

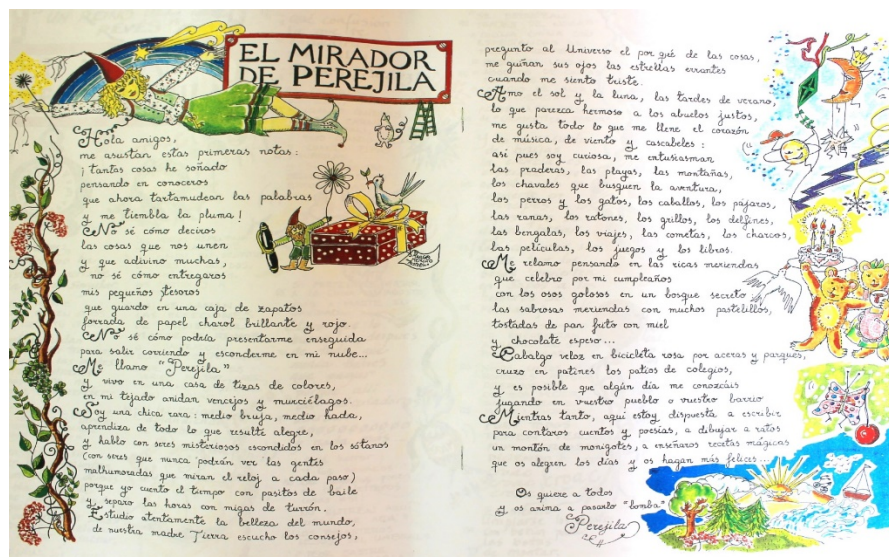
“Bathtubs Teeming with Frogs: Confluence of Form in the Multi-modal Work of Spanish Artist and Poet Margarita Merino”¹

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The title of this article is taken from a line in Margarita Merino’s poem “Mi casa” (“My House”)² in which she describes in humorous yet exasperated poetic language the condition of her home following a city-wide flood and serves to exemplify the spirited disposition that runs throughout her work.

An accomplished poet, with five published collections of poems, Merino is also a dedicated, self-taught visual artist who frequently illustrates her texts. All of the issues of the Spanish children’s magazine *Ardilla*³ (1987-1995), for example, contain her illustrated prose poetry. The poems, centered on a quasi-alter ego character that Merino created, “Perejila,” are included in the series entitled “Perejila’s Vantage Point” (“El Mirador de Perejila”). In her first installment, Perejila introduces herself timidly to her young audience, while at the same time establishing an intimate relationship with the reader in her salutation:



“Hello, Friends.
This first encounter is scaring me.
I have been dreaming about so many things
while planning to meet you
that now I am stuttering and
my pen is trembling.
I don’t know how to tell you

what we have in common,
 but my guess is quite a bit.
 I don't know how to give you
 my little treasures that I keep in a bright red
 patent leather covered shoe box.
 I don't know how to come out and introduce myself
 so that I can run back and hide in my cloud. . . .
 My name is Perejila
 and I dwell in a house of colored chalk.
 Swifts and bats nest in my roof.
 I am a strange girl: half witch, half fairy,
 a student of everything that turns out happy,
 and I speak with mysterious beings hidden in basements,
 beings which would never be able to speak with ill-humored people
 who constantly check their watches,
 because I measure time with little dance steps
 and I separate the hours with little pieces of almond candy.
 I pay close attention to the beauty of the world,
 and I listen to the counsel of our mother Earth.
 I ask the Universe why things are the way they are,
 and its eyes wink wandering stars at me
 when I feel sad."

The dichotomy of fear and courage are evident in this first issue of "Perejila" in the words *stuttering, trembling, run back, hide in my cloud* versus her forthright introduction, "My name is Perejila and I dwell in a house of colored chalk. . . . I am a strange girl," etc. This split between reticence and assertiveness is less evident in other works by this author, however, as she boldly challenges a variety of accepted norms, attitudes and behaviors that she considers censurable. Even in this first installment of the series, she criticizes "ill-humored" and unpoetic adults who too often "check their watches," a foil for the "half witch, half fairy" allure. The narrator's use of fantasy here appeals to young readers who, while observing adult behaviors in their daily lives, cling to their imaginary worlds of play where all things are possible.

