

Mexico's New Poetry

Fernando Fernández and Eduardo Vázquez

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In his most recent publication, *Ora la pluma* (This Time the Pen) (Mexico City: El Tucán de Virginia, 1999), Fernando Fernández shows himself to be a proud descendent of Ramón López Velarde, “the single father of Mexican literature.” The fact that an author barely 35 years old assumes so openly the heritage of a poet who died at the age of 33 more than eight decades ago is particularly significant. López Velarde was the first among us to bring the language of conversation into poetry. To do it, he used the cardinal recourse of the latest in modernism (noticeable in Leopoldo Lugones of *Lunario sentimental* [Sentimental Lunar-y]): the clash of the colloquial language of cities with an entirely personal “literary” language. In some of the poems of his *Zozobra* (Anguish), López Velarde wields language that masterfully combines the humdrum and the unexpected, grace and irony. Of all of Mexico’s poets—with their penchant for elaborate discourse—only a few have learned López Velarde’s lesson: Novo, Lizalde, Pellicer in part, Zaid, Deniz, and, among the young poets, Fernando Fernández, all challenge the idea that López Velarde is a reference point but not a path to follow.

Ora la pluma is part of a current that counterposes a shrewd, mocking voice to rhetorical eloquence. Far from any edifying purpose, Fernández invents a stuttering speech that mixes sentimentalism and sarcasm, melancholy and levity. The strength of this language lies in the unity of dis-

cordant notes. Along with Julio Torri, Fernando Fernández discovers melancholy as the complementary tension of irony. Out of this discovery, he attains moments of luminous corrosiveness:

Eloína wasn't an eyesore.
 From her unmolded
 body, her torso unexercised,
 flowed a nimbus of
 disdain, and a detached beauty
 —concept of the erotic
 framed by unreachable or postponed possession.¹

In his desire to resist the bondage of time, Fernández clings to the aesthetic of disappearance: what has been lived dissolves in the virtuality of the future and conditional tenses (“will have...” and “would have...”) or in an “if he had...”, that multiplies the final results of the most memorable experiences. This grammar uses work-a-day words, and yet each new phrase convinces us that no one talks like that. Fernández works from the bottom of the language: he proposes speech rooted in the commonplace to then grow toward the intermittent, the discontinuous, but also toward the conjectural and the ominous. The two epigraphs by Garcilaso used in the book reveal the baroque sediment that nourishes this young poet’s syntax, a sediment that in the poetry of our language has often been the starting point for breaking with paralyzed discourses.

By giving the nation feminine attributes, López Velarde fled from civic enthusiasm. Fernando Fernández underlines the abyss separating poetic

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language from political discourse. In “Soliloquio con héroe en Churubusco” (Soliloquy with Hero in Churubusco), a man visits the ex-monastery of Churubusco planning to pray while waiting for the debates to begin in the Publishers Chamber of Commerce. Finding the chapel closed, he decides to direct his plaint to the statue of one of Mexico’s war heroes. And the statue responds, “If we had any ammunition, you wouldn’t be here...” Then, the suspicious visitor thinks:

But *parque*,² park, in the sense of garden,
 was right outside,
 even if we ignore the filthy dog
 who was licking the bronze plaque
 and a couple of vehement couples,
out there,
 next to the church, wasn’t it a park?³

In the best written poem in the book, “Raya” (Line), Fernando Fernández deals with the theme of love that succumbs to the rigors of time. Like in the work of López Velarde, here the woman plays a dual, contradictory role: it is she who summons and reconciles the most divergent realities, and she is also the one who is scattered and scatters us in infinite presences. Fernando Fernández brings these tensions into play and resolves them in images in which the clarity of consciousness is manifested in the joyful turbulence of the words:

(I’d like to have Belisarda
 —I told you once, when we played at telling
each other, in determined
 but tremulous words,
 our desires in reference to others—
 have her here like an apparition which would
sweeten the fall,
 downy and tame among us,
 licking salt from your outstretched hand.)⁴

Knowledge of tradition once again becomes a road to self-knowledge. Without a project for the



future, continuity with the past is one of the possible roads toward a different poetry. Although revolutionary action and the poetic endeavor seem more and more incompatible, there is a heritage that some young authors do not disdain: the ability to say no. Eduardo Vázquez, born in Mexico City in 1962, has learned from those who not so very long ago sought in the poem a place to refound ordinary life. Given the loss of the image of the world and the crisis of signifiers on the threshold of the twenty-first century, Vázquez assumes his subversive vocation. Gambles like his, rarer and rarer today, are a true update of attitudes and feelings as essential as hospitality, the vocation for freedom, the cultivation of memory, community feeling, brotherhood and even hope. For

Vázquez all these things reappear as alternatives to the evils plaguing us: growing relativism and its inevitable counterpart, nationalist and religious fanaticism.

