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Ricardo Garibay

A Pasionario of Letters

(1923-1999)

In colloquial speech in Bolivia, the name *pasionario* is given to old fighting cocks, the ones that have survived thanks to their courage and passion for life. The comparison may not be the most appropriate, but we could say that Ricardo Garibay Ortega (born in Tulancingo, Hidalgo, January 18, 1923; died in Cuernavaca, Morelos, May 4, 1999) was a fighting cock of letters, a *pasionario*, whose weaknesses were writing, reading and women.

Part of his existence testifies to the first of these weaknesses: his writings in many of the best known literary genres, including novels, short stories, essays, memoirs and plays. But his name can also be linked to two other genres where he left part of himself: journalism (print, radio and television) and cinema (script writing). In the last years of his life, the radio was one of the media through which he made public his vehement commentaries on another of his preferences: reading.

A PASSION FOR WRITING

Before he began to work exclusively in literature, Ricardo Garibay studied law, was a beginning philological researcher and

a furtive student of letters. It was not until he was 30 that he dedicated himself completely to writing, a craft he spent 10 to 12 hours a day practicing, making his debut with a short story in a collection, *Los presentes* (Those Present), which also includes contributions by Elena Poniatowska and Carlos Fuentes. Other of his contemporaries were Josefina Vicens, Rosario Castellanos, Elena Garro, Sergio Galindo, Luis Spota, Agustín Yáñez, José Revueltas, Juan José Arreola and Juan Rulfo.

According to some of Garibay's colleagues and critics alike, Arreola's and Rulfo's fame eclipsed him. This should not be taken literally, since fame is no parameter for measuring some and disregarding others.

What is undeniable is the vastness of Garibay's work (around 60 works) and his current and future readers. Sadly, in our country, many authors' writing becomes known only posthumously and not when first published.

His work is the product of two elements: his humility before a blank page and a bold effort to infuse his work with true breath, the breath of life. As he himself said, "If in a single reading the reader can *see* what is written on the paper, then the text breathes. It doesn't matter if it's long or short. It has it and that's it. It breathes. It's alive."¹

A PASSION FOR READING

Reading, writing, reading...these are the writer's trade, and Garibay practiced his craft every day to the full. We can see this in the examples of the readings that captivated him, that moved him; readings found in a miscellaneous assortment of books whose leit motif is a passion for reading, a kind of a log whose notes go beyond a mere inventory of texts and authors that he critiqued, tasted, disdained or admired. It is sort of a fishing trip, but in this case the hook is cast into the stream of letters, not to catch fish, but "*astucias literarias*" ("literary astutenesses").

Garibay liked this phrase, coined by another Mexican writer ("Literary astutenesses..., foreseeing that moment, so dear to the spirit, in which a word unites happily—or astutely—with another."² Emilio Uranga), for its power of suggestion. He decided to rephrase it, saying, "The dear, unexpected moment in which one word happily or astutely joins another, and together they reveal to us one of the vital secrets of life."³

Ricardo Garibay, with his curious penchant for meeting up with these vital secrets of life, devoured every piece of literature that fell into his hands. He went through every line trying to make discoveries deserving of his interest, to unearth literary stopovers—the other way of saying literary astutenesses—along the pathways of letters.

Every stopover is a phrase in which its author has managed to capture and reveal the very guts of existence that we often do not see. These subtleties may come from different sources and latitudes, but their particularity is that they offer the reader (in this case also a creator) an idea, a message of a word that will nourish the perception or sensibility of someone who has opened out into a life given over to literature, such as Garibay's.

A PASSION FOR WOMEN AND LIFE

One fact stands out, among others, in Garibay's books: several of them have women as central characters. Examples are *La nueva amante* (The New Lover), *Verde Maira* (Green Maira), *Mujeres en un acto* (Women in One Act), *¡Lindas maestras!* (Pretty Teachers!), *Taib, Lía y Lourdes* (Lía and Lourdes), *Treinta y cinco mujeres* (Thirty-five Women) and the unfinished *Cartas a Minerva* (Letters to Minerva). The feminine always

seduced him. Women were the constant spirit that wandered through his writing, a spirit he related to as though it were a woman to be pursued and courted.

Another achievement in Garibay's work, specifically his narrative, is the rendering of everyday Mexican speech. He knew better than anybody how to listen and capture the colloquial speech of different social strata, and he brought it to his writing to give them voice and presence, to present these always ignored sectors in a real way.

Testimony to Garibay's dynamism and passion for life throughout his 76 years is the fruit of his constant participation in Mexico's cultural milieu (he wrote innumerable movie scripts; he was an assiduous columnist in the Mexico City daily *Excélsior*, and a co-founder of the news weekly *Proceso*); the prizes given to his work (the Mazatlán Prize in 1962 to *Beber un cáliz* [Drink a Chaliceful] and the prize for the best foreign book published in France in 1975, for *La casa que arde de noche* [The House that Burns at Night]); his many lectures on Spanish-language narrative and poetry; the television programs in which the central topic was always Mexican culture; as well as the radio spots called *Literary Astutenesses*, in which Garibay gave himself over body and soul to talking about any text at all with his own characteristic brand of excitement.

Unfortunately, just as with other Mexican writers who have died in this decade (Octavio Paz and Jaime Sabines, to mention only the most recent), the cancer was more tenacious and lethal than his three passions, and it beat him. But, just as he wanted, "What better way to die than between one page and another. There could be no greater happiness!"⁴ And it happened just that way. Now, the responsibility falls to us, his readers, of recovering and maintaining the legacy of his work, not allowing it to be forgotten. ■■■

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NOTES

¹ *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 5 May 1999.

² Ricardo Garibay, *Paraderos literarios* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1995), p. 12.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Reforma* (Mexico City), 5 May 1999.

Problemas del desarrollo

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