

A banquet, an odyssey

Plato wrote "The Symposium" (also known as "The Banquet") between 385 and 370 BC. The Greek philosopher wrote this work during his middle period, when he had already founded his Academy in Athens and developed more complex themes, such as the Theory of Forms.

In Ancient Greece, the symposium (from the Greek: Συμπόσιον, transl. *Sympósiōn* - "drinking together") was a social and intellectual gathering of elite men, that usually took place after dinner (Deipnon). It was a space for socialising, philosophical debate, entertainment and celebration, subject to specific rules and rituals.

Participation was restricted to free, adult males (citizens) and slaves. No women attended, except for *hetairai* (cultured courtesans). The moderator - the symposiarch – was responsible for setting the pace of drinking and proposing the themes of discussion. Wine, a core element of these meetings, was served mixed with water in a "crater" (krater) – in a variable ratio of water to alcohol (3:1 or 2:1), in order to avoid excessive drunkenness. One of the entertainments was "kottabos" - a game of skill that consisted of throwing the dregs from the bottom of the wine glass, to a target in the middle of the room.

The main theme of "The Symposium" is the nature of love (Eros). Each character presents a unique vision of Eros, ranging from love as the driving force of virtue (Phaedo) to the conception of love as the pursuit of absolute beauty (speech by Socrates/Diotima). In this context, it is interesting to appropriate Plato's text, in terms of the idea of the ladder of love (Diotima/Socrates), according to which the feeling of love is an upward journey - from physical love towards someone to the appreciation of universal beauty and immutable forms, such as Beauty itself – or Alcibiades' drunken discourse on his unrequited love for Socrates.

In Plato's work, Diotima is an enigmatic figure, described by Socrates as a "priestess of Mantinea" who would have instructed him in the nature of the love (Eros). She is not physically present in the dialogue, but is evoked by Socrates as the source of wisdom. Diotima presents love as a daemon (an intermediary spirit between humans and gods), linked to the search for immortality through physical or intellectual creation. On the other hand, Alcibiades' drunken episode, is a crucial moment in "The Symposium". It serves to contrast the philosophical seriousness of the previous speeches with the force of disorder and human passion. Alcibiades was an Athenian politician and military man, known for his beauty and charisma, who arrives drunk at the banquet and makes an impassioned speech about Socrates, instead of following the proposed theme: the eulogy of the god Eros.

While the other guests make lofty, theoretical speeches about love, Alcibiades brings a more intimate perspective to the gathering. His drunkenness reveals human fragility and

emotion, in stark contrast with the rational quest and idealised vision of truth and beauty discussed by the philosophers. His passion for Socrates highlights the tension between physical love and spiritual love, one of the central issues of the Platonic dialogue.

One of the key texts that Sebastião Casanova read while he painted "Ma mort sera petite, comme moi", was James Joyce's "Ulysses", that was inspired by Homer's "The Odyssey". In "The Classical Temper: A Study of James Joyce's Ulysses" (1961), S. L. Goldberg establishes a subtle relationship between the representation of drunkenness in Joyce's book and the context of Plato's "The Symposium", although not directly or explicitly. This connection is primarily due to the way in which both texts exploit the "dynamics between disinhibition, truth and the search for meaning".

In "The Symposium", the participants drink in moderation, because of their hangover from the previous evening. Their dialogue is interrupted by the arrival of Alcibiades who is drunk and exposes the complexity of Socrates – while on the outside he resembles a satyr, on the inside he is divine – thereby revealing that intoxication releases a "truth unfiltered by reason".

In "Ulysses", the journey of Leopold Bloom, a moderate drinker, is characterised by moments of "sensory disorientation" and "introspection", especially in the "Circe" episode, where his hallucinations and fantasies reveal his inner desires and traumas. Goldberg suggests that Bloom's "drunkenness" is not alcoholic, but "existential" - a search for connection in the midst of the chaos of Dublin, similar to the dialectical journey of "The Symposium". In the episode of the "Lestrygonians" (anthropophagous giants in Greek mythology) - Bloom's hunger and exhaustion generate a "sensory ecstasy", triggered, for example, by the smell of bread, which brings him closer to an almost philosophical epiphany. Bloom can be interpreted as a "sober Socrates", while other characters, such as Mulligan, represent destructive drunkenness. Bloom maintains an "ethical sobriety", seeking meaning even in disorder.

Goldberg also emphasises that, just as Alcibiades reveals the essence of Socrates through drunkenness, Joyce uses altered states of consciousness to expose "psychological truths". Socrates' sobriety allows him to transcend the physical; Bloom's sobriety ensures that he remains connected to the sensible world. Both seek an "ethical harmony".

Sebastião Casanova is also an excellent cook. In the exhibition the spectator will find a variety of items linked to moments spent at the table - in a restaurant, in a patisserie, in his home. The artist serves visual meals for the spectator. He sometimes paints on a full stomach, drunk or even when fasting or sober. His works are epiphanies. A sense of *joie de vivre* emerges from his works in this exhibition. And also the bitterness of the end of a party.

