



# TEXT

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## *God, a metaphor: A meditation on Alejandra Pizarnik's "Awakening"*

### Abstract:

Alejandra Pizarnik's life was a long preparation for suicide. But instead of letting the Argentine poet's death define her legacy, this article will focus on her intellectual sparring with the notion of God – and her ultimate strategy of turning God into a strawman for her own processes of creation. In her diaries, Pizarnik vows – like a prayer – never to call on God, never to invoke him. This is, she writes, the ultimate test: her blood may boil, her screams may consume her, her veins may burst, but she would rather keep her mouth shut. Pizarnik couldn't bring herself to believe in God – which means she couldn't stop writing about him. This article will centre its analysis on Pizarnik's most famous poem, "Awakening," in which she repeatedly invokes the Lord ("Lord / the cage has turned into a bird / and taken flight") until she turns him into something else, something darker still. By resorting to her diaries spanning the late 50s until her death in the early 70s, as well as her connection to the oeuvres of Sylvia Plath, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Jacques Lacan, this article will show how Pizarnik – labeled as a "gifted girl" – was placed (and placed herself) in the impossible position of being expected to be ambitious (because she was gifted) but not *too* ambitious (because she was a woman). "Awakening," written and published between 1956 and 1958, articulates the turning point of Pizarnik's extreme position toward God: how can someone who pushed herself so hard accept a God that would be willing to forgive anything?

### Biographical note:

Caio Yurgel has a background in philosophy, creative writing, and comparative literature. His teaching and research are primarily concerned with literatures written in Chinese, French, German, Portuguese, and Spanish, with a focus on comparative and interdisciplinary approaches. He is the author of *Landscape's Revenge: The Ecology of Failure in Robert Walser and Bernardo Carvalho* (DeGruyter, 2018), and the collection of essays *A Estética do Espetáculo: Cinco Teses em Walter Benjamin* (NEA, 2013), winner of the prestigious Mario Pedrosa Award for Essays on Contemporary Art and Culture, awarded by the Brazilian Ministry of Culture. He is also the author of two

award-winning novels, *Samba Sem Mim* (Saraiva, 2014; Prêmio São Paulo de Literatura 2015) and *As Noites de Hong Kong São Feitas de Neon* (Gato Bravo, 2019; Prêmio Autor 2019), as well as over twenty peer-reviewed articles on a broad range of topics and authors.

Keywords:

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### The cage has turned into a bird

Alejandra Pizarnik was afraid of religion. She couldn't bring herself to believe in God – which means she couldn't stop writing about him. In her diaries she often brings up the question of God's existence only to dismiss it as a 'vulgar' question. "Vulgar," from the Latin *vulgus*, *vulgaris*, meaning: the common people, the rabble, the peasantry (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The question of God, says Pizarnik, is vulgar, a question for peasants. "If God is everywhere, why bother looking for him?" (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 552) she quips [1][2].

In a recent biography, Cristina Piña and Patricia Venti remark on the absence of an explicit religious dimension to Pizarnik (Piña & Venti, 2022, p. 138) – or at least one that transcends "her condition of a non-practicing Jew" haunted by tradition (Piña & Venti, 2022, pp. 327–328). The conflict is all too evident in Pizarnik's writing. In her diaries she vows – like a prayer – never to call on God, never to invoke him – no matter how dire the circumstances. This is, she writes, the ultimate test: her blood may boil, her screams may consume her, her veins may burst, but she would keep her mouth shut, God away from her lips (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 199) [3]. It bears noting that Pizarnik sometimes writes God with a lower-case g (*vulgaris*), as if to say: Lord, I belittle you; I make you small. As if God would be going about his day thinking: *someone is not capitalising My name, whatever shall I do?* As if God would care.

Here is a writer writing in her diaries – a *diary* of all places: a genre (allegedly) not meant for publication, a genre which ideally should be burnt before its author's death – expressing her disdain for God by ... obsessing about him? Depriving him from the dignity of an upper-case letter? It is telling that Pizarnik is musing about God in her diaries. A diary is, or should be, the embodiment of the indescribably insignificant task of the writer: the writer fills the page with words, then burns it. A diary which survives its owner is always a disappointment: "I resist writing. I am tired of these Intimate Diaries, empty and frustrated, that offer neither consolation nor help, but rather evade and falsely resolve daily anguishes" (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 166) [4].

