de plástico anaranjado y gris,
el piolín que colgaba de su mano izquierda,*

y en sus pies los dos crampones -sorpresivamente nuevos-.

Dolido por aquella visión, preguntó Buddha al auriga:

¿Qué ha hecho, buen auriga, este hombre?

—Alteza, esto es lo que se conoce como un escalador.

—¿Y qué es, buen auriga,

lo que se conoce como un escalador?

*—Un escalador, alteza, significa un ser con demasiada ambición
y al que no le resta mucho por vivir.*

Lesson of the charioteer

One day, Buddha went out in his winged carriage
driven by a charioteer;

it was the first time they were flying
over the high crags of the mountain,
and on that trip he met one of those Korean climbers
that lately have been accused of being suicidal.

The climber had been dead for at least five years
and still had his arms around his chest,
his last gesture before freezing.

For a long time his belongings had remained intact:
his camera, his orange and gray plastic jacket,
the ice hammer hanging from his left hand
and on his feet the two – surprisingly new – crampons.

Saddened by that sight, Buddha asked the charioteer:

– *What has he done, good charioteer, this man?*

– *Highness, this is what is known as a climber.*

– *And what is it, good charioteer,
that is known as a climber?*

– *A climber, Highness, means a person with too much ambition
who doesn't have much longer to live.*