

Jaime Sabines And Poetic Emotion

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When Jaime Sabines died, he was five days away from his seventy-third birthday. He had published the best of his work, a central piece of the Mexican literary canon. In the year 2000, bereft of his physical presence, we will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of his first book. *Horla* was the volume that unveiled this great poet's splendid, intense work.

Horla is the door to the apotheosis of Sabines' emotion, and on its first page it delivers the following limpid image of wounding abandonment:

*The dawn came without her.
He scarcely moves.
He remembers.*

*(My own eyes, more delicate,
dream her.)*

How easy absence is!

*On the leaves of time
that drop of day
slides, trembles.*



Reprinted courtesy by Jaime Sabines' family

Sabines and his wife "Chepita".

The poetry of Jaime Sabines is a touchstone of Mexican culture. It is reread and unreservedly admired by countless readers. Sabines' poetry has opened a better door than that of reading for information, erudition or fashion. It opens up the door of emotion through authentic poetry.

The person who is motivated to read by emotion rather than by gain is much more able to enter the realm of poetry. As Efraín Huerta said, this realm is not to be explored by the pompous or the dispassionate.

Sabines' poetry is a potion, and, as he has said, poetry can be nothing else. "Poetry is discovery, the splendor of life, instantaneous and permanent contact with the truth of humanity. Poetry is a drug taken once; a witch's brew, a vital poison that cast other eyes and hands on man, stripping his skin so he can feel the weight of a quill."¹

Here is a definition of poetry written by a true poet. Indeed, it is the poet's definition and not that of the theorist. In this, and in his writing for ordinary people, Sabines was similar to Pablo Neruda. It was Neruda, author of *Crepusculario* (Twilight Volume), who said that "poetry is insurrection." He also said, and proved, that subjects for poetry are not only to be found, as some like to think, in the grandeur of books, but also in "the harsh tasks of man."

These truths resemble two other truths that Sabines expressed exactly 40 years ago, when accepting the Chiapas Prize in 1959 in his native state. He said that "one should not live as a poet, but as a man," and that "all poetic art should

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be comprised of and subordinated to the art of living."

Jaime Sabines taught many generations to truly read poetry and not just look at books. Is that nothing? Certainly not, especially because so many read books and do not notice the poetry in front of them. So many also write books in verse, and yet lack the ability to bring poetry to the reader. In their fatuous, mistaken zeal to glitter and dazzle, "they have hidden the light, made bread into coal and words into screws," as Pablo Neruda said.

For many years, Sabines has resided in the best of his readers. We call him the poet of the people because for Sabines, as for any other real poet, emotion broke the spine of the book and freed poetry to wander the streets.

Some poets might wish, in a fleeting moment of vanity, that some far-off reader would remember their verse as what made them feel poetry was necessary. Some might wish not just to be read and reread but to be retained in the heart and memory without needing the book. Some would wish the prestige, whether it be true or false, that spins itself around the name of the poet, to be totally unconnected to the experience.

Jaime Sabines endowed Mexican poetry with a new intensity. He gave it new wings. He turned it away from the fatuous scribbles of little men who write so critics will endorse them and academics will study them. He turned it into a human vocation, that of communication among men. After all, as he asked, "what are poets good for? They serve, like Sisyphus, to push the stone up the hill only to have it fall again, to pick the flower out of the ash pile, to

hurl disenchantment out of the hearts of men."²

The poetry of Jaime Sabines opened our eyes to reality. It gave us a timely warning about the dangers of a craft that most people think is all too innocuous. The poetry of Jaime Sabines stripped the skin off its readers so they could feel the weight of a quill. With that, it gave them the gift of emotion and the charm of knowing through the senses.

"Jaime Sabines," wrote Octavio Paz, "is one of the best contemporary poets in the Spanish language. Soon after his first book, he found his voice. It is an unmis-

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takable voice, a bit brash and harsh. It is a rolling, dark green stone, marbled by those sinuous, deep lines that the Sun and the seasons etch on craggy heights. Passionate maps, the signs of the four elements, hieroglyphics of blood, bile, semen, sweat, tears and all the other liquids and substances man uses to sketch his own death, or that death uses to sketch our image of man."³

In Paz's well known essay "Corazón de León y Saladino" (The Lionheart and Saladin) (1972), included in the book *In/mediaciones* (Immediate Mediations) (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1979) and also

in *México en la obra de Octavio Paz* (Mexico in the Work of Octavio Paz) (1987), edited by Luis Mario Schneider and Paz himself, he talks about some of Sabines' virtues.