There is indeed something indescribably insignificant about being a writer, indescribable precisely because the writer feels the need to write, feels the urgency of what she is doing, but whenever the writer must explain why she writes to someone who does not – it is then that the writer understands her indescribable insignificance. Was it not Saint Augustine who said: "What then is literature? If no one asks me, I know what literature is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know"? And is that not the beauty of literature? That from such insignificance it becomes liberating?

Liberation is the movement Pizarnik is seeking with her writing. To get weight off her chest, and to fly away. "Lord / The cage has turned into a bird / and taken flight" – as the first verses of her famous poem "Awakening" go (Pizarnik, 2001, p.72). There is a moment of levity, of lightness, in not deferring to God – in not deferring to authority. There is enjoyment in treating authority with contempt. There is vindication, too. Feminist theology would remind us that it is no coincidence that a diary is considered a minor genre, connected as it is historically to women. Paraphrasing Adrienne Rich, Cynthia Huff speaks of diaries as being "about

community, not hierarchy, about communication, not authority. Hence, their inherent generic qualities are subversive to the literary establishment and to the patriarchal social order that it perpetuates in its privileging of texts and genres, each ranked according to unquestioned standards” (Huff, 1989, p. 6). Etymologically speaking, genre and gender come from the same root (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). But can a diary really be about community?

The indescribable insignificance of shouting into one’s own pillow: the wounded narcissism of a writer who feels wronged, slighted, a writer who for whatever reason needs to prove her worth not to herself (for she cannot be convinced of it, even after 1104 pages), but to others – a community of sorts, if we will. Pizarnik’s diaries portray a writer obsessed with herself and her own pain, a writer wallowing in a darkness that feels comfortable to her while simultaneously aware of (and disgusted by) the fact that this infatuation with herself is further proof of her being lost [“mi pérdida”] (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 500) [5]. Are we to believe in either self-awareness or disgust in the face of 1104 pages of a posthumously published diary that does not even include the totality of her papers? If humility ever enters her diaries, it does so in the form of a performance. The hunger artist (*vulgaris*): you, the rabble, the common people – I, the writer, am both insignificant and above you. Both/and: an ambiguous community.

Or, rather: triumphant. Triumph is also the movement Pizarnik is seeking in her writing (and the failure to achieve it is what makes her work so compelling). Feminist theology can help us approach this movement by way of what Catherine Keller would call “triumphant ambiguity”:

Feminism, I am suggesting, has borne the impossible in something very like the Cusan sense, which is also that of the impassable, the aporetic. Through its persistent confrontation with the impasse feminism has become a site of dis/closure. Its apocalypse—historical unveilings neither violent nor final—does express a certain shining necessity. A now, retroactively, inevitable wave of possibility. Real achievements, real failures, ambiguous triumphs, and triumphant ambiguities measure its position but not its momentum. The possibility comes into focus in language just there where language articulates its own edges. Where our saying folds into its own unsaying, and back again into fresh discourse, the folds of feminist discourse and the folds of apophatic theology may prove mutually disclosive. (Keller, 2008, p. 909)

Saying folded into unsaying; dismissing God by lecturing about him. Here lies the movement, the ambiguity of this taking flight: the ambiguity of summoning the Lord (“Señor”) only to let him know one rejects the very premise (“The cage has turned into a bird / and taken flight”) (Pizarnik, 2001, p.72). Seven times does Pizarnik address God directly in her poem – and seven times does she dismiss him. The whole poem works like a balloon being constantly inflated and deflated. The poem inflates every time the speaker says “Lord,” as if gathering her strength – *Lord, you listen to me now* –, only for this energy to succumb to fear and peter out:

Lord  
The cage has turned into a bird  
and taken flight  
and my heart is deranged

because it howls at death  
and it smiles behind the wind  
at my delusions

What shall I do with this fear  
What shall I do with this fear (Pizarnik, 2001, p.72)

Where does this energy come from, the energy to inflate oneself again and again, the energy to write? What is fascinating about this poem, and perhaps what helps explain its fame, is that this poem captures something central to Alejandra Pizarnik's oeuvre. Her diaries, her letters, her prose and her poetry all lay out a clear pattern to her existence: moments of motivation followed by periods of absolute dejection. One may call this depression, if one wishes; but the diagnosis is of little use now. It is the bouncing back, the taking flight that is of interest. What motivates one back into language? What motivates one back into writing? In Pizarnik's case, it was God. But not any God.

