

# Elías Nandino, a poet of vitality and talent

**T**he poet and physician Elías Nandino Vallarta, one of the outstanding figures of 20th-century Mexican literature, died on October 2, 1993, in Guadalajara. At the age of 92, after a life of intensity and joy, the poet lamented the ravages time had wreaked on his body. He protested against old age "because age really means being deprived of everything"; he said the young man living inside him could no longer stand the old man he had become. Only poetry could console him:

*I myself do not understand  
If now I am made of ice,  
why then do I go on burning...  
not in my loins  
but in my brain?*

Nandino was born on December 19, 1900, in Cocula, Jalisco. Elías and his two sisters were the children of Alberto Nandino, a merchant, and his second wife, María Vallarta. Despite his father's intolerance, from an early age the poet was open about his homosexuality, expressing it fully and freely throughout his life, confronting the social prejudices of his day.

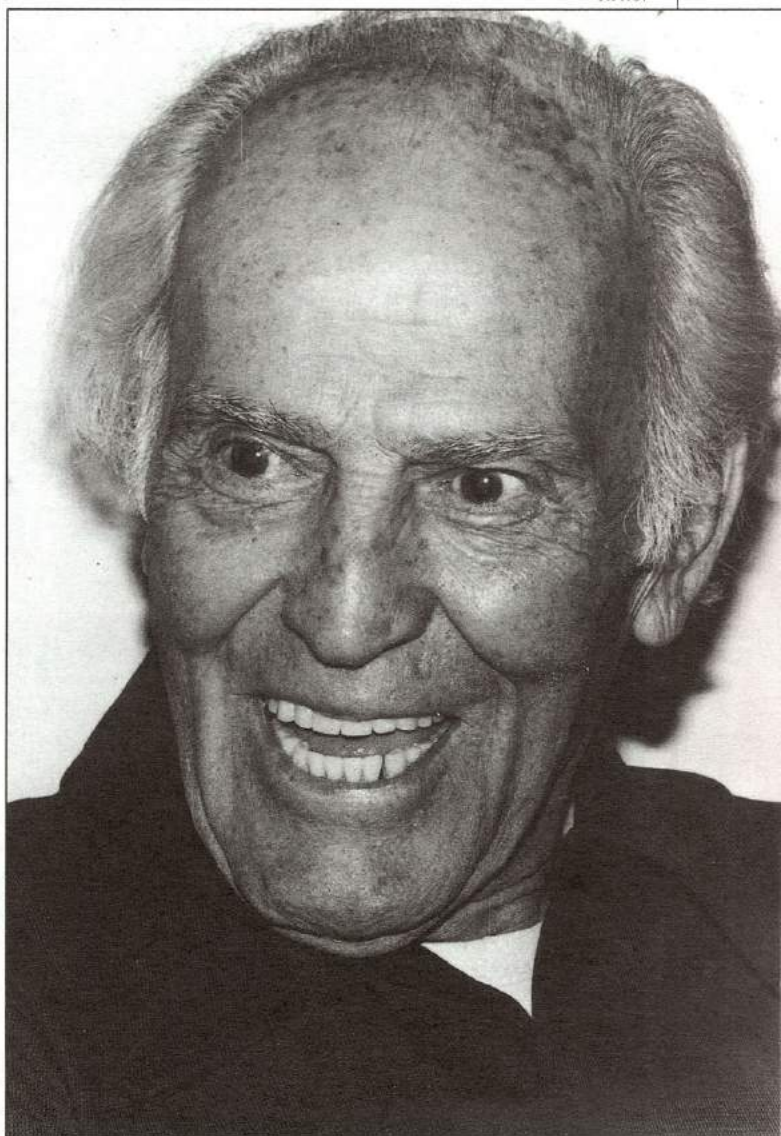
He attended high school and the first year of medical school in the city of Guadalajara. Yet the first time he visited Mexico City it seduced him. "When I got to know the city I realized that this is where I wanted to live, and I made up my mind to do so." He enrolled in UNAM's National School of Medicine, graduating in 1930. He later specialized in gynecology and abdominal surgery.

His interest in poetry began during his adolescence. Reading Manuel Acuña and Manuel M. Flores inspired him to write his first poems. At the School of Medicine he put out a journal called *Allis Vivere*. During the same period his friend Delfino Ramírez introduced him to the poets Salvador Novo and Xavier Villaurrutia, who were in the vanguard of a group of young people who wanted to rescue Mexican literature from the stereotyped, solemn and provincial schemas that prevailed at that time.