Given the progressive standardization of poetic languages, the attempt that Vázquez brings into play in his most recent book, *Naturaleza y hechos* (Nature and Events) (Mexico City: Era, 1999), revives the yearning to speak in the singular in frequenting life's most compelling experiences. Venezuelan Eugenio Montejo says that for the poet of today, uprootedness begins in the loss of the city as the expression of a common project. With the gradual disappearance of cities, we begin to see the importance of their presence in the work of the great poets: Baudelaire and Paris, Cavafy and Alexandria and the four Pessoa's and Lisbon.

A poet of today, even if he/she spends his/her entire life in the same place, is condemned to being uprooted: he/she lives with the certainty that cities have been abolished. Whether he knows it or not, every poet confronts the challenge of tracing in the air the spiritual geometry of a possible city. Today, memory is the pillar of that attempt, "the atmosphere of his imagination," as Malanos said about Cavafy's work. Vázquez manages to restore to us a vital space in the liveliest recollection of the revoked cities:

The city that sinks up to its knees in the sand, the city of "the men and women who wait on the coast/ for the afternoon to renew the turn of the stars."⁵ The city of rooftops, where a legion of young girls builds towns that repair the view of the hills (the villagers have left the town, and in their airy capital they relive the atmospheres of a subverted Eden).

The city that we leave to go to the beaches where contemplation becomes possible again. The city that we return to by isolated paths, only to reencounter the stooping walls, the cat and the timetable.

The city of concrete life, where "those who arrive build their neighborhood/ and found the market and the chapel."⁶ A universe of names more faultless than the august names of history; of actions nobler and more long-lasting than official heroism: Nicanora serves breakfast, Pedro shines shoes, Jesús buys marijuana at the workshop door. Here the epics have unexpected champions: the young boxer with cauliflower ears; swaggering, dirty-mouthed kids, who watch life go by from the corner with a beer in their hands and chicken out at the last minute (on the radio, a few minstrel bands narrate the epic poem of the dispossessed).

The city of simultaneous apparitions: a young man "rehearses a pass at an imaginary bull in the air,"⁷ while a woman is absorbed in the sacrifice of nothing; the air swirls in a subway car, and the newspaper centerfold displays a nude Nordic beauty on some Pacific beach; all together in a toy shop passageway, an old man arranging books on overflowing shelves, a mason singing as he works, the dreams of the thousands and thousands living next to the walls that will be their graves are a representation of the Passion.

The old city, reserved and public, abhorred and loved like an old whore who shows all the signs of worn-out passion: the decadent Don Juan; old people's get-togethers; the bits of a dug-up pyramid; the twisted columns of a church. "Something in it is consumed/and is ash./Something is recent among the ruins."⁸

There is no city like the one desired. There is no place for the order we dream of. We are the masters of our absences. In "La primera persona del verbo" (The First Person of the Verb), Vázquez makes a list of his holdings: a trunk of anecdotes, the lack of faith, a decimated sky, the love of women's names and Sundays, the memory of a family who

crossed the sea (Vázquez is the son and grandson of exiles) and who, in exchange for a ruined dream, made the discovery of brotherhood. And here, the origins of that poetic place that Eduardo Vázquez intuitively revealed to us: the tribe scattered by ubiquitous war, a homeland founded on shipboard, the republic of the shipwrecked.

In the cities of exile, says Octavio Paz, men sanctify a brotherhood older than that of religions: we experience loneliness not only in the face of the cosmos, but also in the face of our neighbors; but in our changing space, we guess at the presence of a same rift: "brotherhood over the vacuum," Paz calls it. An absolute child of his time, Vázquez understands we are experiencing a universal, permanent war. In his poem about Sarajevo, he permits the closest examples of devastation and struggle to converge: the Spanish Civil War and the struggle the Chiapas indigenous people are carrying out in Mexico's Southwest. "All wars have similar histories."⁹ Among the dead, next to the rubble left by the violence, life continues like tenacious Nature. After the most tragic events, little old ladies sweep stoops, children play hide-and-seek. Who wins wars and who loses them? War is eternal, "a history sown with fatuous flare-ups."¹⁰ The war of '36, the war of our parents and grandparents, was not

won by Franco or by the Republic, but by a pair of institutions that have encouraged Spain's rebirth: democracy and the constitutional monarchy. Perhaps it is worth resisting, just as it is worth reinventing everything: "Just out of the shelter little girl breasts/dreamed of a dance floor for the first time."¹¹ **VVM**

NOTES

¹ "Eloína," *Ora la pluma* (Mexico City: Ediciones El Tucán de Virginia, 1999), p. 14. Translated by John Oliver Simon.

² In Spanish "parque" means "ammunition" as well as "park." [Editor's Note.]

³ "Soliloquio con héroe en Churubusco," *Ora la pluma*, p. 76. Translated by John Oliver Simon.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58-59. Translated by John Oliver Simon.

⁵ "Naturaleza y hechos," *Naturaleza y hechos* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1999), p. 11.

⁶ "D.F.," *ibid.*, p. 65.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁹ "La sombra de los árboles," *ibid.*, p. 101.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