Thematically, Merino's work is characterized by her fierce independence, her love of the natural world, her confidence in the young, her abhorrence of inequality, and her unfettered belief in man's ability to improve. Visually, the colorfully illustrated poems of "Perejila's Vantage Point" reflect her themes, enticing the reader to engage with the aesthetic quality and ethical messages of the texts. The initial subliminal messages—that human nature responds positively to beauty and that we have the power to participate in the beautification of our world and the amelioration of hardship worldwide—draw us closer to a self-examination of our individual roles in our universe and in our relationships.

While the following installment of Merino's illustrated poetry in the *Ardilla* magazine, "Moon and the Cookies" ("Luna y las galletas"), demonstrates an increasing sense of self, it nevertheless evinces a visual diffidence, with images that are at times ornamental and decorative, tending to ring the page borders in support of the text. The imagery depicts her imaginative interpretations of objects and symbols that are immediately recognizable—to children, adults, and across cultures—suggested in her poetry and specifically realized in her illustrations. Her central character, Perejila, is clad in elfin-like clothing that quickly assigns her a magical, spirited power, replete with wand. Vines, flowers and birds intertwine with images of the moon and sun, along with children's toys, brightly wrapped gifts, a birthday cake

and, finally, an old-style fountain pen, an image that frequents her larger body of visual work. In interviews, Merino speaks freely and fondly about her early years, her father's writing pens, and the fact that he was the primary force behind her imaginative development.⁴ In these early works, predominantly warm colors are applied over a very thin contour line, allowing the written word to take center stage.



The construction of these early images parallels the timbre of the accompanying text—visual introductions of key characters and apparently concrete settings that only exist in her imagination (*house, basement, beings, and candy*). One senses that this is only the beginning of a longer story that will take form in the telling. The images might be likened to literary or dramatic asides—rough working sketches that explore the visual character of the narrative. They possess both a hesitancy and a simplicity that confirm the idea that Merino is sharing an ongoing visualizing process with the reader/viewer.



In the eighth installment of *Ardilla*, "Let Us Defend the Beauty of the World," Merino provides a highly structured image that represents her ethos. Perejila is at the center of a beachfront

parade that moves from the right of the painting at a slight incline down to the left. She is positioned in between two informally symmetrical groupings of four musicians (left) and four horsemen (right). All are dressed in flowing white garments with traditional accessories. The setting is bright with a slight breeze gently animating the entire scenario. In the distance a sailboat cuts through the lapping water. Perejila herself serves as something of a master of ceremonies for the event, tethered to a floating peace sign (perhaps a kite) and another airborne heart-shaped balloon emblazoned with the word “peace.” Text appears in three vertically oriented rectangular boxes balanced in pictorial weight with a palm tree to the right side of the picture. As noted earlier, these combined elements provide a glimpse into Merino’s worldview as repeatedly expressed in her poetry. Music, dance, poetry, love, theatrical pageantry, recreation and sport, are all prescribed as essential ingredients for peace. The coastal scene conjures up notions of play while acknowledging Spain’s long dependency on the sea.

Merino’s final installment in the *Ardilla* magazine series, “Happiness Workshop,” clearly demonstrates that her characters have come to life. They are significantly larger and more personalized, and the once-dominant text now appears to be competing for space with the bold and animated forms—birds, fish, and a lizard appear to be visiting a sage-like beast in a setting reminiscent of a medieval castle. A unicorn, a teddy bear and butterflies round out Perejila’s visiting entourage, and while these depictions support the text, their more specific characterizations suggest that they are coming into their own, i.e., they are no longer generic symbols, but now personable characters with developing narratives. Following is our translation of “Happiness Workshop”:

“I have come to this faraway land
beyond the place of no return
to learn the secret of happiness.

With the joyful beasts who, too,
have come from other planets,
(the wise chemists, mathematicians,
biologists, alchemists and poets
chosen from among them) I have come
to learn why the living
fall in love in the springtime,
why when we travel through light
the stars sing us romantic ballads,
and important things like these.

Frightened by so much excitement,
I see the animals prepare antidotes
against pollution,
elixirs against bad moods,
explosions of laughter against
the humorless professor and
against parents weary from quarreling,
magnificent ointments that
provoke the urge to dance the
mambo, the su-cu su-cu,
salsa, cha cha cha. . .