This meeting was a turning point in Nandino's intellectual and poetic education. Among others, he also met Gilberto Owen, Jorge Cuesta, Enrique González Rojo, Jaime Torres Bodet and Roberto Rivera, with whom he shared cultural interests, existential and sentimental conflicts, as well as an intense nocturnal life.

Years later this group of friends came to be known as "The Contemporaries." While Nandino's name would always be associated with this circle, he was never considered a member of the group, as he was studying in Europe when it was formed. In reality, Nandino's poetry

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*Passion was fundamental to Nandino's writing.*

## To a dead poet \*

If you had been what in the shadows, last night,  
 climbed down the staircase of silence  
 and lay down beside me  
 to create the channel of accents in a vacuum  
 which, I imagine, will be the language of the dead.  
 If you had been, truly, the single cloud  
 which in its journey paused beneath my sheets  
 and molded itself to my skin  
 lightly; breeze, aroma,  
 almost dreamed angelical contact...  
 If you had been  
 what parted the dark stillness and  
 appeared, as if a spiritual  
 drawing which wanted to convince me  
 that you go on, bodyless, living in the other life.  
 If you had been the hushed voice  
 which infiltrated the voice of my conscience,  
 seeking to incorporate yourself into the word  
 which arose from your death, through my lips.  
 If you had been what in my dream  
 descended like mist, little by little,  
 and was imprisoning me  
 in a vague tunic of expired flight...  
 If you had been the flame  
 which unburning passed through my wakefulness  
 without stirring the lake of astonishment,  
 just as the image is submerged  
 in the mirror, without wounding the limpid freshness of  
 its epidermis.

If it had been you...

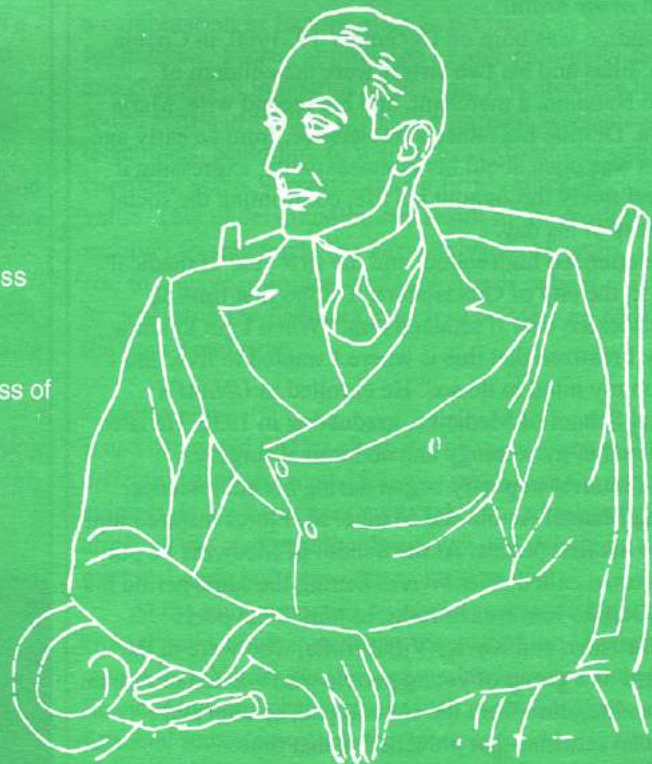
But our senses  
 cannot identify souls.  
 The dead, if they do return, have lost  
 all that could  
 give us the pleasure of recognizing them.

Who else could have come to visit me?  
 I remember that, with you alone,  
 I often spoke of the dread  
 in which death's constant siege

keeps us buried,  
 and the two of us spoke guessing,  
 conjecturing, posing questions,  
 inventing answers, only to be submerged in defeat,  
 dying in life from thinking of death.  
 Now you know how to decipher the mystery  
 because you are in its bosom; but I know nothing...

In this uncertainty I secretly think  
 that if it wasn't you that in the shadows,  
 last night, climbed down the staircase of silence  
 and lay down beside me,  
 then perhaps it was  
 a visit from my own death.

\* Dedicated to Xavier Villaurrutia.



Xavier Villaurrutia, drawing by Carlos Orozco Romero. Taken from Luis Mario Schneider, *Xavier Villaurrutia, entre líneas*, Ediciones Trabuco y Clavel, Mexico City, 1991, p. 7.

did not follow the Vanguardist line of the rest of the group, and his interests had more in common with Modernist, "Stridentist" and Romantic poetry.