"Sabines," he writes, "is an extraordinary poet, a writer of some impressive, unforgettable fragments and many completed poems....Sabines has succeeded in writing poems that have range and complexity. Three unusual qualities of these poetic constructions astonish me: simplicity of line, spontaneity of delivery and solidity of form."⁴

As if these three unusual qualities were insufficient, one should remember what Paz says about Sabines in his *Obras completas* (Complete Works). In the first volume, Paz points out that Sabines belongs to the founding generation of contemporary Latin American poetry, along with José Lezama Lima, Enrique Molina, Nicanor Parra, Roberto Juarroz, Alvaro Mutis, and Paz himself.

In the third volume, Paz says, "It would be tedious to mention all the Latin American poets who, after López Velarde, make prose poetic; six names will suffice: Borges, Vallejo, Pellicer, Novo, Lezama Lima, Sabines."⁵

In the seventh volume, Paz comments, "Mexico went through an empty period somewhere between 1940 and 1950. The great magazines had vanished, the last one being *El Hijo Pródigo* (The Prodigal Son). The generation of *Contemporáneos* (Contemporaries), an island of clarity in a sea of confusion, had fallen silent. Criticism oscillated between revilement and flattery. Only two or three voices in poetry and art stood up to the system and nationalism. The style was 'progressivist,' and the dissident was relegated to 'Now-

heresville.' At the end of this period, a new era was born, and poetry, as usual, heralded the change. A handful of books were enough to make the desert bloom. One of them was *Varia invención* (Other Inventions) by Juan José Arreola; another was *El llano en llamas* (The Prairie Aflame) by Juan Rulfo; yet another was a collection of poetry by Sabines.⁶

Jaime Sabines is a founder of contemporary Mexican poetry; his work has been present and pivotal from the very beginning.

Sabines once wrote, "Poetry exempts no one from human suffering." The spiritual tension throughout his work is to be admired also because it affirms the indubitable truth that, "Poetry will never be excessive." Every reader proves this to him or herself, and the work of Sabines revitalizes and affirms it for us.

From the first to the last, Jaime Sabines is carried away by passion. He is the supreme Mexican poet of emotion. In *Me encanta Dios* (I Just Love God), a beautiful autobiographical poem written in 1993 and published on the last page of his last *Recuento de poemas* (Collected Poems) (1950-1995), he writes, "I just love God. He's a magnificent old man who doesn't take himself seriously. He likes to play, so he plays, and sometimes he gets carried away and he breaks your leg or he crushes you totally." Finally, he reconciles himself: "God's always in a good mood. That's why he's my favorite parent, my best child, my closest brother, the most adored woman, the puppy and the flea, the oldest stone, the softest petal, the sweetest smell, the unfathomable night, the bubbling of light, the source of who I am. God makes me happy; I just love God. God bless God."

"Sabines," wrote Marco Antonio Campos, another Mexican poet, "doesn't just belong to that minority of other poets, critics and literary professors. He belongs to the people. His poems seem to be written for everyone, even for those that put on sterile gloves when it's time to write or those who want their poems to glitter like the curlicues on a baroque altar. The astonishing fact is that Sabines himself has made only the tiniest contribution to his own popularity. Much like Juan Rulfo, another great recluse, he has not led a literary life. The sumptuous vanity of poets and writers, whether deserved or not, has always been almost or completely unbearable for him."⁷

In the words of José Emilio Pacheco, Sabines is one of the few Mexican poets who has truly left a body of work. "An impressive *Recuento* (Collected Poems), and, shall we say, five poems (not necessarily the same for every reader) that are among the greatest of his language and his time. You could not ask or aspire to more, no matter how great your ambitions."⁸

There have been, admittedly, detractors of the robust figure and characteristic greatness of Sabines' work. Sabines' strong masculine tone has come to annoy a few people who confuse poetry with affectation. They do not understand that spiritual authenticity does not hide but rather reveals the masculine principle in men or the feminine principle in women. As Paz says, critique gets confused with revilement, and the cold spirited are irritated by emotions foreign to them and they write about it: they can't reconcile themselves to being passionless but insist on making it public.