They know how to use their cidery recipes
to disarm the hardness of heart which hurts
kind beings and provokes wars.

And if I can't manage to translate
for you the musical language of celestial globes
in my fantastic laboratory, maybe
I will learn to change the flavor of
liver to that of chocolate truffles,
unsettling Mondays to Saturdays,
homework to pop band cd's. . . .

I promise you I'll find the door
that when opened will take us flying
away like Peter Pan.
Don't ever doubt that I will discover
which letter of the keyboard, which channel on the TV,
will suddenly eject us from the sofa
toward the place where adventure is as intense
as a hurricane. . . ."



In a show of remarkable collaboration, Merino places herself on the same intellectual plane as the “joyful beasts” (including scientists, mathematicians and poets) who come together to work on the recipe for happiness. However, we now witness how “the animals / prepare antidotes against pollution, / elixirs against bad moods . . . and they know how to . . . disarm the hardness of heart” that causes unwarranted suffering in the world. The elevated role of the animal in this poem could support María Cruz Rodríguez’s interpretation as Merino’s arrival at the ecological phase of her *weltanschauung*. The message, of course, is that humans have much to learn from animals and from nature in general. According to Rodríguez,

“M. Merino, in her ecological poems, gives voice to Nature and introduces an anti-patriarchal concept that breaks with the man/nature dichotomy. Rejecting the attitude of disdain and the utilitarian concept of the natural world, she considers nature as a teacher of life. Animals, for their part, are the repositories of the values that humans are losing, including fidelity and gratitude. This concept is translated into a language of reverence toward animals, plants, trees, rivers, mountains and the sea” (23-24).

We note, however, that all these elements of the natural world are featured in Merino's *Ardilla* poems, and we see less linear development in her celebration of Nature than does Rodríguez. Merino has long insisted that humans must demonstrate both a sensitivity and a sensibility in their pursuit of true harmony with Nature.

Among Merino's personal papers is a single sheet entitled "An Image and a Paragraph on the Creativity of Margarita Merino," written by an anonymous source and describing the poet as "a gladiator in defending the fragile beauty of the world, its peace, its abandoned human beings, and its noble beasts."⁵ Accompanying the text is an illustrated copy of Merino's final poem in her then-unpublished collection *Journey to the Outside* (*Viaje al exterior*), now published as an appendix to Rodríguez's critical essay on Merino's poetic journey. The poem in question, "Entreaty II" (*Súplica II*), emphasizes the ethical and visual worldview of the poet.

Let me bring the flocks of clouds
to graze at their leisure,
the worthless dreams
for the merchants
while I listen to music.
Let me prepare soup
and water my flower pots.
Let me cure the wounds
of these old, worn books,
talk to the children
while I pick berries
and reveal to the birds
what the horses tell me
in secret:
I am just a teacher
in the language of dogs, streams, willows,
wind and dolphins.



Both the text and the images in "Entreaty II" recall those of "Happiness Workshop" in that the poetic voice in each work emphasizes not the patriarchal dominion over animals and nature but rather the lessons that man can receive freely from them. Elements of fantasy (animals who are scientists, poets, mathematicians, as well as whispering horses), and the idea that positive change is the result of interaction with the natural world, are highlighted in both poems. While the tone is more playful and adventuresome in "Happiness Workshop" as opposed to an almost pastoral, bucolic tone in "Entreaty II," the visual images are quite similar, but with the overriding suggestion ("Entreaty II") that humans can affect change, that they are an essential and critical component in realizing this "recipe for happiness."

Looking at both of these works, one can sense the intuited development of the visual composition. At times, key images noted in the text appear deliberate in their placement; other times they appear woven into the larger fabric. While the earlier example ("Let Us Defend the Beauty of the World") suggests that Merino considered text placement prior to the accompanying illustrations, "Workshop" displays a more cooperative relationship between word and image. In both we see visual compositions crowded by a pastiche of characters and symbols that appear less deliberate, more intuitively conceived.