Let us return for a moment to a scene from the "Lestrygonians" episode, in Joyce's "Ulysses":

" Mr Bloom ate his strips of sandwich, fresh clean bread, with relish of disgust, pungent mustard, the feety savour of green cheese. Sips of his wine soothed his palate. Not logwood that. Tastes fuller this weather with the chill off."

And then, at the beginning of "The Eumeus" episode (Chapter 16):

" Between this point and the high, at present unlit, warehouses of Beresford Place Stephen thought to think of Ibsen, associated with Baird's, the stonecutter's, in his mind somehow in Talbot Place, first turning on the right, while the other, who was acting as his fidus Achates, inhaled with internal satisfaction the smell of James Rourke's city bakery, situated quite close to where they were, the very palatable odour indeed of our daily bread, of all commodities of the public the primary and most indispensable. Bread, the staff of life, earn your bread, O tell me where is fancy bread? At Rourke's the baker's, it is said.

The Australian professor S. L. Goldberg (1926-1991) suggests that these passages can be related to the reinvention of Platonic idealism: while Plato considered that the sensible was a stepping-stone to the intelligible, Joyce valorises the sensible as a path to the sublime. The smell of bread is not a means, but an "end in itself".

- Beauty lies in experience, not in abstraction. Furthermore, in Goldberg's opinion the fact that bread, in another passage of the book, can also be associated with the "presence of God", may be interpreted as a "criticism of institutionalised spirituality": Bloom encounters the divine, not in the church, but in the aroma of a bakery, thereby reinforcing the Joycean theme that the sacred resides in the ordinary.

Bloom is a "modern Socrates", whose philosophy is not to be found in the dialogues of the Academy, but on the streets of Dublin, amongst the aromas of bread, love letters and twinkling stars. Both characters are anti-heroes, "outsiders". In Ulysses, Leopold Bloom has other food-related epiphanies - the pork kidney in the "Calypso" episode (Chapter 4), sirens and grilled liver (Chapter 11), etc.. These moments reveal profound aspects of his psychology, memories and vision of the world, rather than simply illustrate his sensory relationship with food. They also function as metaphors for themes such as desire, mortality, the human comedy and spirituality in everyday life. Bloom's food-related epiphanies reveal that, for Joyce, "food is a microcosm of human experience". Every bite or aroma triggers new memories, desires and fears - connecting the physical to the metaphysical. While Plato viewed the body as an obstacle to truth, Joyce, through Bloom, celebrates the immanence of the sacred in everyday life, where even a fried kidney or a piece of bread can be a portal to the sublime.

The exhibition "Ma mort sera petite, comme moi" is a celebration of life, of desire, of pleasure. We can view it as a banquet, an odyssey.

Sebastião Casanova's paintings bring with them the odour of oil paints and the aroma of the meals that gave rise to them. We sense the scent of a stew, the flavour of a grilled lobster, the memory of a plate of mussels, savoured with an Alvarinho wine. Family scenes, meetings with friends, nights of revelry: the narrative that emerges from this exhibition is related to a bohemian existence, where the theme of community takes centre stage. The artist is part of the group of artists of Caldas da Rainha, a city where the most stimulating art scene in Portugal has emerged over recent decades.

There is also a significant existential dimension to Sebastião Casanova's work: the reflection that he proposes to us is about ends – of life, art and time - synthesised in the concept of *epoché*, found in Edmund Husserl's phenomenological philosophy. The "presupposition less" philosophy of Husserl and modernist painting, aims to search for a more authentic experience of reality. Both the philosopher and modern art, challenge conventional ways of seeing and interpreting, proposing a rupture with mental and aesthetic habits. While Husserl suspends judgements in order to reach the philosophical essence, modern artists have suspended traditional techniques in order to reveal new possibilities for expression.

Sebastião Casanova is an heir to an absolutely modern cultural lineage. In his work I discern points of contact with Pierre Bonnard (the table), Cézanne (still lifes), Morandi (idem), Broodthaers (the mussels), Daniel Spoerri (frozen meals) and Rirkrit Tiravanija (relational aesthetics). In our conversations, the artist mentioned other influences, above all from the fields of photography - Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall, Catherine Opie, Philip-Lorca diCorcia - and cinema - Peter Greenaway, Sergio Leone, Paolo Sorrentino, Luis Buñuel or the opening scene of Enzo Barboni's "They Call Me Trinity" (1970), in which the gunfighter gulps down a huge plate of beans, accompanied by a large chunk of bread, straight from the frying pan.

Sebastião Casanova's paintings are food for thought – as a critique of the haute bourgeoisie, of the grotesque dimension of reality and of the social landscape.

His painting prefers to drift rather than stay in the living room. Everything is resolved in the kitchen. Around a plate of lentils or a prawn açorda (bread-based stew).

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