At her lowest, she would turn to God – and dismiss him. She would turn to God – and belittle him. A question for commoners, you are (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 51) [6]. A non-question, even (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 202) [7]. At some point Pizarnik calls her own parents “useless gods” (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 220) – echoing a complaint she filed at her mother as a young girl: “Recalling you punishing a tiny girl with whips and sticks, recalling also the chaotic phrases filled with atrocious promises taken from the Old Testament and the threats that would only be carried out in my imagination, fills me with anger ...” (Piña & Venti, 2022, p. 42). The reference to the Old Testament is of fundamental importance for us to understand which God casts a shadow over Pizarnik and motivates her back into writing (God as method), but first we need to tackle the question of why Pizarnik keeps bringing up God only to dismiss him (God as strawman). Why would one bother to suggest a topic only to then undermine it?

Because the energy, the motivation for writing lies in negation. Writing comes from negation. Words negate by definition. The word “chair,” when uttered, both affirms the object chair and – crucially – rejects everything else that is not it. This is why the word “chair” does not conjure up images of elephants – at least not usually.

Pizarnik couldn't bring herself to believe in God because she already believed enough in him – she believed in God as metaphor. God as metaphor is pure religion. But what Pizarnik does is corrupt the metaphor further by replacing theology with creative writing: God becomes a metaphor not for creation writ large but for *artistic* creation – the original negation, the strawman to be rallied against, the revenge that motivates one back into language.

God cannot be explained. Neither can this poem. One cannot reason one's way into faith. This poem either affects the reader or it doesn't. The explanation is insignificant. The work is its own metaphor; the work does not come from its explanation. The explanation follows, if it does. The work happens in this space between the thing that is designated and the thing that is named.

It is no wonder that Pizarnik dedicated her poem to Léon Ostrov, her first psychoanalyst.

### **What shall I do with this fear**

Fear is a recurring sentiment in Pizarnik's diaries. Fear spans the pages of the diaries from the early entries in 1954 all the way to the final ones in the 1970s. "I am afraid afraid afraid!!" she confesses (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 79). If her diaries are to be believed, Pizarnik was afraid of life, of death, of having babies, of failing, of rejection, of loneliness, of getting fat, of people, of the future, of beginnings – in short, Pizarnik was afraid of herself. She was a thing she did not quite understand. And she pushed herself too hard as well: she was not generous with her own shortcomings. She speaks of being afraid of studying and of taking exams. The word she uses to capture the apprehension these activities produce in her is "desperation". The pressure to perform – and the pressure to keep it up – leads her to paralysis:

Only now do I understand that when I decide to undertake a new project – like, for instance, studying – I do not take into account my natural way of being, and think of myself as someone else. But then, when the time to act comes, I rebel against this other Alejandra who pushes me without knowing me. And so, I do nothing. (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 222) [8]

And so, she does nothing, but this paralysis is not without its own contradictions. Pizarnik declared that she found her calling as a writer as early as in primary school, a declaration which, if her classmates are to be believed, was fueled by a desire to "set herself apart, to triumph" (Piña & Venti, 2022, p. 64). Pizarnik's perfectionism is well documented by scholarship, as is her contentious relationship with her own body: her belabored diction, her asthma, the acne which left permanent scars on her face [9]. The Pizarnik who was afraid of studying and of taking exams was the same Pizarnik who then went on to Universidad de Buenos Aires, the best university in Argentina, as an undergraduate, and the best university in France, the Sorbonne, as a graduate student. How, then, can one be afraid of the very thing one excels at? Pizarnik claims in her diaries that these activities go against her natural being – this pressure to perform, to be a version of herself at all times, makes her afraid afraid afraid. It slowly dawns on her that she has painted herself into a corner. This is what she was in the mode of not being it: a gifted girl. She writes in her diaries that a friend of hers, Arturo, introduced her to a group of his friends by saying: "This is Alejandra, the most gifted girl in the world. She has been bestowed with all that God can bestow upon a human being ... and yet, she is always sad" (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 138) [10]. Pizarnik was expected to be the straight-A student; she was expected to be a good girl; she was expected to be one of the great poets of her generation. And so, she was afraid. And fear led her to paralysis – and everything else that followed.

