

The painting of Lima de Freitas under the eyes of Gaston Bachelard¹



Lima de Freitas: *The Fire Lovers*,
Oil on canvas, 1971.



Lima de Freitas: *The Androgynous Angel*,
Oil on canvas, 1971.

In the 70s and 80s of the 20th century, the work of Lima de Freitas found a new realism that allowed the rise of a new perspective: the *Fantastic*. For Lima de Freitas (1977) the Fantastic is that which does not have a logical definition as it distances itself from rational clarity, thus enabling us to move away from pure naturalist realism – as it admits the existence of another plane of reality, the mysterious, the indefinable, the strange – towards the unconscious, questioning the purposes of imagery, and hence exploring new forms and realities. It is in this light that we can better understand the meanings of the two paintings we have chosen in order to illustrate their complicity with the work of Gaston Bachelard: *The Fire Lovers* (1971) and *The Androgynous Angel* (1971). The author's works dedicated to the imagination represent an indispensable contribution to the study of the aforementioned paintings from the point of view of a symbolic hermeneutics.

¹ This text was originally written in Portuguese. The author thanks Professor Agostinho de Almeida and Eileen Rizo-Patron (Bachelard Studies co-Editor in Chief) for its English translation.

The natural elements – water, air, earth, and fire – designated by Bachelard as “hormones of imagination” (viz., the imaginative dimension of fundamental matter), characterize the dynamic material imagination that is intimately linked with the cosmos and is so dear to the author. It will thus be under the sign of these same hormones, of this materiality which values the symbolizing power of the four material elements, that we will begin to reflect on the painting *The Fire Lovers* (1971). This perspective gives a transfiguring halo to the “symbolic-mythical aesthetic” of Lima de Freitas, which in the chosen work characterizes an ancestral and contemporary side of beauty, love and an aspired state of plenitude (fusion of bodies and souls). One can observe the representation of a quadrangular frame that encloses the bodies in the center (crowning their heads in a geometric center of relief and significance). At that end, light or *Lux* appears embedded within a complex geometry (circles, triangles and squares), which one could read as movement or adaptability, depending on the *solar energy/fire* (G. Bachelard) experienced at each moment by the lovers. Within the frame, the geometric figures are still present, separately, with the air element (G. Bachelard), hovering over the bodies. Around this frame there is the representation of the *water* element (G. Bachelard) as the basis of fertilization, birth and development of this *corpus* or androgynous being. The *earth element* (G. Bachelard) is also represented by the trees which correspond to the obsessive imagery in the work and thought of Lima de Freitas (the shape and symbolism of branches, trunks and roots). The *grail* or Holy Grail appears on the left side of the painting, as part of the path, outlined by the depiction of trees that direct the dance and movements. The atmosphere is dark, humid and nocturnal, a symbolic link to the more feminine side of the painting, which suggests a favorable romanticism. There is, at the same time, a global luminosity that may be read as the masculine aspect, symbolized by dryness, sunlight (daylight) and heat. In this symbiotic relation, the woman’s golden hair seems to represent the transmutation of all less noble alchemical elements into gold. Lima de Freitas’s paintings evoke poetic themes and idealizing daydreams: “the idealizing reverie, a reverie which places a dreamed communion of animus and anima, the two principles of integral being, in the soul of a dreamer of human values”².

It is this idyllic communion of *animus* and *anima* (C. Jung), studied later by Bachelard³, that we then find in *The Androgynous Angel* (1971), and which we will here try to describe: the Angel representing “intermediary beings” (between spirit and matter), among which messengers, guardians and protectors are main examples, seems to announce Bachelard’s hermesian inclination. To indicate this path, the angelic being, with the help of his wings, launches itself in an ascending or vertical flight, which thus contributes to dematerialization and, consequently, to earthly liberation. The figure here seen impregnates the divine light and blends in with the symbolism of the circle, where the heads are unified and the sphere is held by the hand, while it simultaneously holds and indicates the way (music of the

² Bachelard, G., *The Poetics of Reverie*, trans. Daniel Russell, Boston, Beacon Press, 1969, p. 91.