From a more formal perspective, these later works are so dense with imagery that they become, at times, difficult to read. The flattened space is alive with bolder line work and increasingly mixed color. While Merino does create nominal space through overlapped figures, the consistency of color saturation defies the deeper spatial illusion she seems to suggest. In short, her use of color tends to follow a descriptive tradition rather than the more contemporary tendency to animate spatial placement through color, finally resulting in a shallow stage on which her players perform. Another observation is that no character (save that of Perejila herself) seems to be subordinate to another; they are all equally vital and equally critical to the composition, stacked vertically with Perejila consistently near the top of the composition. Other elements, or symbols, tend to fall to the lower regions of the works. Merino's full color illustrations are reminiscent of the works by pre-Renaissance artists Cimabue (Cenni di Pepo) and Giotto (Giotto di Bondone) in whose works space was layered top to bottom with characters sized according to importance with little regard for empirical perspective or figurative foreshortening. In this respect, many of their signature works appear marginally concerned with the natural world. Having spent many years in Madrid, Merino had regular access to artworks by these artists and those working in their ateliers during her regular visits to the Museo del Prado and others. Her Catholic upbringing and education insisted that she familiarize herself with these narratives—the biblical stories they depicted as well as the hierarchy of figurative importance.



In light of the non-naturalistic use of space in Merino's work, one can read her poem "Mi casa" (fragment below) to see how she has woven a text that needs no visual illumination. She has created a work so image-laden in the reading that it borders on the ekphrastic. Her attention to detail suggests a place that represents her state of mind during a transition from one culture to another, one house to another. She provides us with a concrete description of her world as she views it at the time, subject to whimsy and change at a moment's notice. It is a world full of possibilities and at the same time, quite fragile. If she veers off course for any moment, the house and its imagined inhabitants will claim ownership. One cannot deny the visual upheaval cast in a ludic tone.

"Tired of this mess I surrender,
because someone has changed my house
into a nebula and created utter confusion.
The ghosts have gotten lazy;
they spend all day sleeping without making a sound,
and to top it off, they are wearing my pajamas
and taking over my bed.
The birds, having lost their sweet shyness
which kept them distant, have taken to
nesting in my closet. They think nothing of
filling my favorite clothes
with little breadcrumbs and droppings. . . ."

While writing and illustrating the "Mirador de Perejila" series, Merino published four collections of poems: *Journey to the Interior (Viaje al interior)*, 1986; *Ballads of the Abyss (Baladas de abismo)*, 1989; *Poems of the Cloister (Poemas del claustro)*, in collaboration with Juan Carlos Mestre and Alfonso Ares, 1992; and *Wounded Falcon (Halcón herido)*, 1993. The second edition of *Journey to the Interior* (1998) contains six black ink drawings which correspond thematically to the poetry. The flattened, stacked space of her full-color drawings is consistent with her black ink drawings, although these lack the amplified flatness provided by text imbedded in the colored images. These black and white drawings are precise and easily read. Continuing to dominate the work is a central female figure, clad in costuming that suggests a more iconic male role—the sea god Neptune, a sea-voyager aboard a fifteenth-century Spanish ship, and an Indian faith healer, to name only three. (Given the date of publication of this collection, the role-bending or role-reversed images were more provocative than they would be today.) These crisp contour line drawings are quickly discernible due

to the absence of excessive modeling marks and colors that compete for spatial dominance. The depicted forms and clear spatial definition provide refreshingly lyrical and legible works that equal her poems in their ability to speak independently.



Another series of Merino's works (reminiscent of illustrated manuscripts and bookplates) is distinctive from earlier mentioned works because they appear more responsive to the form and dimensions of books. The early Perejila works—text and image—by comparison seem to be products of intuitive expression, where rendered images appear without prior planning. Additionally, they remind us of personal journals, supported by her use of hand-rendered text—carefully printed while sometimes appearing to simulate specific font styles.



What is interesting is the sense that the figurative elements appear to have been developed after the border was defined or intuited. There is a consistent fraction of whitespace between the interior depiction and the ornately painted border frame. In historic terms, these borders served to reiterate the physical book form (frame within a frame), while providing decorative detail and interest that often suggested prevailing design motifs or allusions to natural