At the end of the day, Machiavelli was wrong. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli advises that it is best for a ruler (or a professor) to be both loved and feared: "But since it is difficult to be both together, it is much safer to be feared than to be loved, when one of the two must be lacking" (Machiavelli, 2005, p. 58). And maybe this does apply to a ruler (or a professor), but not to a

writer. For a writer, and particularly for the writer who is aware of their conceptual insignificance, fear is a terrible motivator. We see this in Pizarnik. In her diaries, the word “fear” triggers a paralysing vocabulary of impotence, inhibition, helplessness [*impotencia, inhibición, desamparo*]. Pizarnik speaks of an old fear that brews in her, beckoning her to suicide (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 222) [11]. In a different entry she speaks of “suicidal days,” days in which she feels harassed and hated by everyone, like she is fleeing from something and wishes neither for death nor life – she is rather just burdened by the acute awareness of the impossibility of it all. And so she becomes afraid of writing: “I know nothing, I have nothing to say” (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 228) [12]. *What shall I do with this fear?* Pizarnik is afraid of being, afraid of the mirrored image of a gifted girl who is supposed to excel academically and literarily, but who is also supposed to marry and have kids.

As a “gifted girl” in the Latin America of the 1950s and 60s (not that this was exclusive to Latin America, and not that much has changed since, either), she was expected to be ambitious (because she was gifted) but not *too* ambitious (because she was a woman). A similar fate has befallen Sylvia Plath, a poet whose life and work is usually compared to Pizarnik’s. Plath was accused of being too ambitious at a time when this mindset was only freely available to men. When Plath graduated top of her class at Smith College in 1955, having written a brilliant thesis on Dostoyevsky, having had her poetry already published in some of the most coveted publications in the United States, she nevertheless had to sit through a commencement address given by then-Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson in which he called on the graduating women of the class of 1955 to use “what [they had] learned and [could] learn (...) for the primary task of making homes and whole human beings in whom rational values of freedom, tolerance, charity and free inquiry can take root” (Clark, 2020, pp. 147; 360).

To have worked hard for however many years and graduated top of her class only to be told that her “primary task” should be that of raising kids is of a level of symbolic violence that can only engender more pressure and more fear. This symbolic violence is what Jacques Lacan called the “*nom du père*,” a deliciously French concept that operates on three homophonous levels (*hélas*): the name (*nom*) of the father; the no (*non*) of the father; and the non-duped err (*les non-dupes errent*) – those who refuse to be duped by the symbolic fiction err most, by which Lacan means that it is through the very construction of this fiction that one may overcome the bare materiality of being (Lacan, 1997, p. 96). To go back to rulers (and professors) as an example, one must believe that a given ruler (or professor) has something to say in order for their legislative (or pedagogic) function to work. That is the symbolic fiction, and one must want to be duped by it, one must invest oneself in this fiction and believe that it can eventually lead to toppling their symbolic authority: that crucial moment, according to Lacan, when one realizes that this given ruler (or professor) does not possess the secret one was looking for to begin with.

If in Plath the signifier of the *nom du père* seems to be the father figure itself, *Daddy* (“If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two” [Plath, 2012, p. 105]), in Pizarnik I would contend its signifier slides between the psychoanalyst (embodied by the figure of the already mentioned León

Ostrov, Pizarnik's first psychoanalyst, with whom she later exchanged letters) and God (Alba Comas Santamaria, 2022, p. 475).