Nandino himself denied that his poetry had anything in common with "The Contemporaries." He had many differences with them: "I had my enthusiasm, my passion, while they were cold; they thought." Passion was fundamental to Nandino's writing; his poems were born "from within," while "The Contemporaries" "were sitting there correcting and correcting, thinking."

According to Nandino, there was a certain attitude of condescension towards his poetry; his work did not meet with a lot of literary acclaim, so that on a cultural level he felt like the "ugly duckling" of the group. "One time they made a kind of list, putting poets in order as to who belonged to the first, second and third categories. They put all their own names in first rank, in second rank they put a lot of people I knew, and I was in third rank."

This attitude formed the backdrop to the ups and downs of the poet's relationship with the group, but it did not affect his literary output. "I began to understand that what I held on to, what I believed, was valuable.... I didn't want to lose the provincial spirit. So I published my books without them finding out about it. Then I would show them the books and they would just smile."

From 1930 to 1950 he carried out graduate studies in medicine, acquiring a well-deserved prestige in the field. He served as personal physician to several key figures of Mexico's artistic world, among them María Félix, Pedro Vargas, Dolores del Río and the dancer Yolanda Montes, known as "Tongolele." He was also Chief of Residents at the Juárez Hospital, where Villaurrutia often visited him.

For Nandino, poetry and medicine were both substantial activities. "I made a perfect symbiosis between medicine and poetry. I approached the practice of medicine with love, with duty, as a kind of marriage, so that when the poet in me observed an operation, he trembled and I felt emotion; and, on the other hand, when I contemplated the thinking object, the surgeon would feel emotion as well."

The author of songs and epigrams as well as poems, his publications include *Canciones* (Songs), *Espiral* (Spiral), *Color de ausencia* (Color of Absence), *Eco* (Echo), *Río de sombra* (River of Shadow), *Sonetos* (Sonnets), *Suicidio lento* (Slow Suicide), *Nudo de sombras* (Knot of Shadows), *Nocturno amor* (Nocturnal Love) and *Eternidad de polvo* (Eternity of Dust), among others. In the field of publishing, he was co-founder—together with Alfredo Hurtado—and publisher of the journal *Estaciones* (Seasons), which printed the work of a number of young writers who were to occupy an important place in Mexican letters, such as José Emilio Pacheco, Sergio Pitó, Gustavo Sáinz, José de la Colina, Carlos Monsiváis and Elena

Poniatowska. The magazine also published the first reviews of works by the painter José Luis Cuevas, a virtual unknown at the time. Twenty issues of *Estaciones* were published over a five-year period.

From 1960 to 1964 he served as editor of the *Cuadernos de Bellas Artes* (Fine Arts Journal). In 1979 he was awarded the National Prize for Literature as well as the Aguascalientes Poetry Prize. The Aguascalientes prize was awarded him without a contest, as the jury decided to confer it on him in recognition of his literary achievements.

As a passionate man, full of life, the subjects of love and death were recurring themes in his poetry. An erotic poet, in 1983 he unveiled a literary form that he had invented and named *albaremas*. *Albaremas* were poems filled with mischief, sensuality and word-play. An example of this form can be found in the book *Erotismo al rojo blanco* (White-Hot Erotica). What was new about *albaremas* was the attempt to give a poetic dimension to the popular word-play called *albur* (punning). Nandino noted that this particular use of words made *albaremas* hard to translate into other languages.

In 1975, tired of the hustle and bustle of Mexico City, he moved to Guadalajara and then to his home town of Cocula. Due to his advanced age he thought the end was fast approaching. Nevertheless, death waited almost twenty years before coming for him.

During this last period the poet continued to be active, giving recitals and readings, organizing workshops on literature. For a number of years he continued to practice medicine as well. Six months before his death he was still working, together with the University of Guadalajara's Luis Medina, on an anthology of Mexico's best poetry, from Sor Juana to the present day.

Poetry was the consolation of his final years: "Without poetry, I might have tried to take my own life." He suffered the ravages of time, which left him physically unable to read and write. He awaited death with patience, and recited from memory the epitaph he wanted inscribed on his tombstone:

*In the dark solitude  
of closed eyelids, of this hole  
are kept  
the remains of my figure.  
This is all that is left  
of my burning flesh,  
which, from burning without measure, expired  
and made it my lot  
not to die from death:  
it was life that killed me* ❧