Enrique Radigales

Weeds

It was spring and weeds were starting to stick out the sown field mantle. The wind shook its dense surface, like a flock of starlings or a dance of algorithms that attract and repel each other.

At the beginning of that week, I travelled with Alberto to Pericastó, to a dry plot of land that my grandfather owned in the region of La Litera, Huesca. The previous summer I had talked my father into stop growing barley there. The crop occupied an area of roughly 2,5 acres and abandoning it meant halting the autumn sowing and, at best, never disturbing that soil again. It was the first step in turning our plot in Pericastó into an uncultivated land.

Pericastó can be accessed via the HU-V-9011-local road, between Azanuy and Alins. Before reaching the ascent of Las Chesetas, a cattle path to the right takes to Barranco Salado. The enclave is isolated from urban areas. And despite the strong anthropogenic pressure, it still retains an accentuated singularity in terms of landscape and biodiversity. Indeed, traces of mammals such as red foxes, badgers, wild boars and roe deer abound there.

Pericastó covers 5 acres of gentle landforms and sloping valleys that were artificially terraced for cultivation. On its edges there are still some almond trees planted around the middle of the last century. Its north-eastern border rises from a discreet sandstone fold, from which you can gaze at the 2,5-acre depression of terraces which flows west into a path. The plot is sheltered by tilted stratifications that function as transition strips between the farm and the Mediterranean vegetation cover consisting of small-sized plants such as marsh-mallows (*Althaea officinalis*) and white-flowered asphodels (*Asphodelus ramosus*) and woody plants such as evergreen oaks (*Quercus ilex*) and Mediterranean hackberries (*Celtis australis*).

I visited Pericastó for the first time in December 2012. My father took me there for Christmas, after my grandfather's death. By that time cereal crops were already sprouting. I went with my father to oversee the pruning of the almonds trees he told me was done every other year. My father communicated through silences, so one had to pay attention to every gesture. That morning, while branches fell, I witnessed a ritual transfer: the transmission of knowledge every *paterfamilias* passes onto his firstborn. I remember we were alone. The cold and the humidity tinged the countryside and the mountains with a relatively homogeneous tone. The landscape —that malleable cultural show— had been simplified by the mist, linking the sensitive body with the rest of biofriendly signs. An electromagnetic pulse shook the earth, like the echo of a remote cetacean that returned a hyper-coded image of the environment. Since then I have visited Pericastó several times, always in search of a system that will allow me to understand its vigour, sensitivity and intelligence.

Over the phone, Alicia Cirujeda,[1] researcher at the Plant Protection Department of the Agrifood Research and Technology Centre of Aragón, sends me an omen about the next three years in Pericastó: 'Weeds are synchronised with sowing. They germinate, grow and attain their vigorous

growth at the same time as the crop. Although this year you haven't sown in Pericastó, weeds will grow until they complete their biological cycle, which can last between one and two years'.

At present, a growing community of botanists and biologists is challenging the demonization of these herbaceous plants. They argue that there are no good or bad plants in nature.[2] Instead, they propose using a more neutral and scientifically accurate terminology. This is the case, for example, with the word 'adventitious', which designates a group of not native plants that accidentally enter the flora of a new habitat. 'Mala hierba' is a term used mainly in Spain, while 'maleza' is more common throughout Latin America. Similar words are used in other languages of our region of the world: 'mauvaise herbe' in French; 'malerbe' or 'pianti infestati' in Italian, and 'herba danhina' in Portuguese. German, like other Germanic languages, instead of using an adjective, prefixes the noun, originating the word 'unkraut'. 'Onkkruid' in Dutch, 'unkrudt' in Danish and 'ukrutt' in Norwegian are similarly derived. Only in English a neutral term —without positive or negative connotations— is used: *weed*.

'Adventitious plants', 'noxious plants', 'invasive grassland plants', 'invasive forest species', 'aquatic plants', 'architectural plants' and 'ruderal plants' are some of the names by which weeds are grouped, depending on the habitat where they thrive. The word 'ruderal' comes from the Latin 'ruderis', which means 'dirt'. It designates a group of plants that thrive in uncultivated lands or in habitats where the natural vegetational cover has been disturbed by humans (anthropogenic pressure), like along roads, suburban places, landfills, dumpsites or cultivated plots.

An uncultivated soil is a soil that has never been cultivated. Ruderals become problematic when they sprout in an unexpected place, where they grow and reproduce synchronously with cultivated crops, competing with the vegetation selected by humans. In certain habitats dedicated to biological production, such as cereal monocultures, for example, this so-called 'dirt' can be a poppy or a wild carrot that hinders the uniform and controlled growth of the cereal crop. This 'dirt' stands out as a red dissonance in a cereal tide swung by the breeze that dances a sort of military choreography. Foreign bodies and difference are excluded in ecosystems where a biopolitical, population control reason is enforced with the aim at increasing the yield and production of the flowering and fructification cycles. In those ecosystems, an army of lab-designed seeds shielded by a limestone soil-proof DNA germinate and grow at a 5G speed.

In these Fordist bio-scenarios gassed with herbicides —from the Latin 'herba' (herb) and 'cida' (killer, exterminator)—, spontaneous growth is deterred by a toxic film that hampers the hormonal development of plants alien to agricultural production. Although these phytosanitary products are harmless to normative bodies, they do have negative effects on plant biodiversity, as well as on other dependent populations such as mammals, birds, reptiles and the largest subgroup in Pericastó: arthropods. The importance of soil health as life support is condemned. The connections between the vitality of the soil and the nutrients that revert in the food is altered by the enactment of necropolitics aimed at increasing the profitability of the agrarian industry. Such actions deeply destabilize these hidden but thriving-with-life lands that urgently need to be made visible in order to adopt an ecological culture of care3. We need to stop bothering the floors, sort of speak.

In this hierarchy of fertile economy, the excluded bodies are those considered unproductive. There is, therefore, a biological seizure for all those species that do not yield fruit in the anthropic manner. When observing this bio-techno-scenario, it is difficult not to feel empathy for weeds, for those small herbaceous plants with short, annual or biannual life cycles, high growth rates and abundant seed production. It is precisely because of their short biological cycles that they adapt very easily to new environmental conditions and become resistant to any type of herbicide. This project aims at creating a territory for these excluded bodies, where the natural cycles of growth, vigour and fructification are not altered by the urgent need for production. And where, above all, speed has been absorbed by life.

June is approaching. In Pericastó, weeds grow higher than the shoulders. It is impossible to follow a straight line if you don't want to prick yourself with thistles, or if you don't want to leave behind a trail of crushed herbaceous plants. My body sways and loses balance. It behaves like an astronaut walking under zero gravity, like a frogman with flippers. The anthropogenic choreography seems ridiculous in such a natural environment, so different from that of an exhibition hall, so different from everything else. You carefully push aside the stems to cross the biological thresholds. You try to manage land depressions, tripping over. The sun doesn't help. You are sweating. The cotton t-shirt surrenders and allows itself to be punctured by the spikes. It stings. Brightness. Haptic. You spend all your life pretending to be porous and it turns out that now you wish you were made of lead.

1 Alicia Cirujeda is a biologist researcher specialized in weeds at the Agrifood Research and Technology Centre of Aragón, CITA-Universidad de Zaragoza.

2 Fernandez-Quintanilla, Cesar y González Andujar, José Luis. 'Las malas hierbas.' CSIC, 2017.

3 Puig de la Bellacasa, Maria. 'Re-animating soils: Transforming human–soil affections through science, culture and community.' Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies, University of Warwick, UK.

Enrique Radigales