The fear of God is the fear of Pizarnik, and when fear kicks in, she all of a sudden knows nothing, has nothing to say. This is a recurring motif in her writing, as she articulates in a crucial entry in her diaries: "I write no poems. I am afraid. I know I should wait, I know a great poem awaits me. Will I be able to recognize the sacred moment?" (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 212) [13]. This passage articulates both the interplay between triumph ("I know a great poem awaits me") and pressure ("I write no poems. I am afraid"), as well as the one between God ("the sacred moment") and fear ("I am afraid"). The moment of creation, of negative knowledge, of writing against the grain of a symbolic order, is also that of paralysis, self-doubt, silence. And crucially: *Pizarnik is writing about not being able to write*. Her silence speaks. She is invested in the fiction (the fiction of writing fiction). A great poem awaits her. Pizarnik is renewing the vows she made in primary school: she is destined for greatness. Elsewhere in her diaries she speaks of her fear of dying before having written "*le livre*" (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 206), the book, which she pens in French, a language not known for its modesty.

So here is a fine student who is afraid of studying and taking exams; here is a woman capable of incomparable charm (should Cortázar et al. be trusted) who is afraid of the expectations of others; here is a writer destined for greatness who cannot write; here is an overachiever who is afraid (or, perhaps, has been taught to be afraid) of her own ambition. Here is a woman who is altogether too hard on herself. If anything, this is the image her diaries paint: that of a woman constantly scrutinising herself for the smallest flaw, the smallest imperfection, the smallest "I-shouldn't-have-said-that" – and ready to punish herself. Her diaries are a compilation of shortcomings – mostly imaginary, but (or *therefore*) not without enjoyment. This perverse enjoyment she found in chastising herself, reader of Sade and Artaud that she was, becomes, in her poetry, an aestheticised remedy for her melancholia (Pérez, 2005, p. 21).

Lord  
Air punishes my existence  
Behind the air there are monsters  
that drink from my blood

But this remedy can only be temporary. Like the God in whose fiction she is invested, Pizarnik can dish out punishment. What she cannot do is to forgive. And she cannot accept a God that can be so easily coaxed into forgiveness.

## Lord

We meet God at last. The God of Pizarnik, that is, this part-Jewish, part-Catholic God of the Old Testament; a God famous for his punishments, but also a God who will forgive the biggest sins as long as one repents. However big one's sins, God's mercy is even bigger. This is called absolution. But a general confession of sins would not suffice: absolution requires "that every circumstance of each sin's commission – the with whom, the what, the where, the why, the



how, and the how many – be divulged to the priest” (Aho, 2002, p. 57). And if one’s confession is sincere, one is then absolved from mortal sins and guilt, and freed from eternal punishment. In God’s infinite mercy, a lifetime of sins can be wiped clean.

Pizarnik cannot stand for this. How can someone who is so hard on herself, who is so willing to punish herself, who is so determined to never to call on God – how can such a person accept this easy way out? How can she accept a God who forgives, when she herself is not willing to forgive her own shortcomings? A God who ultimately forgives is akin to studying hard for an exam only to find out, *in situ*, that the exam will be open book – a disturbing thought for an ambitious soul, and even more so for the ambitious soul who feels pressured to disguise her own ambition.

One possible way of reading Pizarnik’s refusal of an infinitely forgiving Lord is through literature – more specifically through Dostoyevsky, the literary connector between Pizarnik and Plath. Pizarnik was obsessed with the Russian writer – which didn’t make her any less afraid of him: “This book [*Notes from Underground*] says what I will not confess to myself. I read it with fear ... ” (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 492) [14]. Dostoyevsky “hits the bullseye of my anguish,” she admits, before diving into an analysis of *Crime and Punishment* that hits the bullseye of her relationship with God: “I cannot stop mediating about the crime. And I ask myself why it is so important. Does one not forget love? Why would one not forget a crime? I believe one would. As long as God doesn’t exist” (Pizarnik, 2013, pp. 480–481) [15]. The problem with reading Dostoyevsky, especially at a young age (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 416), is that it becomes difficult to continue believing in transcendence. It becomes difficult to accept a God who does not forget a crime, but does forgive it. A crime could be forgotten so long as God didn’t exist – because, in existing, and by forgiving our sins (or threatening us with this horizon of possibility), God forces us to keep our sins in mind. God’s cruelty, Pizarnik seems to indicate, is that his infinite mercy always comes at a price: guilt. Guilt is the price we pay for God’s unwillingness to forget.