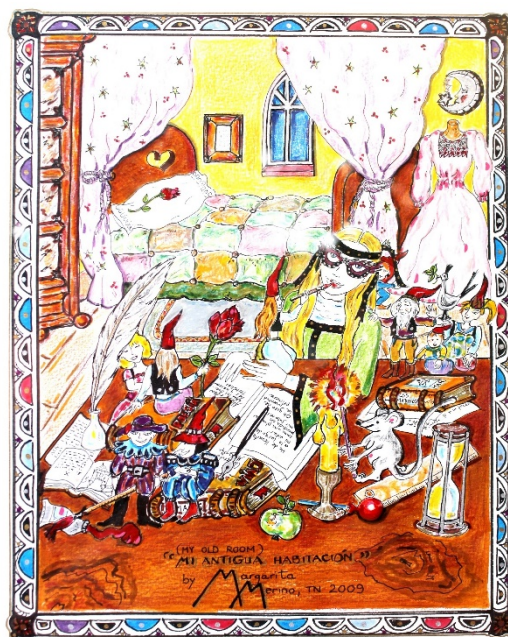
elements common to the locale. Placement of the elements seems more deliberate, with text assigned to predetermined spaces. Text is visibly subordinate to the imagery, i.e., significantly diminished in volume, replaced by visual forms that now serve to convey the personal narratives. The space is clearly and legibly defined, which would suggest that Merino is orchestrating her compositional structure. The worked ornate borders, reminiscent of Christian Books of Hours or illuminated manuscripts, appear to have received the same careful attention as the characters within the frame, suggesting that the iconic reference is central, perhaps critical, to the viewing experience.



While many of Merino's poems are not accompanied by illustrations, they are nevertheless highly visual. In her elegy "Memento," for example, she paints memories of her father who died when she was twenty-one:

"... so much time has my life spent without you,
 so much time that now, without your care, in what was your house,
 the copper coins in the corner,
 the little elephants with raised trunks
 which were said to bring good luck,
 the tiny tin trays,
 the stone turtle,
 the small spare parts and refills for everything,
 the pens and fountain pens,
 the little plastic boxes that held inkwells,
 all have abandoned your armoire.
 Never again will you fall asleep
 in the big armchair that cradled you during your afternoon naps,
 nor will your office again be nourished
 by beautiful editions of treasured books.
 No one replaced the drawing paper in the box,
 and I find no joy in rummaging through the places
 where you used to keep your amazing things,

things that spoke of
a man who was kind-hearted and exquisite while he lived."



The relationship between the above text and subsequent image speaks directly to the idea that Merino has found equal and secure footing in both forms. The depiction of her childhood bedroom, replete with deeply personal associations with her father, is deliberately rendered in a simple, child-like, animated fashion, e.g., a floor scattered with carefully chosen playthings and implements critical to associations with her father. These forms seem to tumble out of a soft and nurturing bed billowing with pristine white curtains and comforter and fluffed pillows. As she recounts, Merino's mother attended to and schooled her in the details of domesticity while her father nurtured her creative nature. These two symbiotic worlds are masterfully wedded in this particular image. Additionally, this heavily illustrated work reminds us of the seemingly dense and animated world poetically described in Merino's poem "Mi casa."

As mentioned, Merino is a self-trained visual artist, an illustrator with the bravado that only comes from a lack of fear otherwise imposed by the Academe. Her works communicate a personal account, a vivid feminism, and a commitment to a vivacious embrace of the environment and its precarious populations. Certain poems and images tell a larger story that reads as an ongoing self-portrait fraught with her studied views on human politics and conflict, on nature under siege. Her visual art has evolved from timid, highly decorative illustrational beginnings into a form that is often independent of text and more rigorous and confident in its pictorial design. These later works now rival the intricacy of her poetry and demonstrate a truly cooperative mastery of both forms.

NOTES

¹This article, in its original form, was the basis of a presentation at the 7th International Conference on the Image in Liverpool, England, September 2-4, 2016.

²"Mi casa" is from Merino's first collection of poems, *Viaje al interior (Journey to the Interior)*, 1986.

³*Ardilla*, a magazine for children, was published by the Caja León and Caja España (Bank of León and Bank of Spain) between 1987 and 1995. A total of fifteen issues of *Ardilla* were published.

⁴The authors of this article conducted a series of interviews with Dr. Merino between 1990 and 2016 in the Spanish cities of León and Madrid, as well as in Kentucky and Tennessee.

⁵An anonymous, unpublished document which summarizes Merino's creative work, but which also includes a full-color series of images bordering the text of her poem "Súplica II" ("Entreaty II") from the collection *Viaje al exterior (Journey to the Exterior)*.

⁶Merino, Margarita. *Halcón herido*. Madrid: Ediciones Endymión, 1993, book jacket.

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