



THE DEBT TO BEAUTY

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There are those who have defined woman as a sphinx without mystery, without enigma, whose fascination is enclosed in appearance. Mystery or no mystery, it is her unquestionable attraction, her beauty, that leads men to become entangled in the combats of the eternal war of the sexes, never finished, never won, full of battles of attrition, of a few triumphant blows of the hand and of many months and years of trenches, barbed wire and constant, monotonogamous, stultifying bombardments. So much wastage and abundance of hendecasyllables, so many flaming and sublimated madrigals to always end up in a barren and soured bedlam: Dulcinea is always Aldonza and not vice versa. Such is the force and seduction of a simple, imaginary and unrealizable *promesse de bonheur* [promise of happiness], as the divine Stendhal would write. The beloved is a screen on which the lover projects his dreams, that is the quixotic misunderstanding essential to the whole love struggle, where animal impulses mingle with the fantasies of the spirit: the centaur in search of his Pallas.

For the other side—that of the sphinxes—which is the one with the strategic superiority and the most practical design, this war was resolved in a prosaic and binding objective, but very necessary for society: the family, the house, the polis, the market. That they lived happily ever after culminates all the narratives of the West, and it covers with illusion the inexorable need to reproduce the social body, to give continuity to something that is much more important than the vain and impossible happiness of individuals. Or, at least, this had been so until some members of the high castes decided to change the rules of the game and pervert the natural inclinations of human livestock with the spread of a poison that acts as a solvent of societies and civilizations: the search for an impossible abolition of reality so that even the most delirious fantasies, almost all of them purely corporeal and erotic, become real, something that, of course, cannot happen, but that makes the sphinxes stop thinking about their essential objective and replace it with a phantasm that only produces neurosis for them and great profits for those who invoke it. And when one of the sides—the strongest—is upset, the other is disoriented; the subtle balance is broken. This, fundamentally, is what *El deber de lo bello* [*The Debt to Beauty*], the recent novel by Javier R. Portella, is about.

Since the last century we knew that absurdity was the essential note of existence. But it is in this century that it has gone from being a simple intellectual or historical reference to become everyday life—the usual scenario of an increasingly ugly, puritanical, hysterical and imbecilic existence, a product imported from America but with European roots, especially Anglo-Saxon.

The protagonist of the novel, Hector, is overwhelmed (and how!) by the plagues of our time: political correctness, gender superstition and delirious feminism. Hector is the fulminated man, whose true love life was annihilated by Cristina, his former partner, and who seeks in extraordinary adventures the meaning of an existence that moves in a field of shadows where he longs for the light, but has the mania of looking for it inside all the tunnels. His erotic epiphany comes at the hand of Angelica, a prototype of the feminine ideal of our time, liberated but seductive, whose name comes in handy if we take into account that demons are also angels. Fantasy becomes reality for Hector, but it only brings him mild joys and constant ashes. Wounded by beauty and hopelessly addicted to its affairs, our postmodern Werther becomes entangled in a skein of sensual labyrinths that torment him. This comes to an extreme when he encounters a sophisticated sphinx, Margot, with echoes of Faust and Bulgakov, who leads him to his inevitable Walpurgis Night.

All of this is told with humor and with a tone that is more French than Spanish, for it is not a traditional thing to describe with elegance the deviations of the flesh, to untie with care such tender ties. Portella draws a humorous but deep portrait of an empty and full society, satisfied to the point of stupidity, a portrait that takes us from the classrooms of the pathetic Santiago Carrillo High School or from a sordid back room of the Ministry of Equality to the mansions of the European oligarchy; Hector goes through all the circles of the amorous hell of our time, of this unbridled chaos, of the glorified vulgarity that can only be redeemed by the cult of beauty, something that the protagonist misses throughout the novel and that only shines in a few moments—as that which they call "happiness."

Sertorio lives, writes and thinks in Spain. this review comes through the kind courtesy of [EL Manifesto](#).