Mariano Carou points out this connection between Pizarnik and Dostoyevsky, arguing that Dostoyevsky’s oeuvre (and ultimately her reading of it) leads to “redemption, never to punishment” (Carou, 2014, p. 78) – an interpretation that can come across as too edifying in light of Pizarnik’s writings. Pizarnik sees herself in Dostoyevsky’s characters. She writes of waking up “tired and feverish as if I myself had committed the crimes” (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 480) [16], showing a willingness to identify with guilt and sin (and punishment) that coalesces in one of the most anguished verses of her poem: “Lord / Heave the coffins of my blood” – two verses that are their own stanza (Pizarnik, 2001, p.73). Pizarnik has committed the crimes, and the crimes cannot be forgotten. They weigh on her blood. She cannot be saved.

Her diaries chronicle a shift from trying to find salvation elsewhere, in other hands – or her own – to giving up on the idea entirely. Pizarnik tried:

- 1) Love (“But I know that my only chance of salvation lies in naturally accepting this lack of affection” (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 190) [17]);

- 2) Death (“Now, I wish to think about death. I believe it to be one of my few chances at salvation. And, for me, saving myself means not alienating myself” [Pizarnik, 2013, p. 232] [18]);
- 3) Detachment (“I only know this: my idea of salvation, the paradisiacal image of a saved Alejandra, is to imagine not thinking of myself from a distance, with great calm, and to consider my misfortunes with the same near-indifferent calm [without morbidity] with which I consider those of others” [Pizarnik, 2013, p. 472] [19]);
- 4) Work (“My health [what I exaggeratedly call my salvation] was being able to write eight hours a day” [Pizarnik, 2013, p. 687] [20]);
- 5) Poetry (“Unable to remain an angel, the girl lies awaiting salvation in poetry, that is, in true life, the one she knew long ago – perhaps centuries ago – which she sometimes remembers, when memory explodes in visions of light and colors and the wound of being closes and everything returns to a sweet harmony, in which everything communicates” [Pizarnik, 2013, p. 880] [21]);

These temporary fixes may have proved effective for a while, but they were never more than temporary: they would inflate her – then deflate her again. On October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1970 (the date is significant – Pizarnik would end her life two years later), she records in her diaries an exchange with a woman who she identifies as E. Pizarnik is vexed at the woman’s offer of salvation: “Regardless of how drunk she might have been, her promise of *saving me* is quite unforgivable – and unforgettable” (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 860) [22]. Pizarnik does a weak God one better: she is unwilling to both forgive *and* forget; she is unwilling to believe in absolution anymore, no matter how detailed her confession.

Lord

The cage has turned into a bird  
and devoured my hopes

“The true martyr is the one who is prepared to let everything go, even the hope of salvation,” writes Terry Eagleton (Eagleton, 2018, p. 89). There’s a cost in placing your desire in someone else’s hands (God’s, for example), and that cost is surrendering your individuality to the expectations of others. Of course, as Lacan would probably point out, whatever we deem most individual about ourselves is nothing but our response to what the big Other most desires of us (this radical symbolic alterity through which we speak – or that perhaps even speaks us), and we are always taking stock of that desire. Alejandra Pizarnik couldn’t bring herself to believe in God, which means she couldn’t stop desiring him. What makes her desire radical – and, by extension, her body of work – is that she rejects the notion of a forgiving God. She rejects the notion of a God who is the object of worship (beloved), but also love itself – *spirit*, according to Augustine; *mutuus amor*, according to Aquinas (Keller, 2003, p. 232). A God who is both giver of love as well as the beloved doesn’t work for Pizarnik. This symmetry lacks contradiction, it lacks the imbalance of power that makes a good metaphor good: the tension between the subject (to which attributes are ascribed) and the object (from which attributes are borrowed). Pizarnik shuns a loving God, a weak God of infinite mercy like Yahweh on the cross, because she does not desire a God who is a fellow sufferer – an equal, a friend. She wants an idol. An idol, as the pure beloved, as the beloved who is unburdened from having to love

back, holds all the power; we, the faithful, are powerless: we can only hope for the coming of the Messiah (once – or twice, if we are lucky); we can only hope that the Messiah even exists. In fashioning God as a metaphor, in addressing him incessantly, Pizarnik is admitting God as an entity that cannot reach us directly, that can only be seen through mirrors – and God’s inability to ever reach us is the subtlest idolatry of all (Bloechl, 2009, p. 130).