³ *Ivi*, p. 55; p. 95.

spheres, in the astral plane). The concentric circles and spheres illuminate the angelic being and therefore guide its ascension. This reflection looks at the perennial existence of the feminine and the masculine, although they present themselves, in the imaginal realm (H. Corbin), as mixed, giving rise to the second dimension of image interpretation – the Androgyne, the *primordial being* (M. Eliade). Is this an attempt to represent a perfect being which is both body and *spirit*? Can we speak of the spirit's search, which implicitly seeks balance between the pair of *animus-anima* opposites? The search for balance between body and spirit seems to be evident in each of these questions. In the painting, graphic lines and brushstrokes of color can be observed, where the difference between the two overlapping and merging bodies is still evident, but on the plane of the spirit these differences disappear altogether, because what matters to the divine is only light, clarity, elevation and ascent. Finally, there is yet another image that must be noticed: the Tree (roots, trunks or branches), in which one can see the fusion and the dialogue it establishes with the Androgyne and/or Angel. Thus, the tree appears to symbolize the path of elevation, starting from the earthly labyrinth and, through the divine column, accessing the astral and celestial planes. On another level of interpretation of the painting, there is a set of images and symbols that deserve mention: Paradise (the fruit tree, and the representation of Adam and Eve), the unicorn or licorne (spiritual power), the shell (the one-way labyrinth, the only way), the dragon and/or serpent (sin), the skull (death as a link to the earthly world) and the child (purity and beauty).

Finally, this whole symbolic set, which accounts for the androgynous myth in its incessant search for the harmonization of opposites marked by the archetypal pair *animus-anima*, finds its most symbolically pregnant hermeneutic meaning in Bachelard's keen observation, namely: "When reverie is truly profound, the being that dreams in us is our anima"⁴ What this seems to mean is that the androgynous figure of the angel must be viewed under the auspices of the *anima* archetype over and above the *animus* archetype. If this is the case, Lima Freitas well sensed that the *anima*, as an idealization of the human, is the transfiguration of being, in short, of life itself into the feminine.

Lígia Rocha
ligiarocha515@gmail.com

Biographical Note

Lima de Freitas was born in Setúbal, Portugal, on June 22, 1927 and unexpectedly died on October 5, 1998, in Lisbon. He is a 20th-century author (writer, painter, illustrator) who has been receiving increasing recognition in society, culture,

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 62,

and the art world. He attended the *Escola Superior de Belas Artes* (Higher School of Fine Arts) in Lisbon where he graduated.

His artistic career began in the 1940s and, from the 1950s onwards, he left his country to discover other cultures and new experiences as he traveled throughout the world. In 1956 he chose to settle in Paris, France, where he remained for eight years. In 1964 he moved to Aarhus, Denmark. In this context, it is important to emphasize that, once he had adopted neo-realism in 1946, its influence became noteworthy in his plastic and essayistic-philosophical work. He stood out as a critic of surrealist and abstract options within Portuguese art of the 1950s. From 1948-1954, Lima de Freitas's painting coincided with his first manifestation of plastic realism which was in line with literary realism, as well as with the Brazilian painting of Portinari. From 1954 until 1959, while in Paris, he dedicated himself to book illustration (a field in which he revealed a rare quality). His neo-realistic option would evolve over the following decade into a spiritualized art of theosophical inspiration (cf. José Augusto França), manifesting a mythical-symbolic, initiatory-mystical character totally removed, in my view, from the neorealist faith of the 1940s. Around 1965 he entered a phase which coincided with his return to Portugal, where he would remain developing works related to the mythical-symbolic roots of the Portuguese historical-cultural tradition – a phase in which primordial and universal images (Jung and Eliade) became recurring objects of reflection and figuration. Thus, his work as an artist-painter, as well as his hermeneutic-philosophical writings, and his fine-arts endeavors were conceived and developed under the strong influence of Carl Jung, Gaston Bachelard, Henry Corbin, Mircea Eliade and, particularly, Gilbert Durand who incidentally wrote a book about the painter's artistic work, which he aptly entitled "*Mitolusismos*" of Lima de Freitas (1987). In 1967 Lima de Freitas met *Master Almada Negreiros* personally, with whom he had fruitful conversations from which emerged concepts and methods that became fundamental in the study of numbers and sacred geometry, namely when Lima de Freitas discovered and decoded the enigmatic *Point of Baubütte*. From 1969 onwards, he avidly continued to develop his work as a thinker and artist until the end of his life, which ended in 1998.

Finally, Lima de Freitas is recognized as a versatile author and a world-renowned figure in the areas of painting, drawing and illustration, in the study of numbers and sacred geometry, in philosophical and artistic reflection, in the reevaluation of myths and symbols, as well as in the creation of pieces for numismatics, philately and ceramics. His works are now found in numerous private collections, as well as in museums in several countries including Spain, France, Great Britain, Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Poland, Italy, the United States of America, Brazil, Angola and New Zealand, among others.