An idol can punish us. We probably deserve it. We probably enjoy it. Desire is tricky that way – we don’t even desire the things we desire; desire is always the desire of the other (Lacan, 1998, p. 235). Writing is what both saves and strangles Pizarnik, what “asphyxiates her subjectivity” (Piña & Venti, 2022, p. 156). Writing exposes her shortcomings, but triumphantly, defiantly so; it invites in God’s ire. But this is not a development of the later Pizarnik – the answer, as usual, was already in the beginning. In one of her earlier entries, back in 1954, Pizarnik praises the Israelites for not seeing a connection between their shortcomings and Yahweh’s ire. They outright refused to take such failures as necessary elements to seek reconciliation with Yahweh, or for their salvation. Instead, they (and also some Christians, she is quick to add) would rather ascribe the eventual bad fortune that would befall them to a simple accident or negligent behavior – which could be easily mended by a sacrifice (Pizarnik, 2013, p. 23) [23].

Instead of salvation – sacrifice. To crave punishment, to wish to self-inflict it. To both fear death and to desire it – here is the indescribable insignificance of the writer, her contradicting superposition: both beneath and above; willing to sacrifice herself, but on her own terms. Sacrifice is not a mere giving up of things; it “concerns the passage of the lowly, unremarkable thing from weakness to power” (Eagleton, 2018, p. 8). But Pizarnik is not – and this is crucial to understanding her work – wielding or seeking to wield this power herself. The edification of such a reading would ruin her poetry. Pizarnik does not fashion herself a God – she *wants* God to have this power over her. She desires this sacrificial superposition which allows her to both suffer and feel superior; to surrender herself in ways that are conducive to some kind of insight. God as a metaphor allows Pizarnik to continue investing herself in a symbolic fiction in which power lies absolutely with the beloved, and in which she wishes to become neither beloved nor lover – but the seducer, the source of temptation.

“I care little for the rose, my dear, but for the word that names it”. (Piña & Venti, 2022, p. 305) [24]

## Notes

[1] All translations from the Spanish are my own. The translation of the poem (“El despertar” / “Awakening”) is also my own, based on Lydia Merriman Herrick’s (Herrick, 2017, pp. 49–53). The Spanish original of the most relevant quotes will be included in the notes below.

[2] “Si Dios está en todas partes ¿por qué buscarlo?”

[3] “No llamar a dios. Aun cuando las flores desgarran mi pasado con su perfume a sueño frustrado. No invocarlo. Ésta es la prueba suprema. Esto consiste en tenerse la sangre, apretarse los gritos, reventar en las propias venas, pero callar.”

[4] “Me resisto a escribir. Estoy cansada de los Diarios Íntimos, vacuos y frustrados, no consuelan, no ayudan, pero sí evaden, pero sí resuelven falsamente las cotidianas angustias.”

[5] “De qué sirve saber? ¿De qué sirve preguntarme para qué sirve? Servir. Nada más inútil que algo que sirve. Porque nada es útil o inútil en mi caso. Pero he perdido mi no preguntar. He perdido mis ojos asombrados y silenciosos. He perdido mi humildad ante mí misma. Me he perdido y el sólo querer buscarme sería la corroboración definitiva de mi pérdida.”

[6] “¡Dios!, que en caso de ser se limita a su empleo de cubretapas del Código Civil y Penal. No me importa verificar algo tan vulgar como la existencia de Dios, pues me basta con sentir mi ser.”

[7] “Me avergüenza escribir un diario. Preferiría que fuese una novela. Estoy confusa. Lo de siempre. Siento que no quiero nada y me siento culpable de ello. No quiero vivir de pie, o no puedo; quiero dormir. Estoy ciega para la realidad y para los otros. Ésta es la conclusión definitiva. Sé que Dios no existe (es un problema que no me interesa), no hay vida futura, no hay nada, no me prohíbo nada, y, no obstante, no hago nada. Es mi única posibilidad de vivir. Una vez, no más. Y no obstante, no hago nada.”

[8] “Además, mis tareas actuales —el estudio, sobre todo— me sumen en la desesperación. Tengo miedo de estudiar, de dar exámenes. Recién ahora comprendo que cuando decido comenzar algo —por ejemplo, un estudio— no tengo en cuenta mi natural forma de ser, y pienso en mí como en otra persona. Pero después, llegado el instante de actuar, me rebelo contra esa otra Alejandra que me conduce sin conocerme. Y entonces no hago nada.”

[9] These challenges faced by Pizarnik are so well-documented that they have practically ascended (or descended) to the level of anecdotes. It is telling, for instance, that they should be mentioned in a review of the English translation of Pizarnik’s *The Last Innocence / The Lost Adventures* by Ugly Ducking Presse, in 2019: “It is well-documented that Pizarnik endured challenges growing up, particularly problems affecting her physical appearance (acne, weight gain) and social presence (stuttering).” (Clara B. Jones, 2019)

[10] “Arturo me presentó a unos amigos suyos: «Ésta es Alejandra, la niña más dotada del mundo. Tiene todo lo que Dios puede conceder a un ser humano... y sin embargo, está siempre triste».”

[11] “Otra cosa: siento el miedo antiguo. Es decir, el miedo desconocido, que nacía en el corazón y subía a la garganta. El miedo en forma de mano asesina. Hace años que no lo sentía. Y hoy surgió, cuando desperté. Me pregunto seriamente por qué no me suicido.”

[12] “Ayer y hoy, días suicidas. Estoy huyendo de algo. Nada me enlaza a la vida. Y ahora todo empeoró porque me siento perseguida y odiada por todos. No quiero vivir ni morir. Sólo tengo conciencia de una fuerte imposibilidad de todo. Además, hay miedo de escribir. Yo no sé nada, no tengo nada que decir.”

[13] “No escribo poemas. Tengo miedo. Sé que debo esperar, sé que me aguarda un gran poema. ¿Sabré reconocer el instante sagrado?”

[14] “En este libro está dicho lo que no me confieso. Lo leo con miedo, cada página me aporta nuevas (o viejas) de mí.”

[15] “Pero D. me da justo en el centro de mi tormento. (...) Pero ahora no dejo de meditar en el crimen. Y me pregunto por qué es algo tan importante. ¿Acaso no se olvida el amor? ¿Por qué no habrá un olvido de un crimen? Creo que lo hay. Siempre que Dios no exista.”

[16] “Hoy me levanté cansada y afiebrada como si fuera yo la que hubiera cometido los crímenes.”

[17] “Pero sé que mi única posibilidad de salvación consiste en aceptar con naturalidad esta carencia afectiva.”

[18] “Ahora bien: yo quiero pensar en la muerte. Creo que es una de mis pocas posibilidades de salvación. Y para mí, salvarme es no enajenarme.”

[19] “Sólo sé esto: mi idea de la salvación, la imagen paradisíaca de una Alejandra salvada, es imaginarme no pensando en mí a la distancia, con una gran calma, considerando mis desgracias con la misma calma casi indiferente (sin morbidez) con que considero las ajenas.”

- [20] “Mi salud (lo que exageradamente llamo mi salvación) era poder escribir ocho horas diarias.”
- [21] “Imposibilitada de persistir ángel, la muchacha yace, aguardando la salvación en la poesía, es decir, en la verdadera vida, la que conoció hace mucho tiempo —tal vez hace siglos— y que a veces recuerda, cuando la memoria estalla en visiones de luz y de colores y la herida de ser se cierra y todo regresa a una armonía dulcísima, en la que todo se comunica.”
- [22] “Pero por ebria que haya estado es un tanto imperdonable —e inolvidable— su promesa de *salvarme*. Yo sé bien que nadie lo puede pero algo en mí se amigaría un poquitito si me quisieran un par de años, si me quisieran bien.”
- [23] “La mayor parte de la población israelita rehusaba considerar sus derrotas como actos provenientes de la ira de Yahvé, rehusaba fructificar esos fracasos y soportarlos como *necesarios* para reconciliarse con Yahvé y para llegar a la salvación final. ¡No! Era mucho más cómodo para ellos atribuir la desdicha a un accidente o a una negligencia, fácilmente reparable por medio de un sacrificio. Muy pocos aceptaban auténticamente (hecho que ocurrió también en muchos cristianos”.
- [24] “«Me importa poco la rosa, mi querida, y sí me importa la palabra que la nombra.»”

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