Long before those people learned to read, though, Sabines already had readers.

His audience has always grown, because true poetry will find its way in the intelligence and emotion of its audience. To write for the future is a miserable excuse that people use to justify their own failure. They feel bad because no one reads their work, and they blame the supposed ineptitude of the readers.

The poet does not pretend. He writes from what he is, what he feels, what he knows and what he does not know; what he sees and what he dreams. We do not come into this world just to write books. For Sabines, literature "can be work, but also idleness. Poetry is something else: it is a destiny."

Jaime Sabines wrote for the present and the future, and his books have been alive for a long time. They live in the devotion of readers who, with every reading or rereading, rewrite his poems every day. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Juan Domingo Argüelles, comp., *El poeta y la crítica: grandes poetas hispanoamericanos como críticos*, Collection Poemas y Ensayos (Mexico City: UNAM, 1998), p. 306.

² *Ibid.*, p. 305.

³ Octavio Paz, "Corazón de León y Saladino," *México en la obra de Octavio Paz* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989) p. 84.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁵ Octavio Paz, *Obras completas* vol. 3, *Fundación y disidencia* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica: 1994), p. 247.

⁶ Octavio Paz, "Los privilegios de la vista" *Obras completas* vol. 7 (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica: 1994), p. 330.

⁷ Marco Antonio Campos, prologue to Jaime Sabines, *Los poemas del peatón* (Québec: Écris des Forges, 1997), p. 8.

⁸ Mónica Mansour, *Uno es el poeta: Jaime Sabines y sus críticos* (Mexico City: SEP, 1988), p. 310.

THE PEDESTRIAN

It's said, it's rumored, it's asserted in the salons and at
celebrations by somebody, or a number of people in the
know, that Jaime Sabines is a great poet.

Or at least a good poet. Or a decent poet, respectable.

Or simply, but really, a poet.

The word reaches Jaime and it makes him happy.

How wonderful! I'm a poet. I'm an important poet.

I'm a great poet.

Convinced of it, he goes out into the street, or comes
home. Convinced of it. But nobody in the street realizes
that he's a poet, and even fewer at home. Why don't poets
have a star on the forehead, or shine in some visible way,
or have a ray coming out of their ears?

My God, Jaime said. I have to be Papa, or a husband, or
work in a factory like anybody else, or walk, like anybody else.

A pedestrian.

That's it, Jaime said. I'm not a poet. I'm a pedestrian.

And at that he lies on the bed with the sweet happiness
of contentment.

Loose Poems (1981)

AT THIS TIME, HERE

I ought to dance to that *danzón* they're playing down
in the cabaret,
leave my cooped up room
and go down dancing among the drunks.
A man's a fool to lie in bed
without a woman, bored, thinking,
just thinking.
I'm not "starved for love", but I don't want
to spend every night in a soak,
staring at my arms,
or with the light out, making drawings with a lit cigarette.
Reading, or remembering,
or admiring my literary status,
or waiting for something.
I ought to go down into the empty street
and with my hands in my pockets, slowly
go along with my feet, saying to them:
one, two, three, four...
This Mexican sky is dark,
full of cats,
with frightened stars
and wrung out air.
(Last night it had rained, though,
and turned cool, amorous, thin).
I ought to spend today crying
on a wet sidewalk at the foot of a tree,
or wait for a shameful streetcar
and shout at it, at the top of my voice.

If I had a dog I could pet it.
If I had a child I would show him my picture
or tell him a story
that didn't mean a thing but was long.
I don't want, now, no I don't want
to keep lying awake night after night.
When am I going to get to sleep, when?
What I want is for something to happen.
To die, for real,
or really be fed up,
or at least have the roof of my house
fall for a while.

Let the cage tell me about its affair with the canary.
Let the poor moon that the gypsies still sing to
and the tender moon of my cupboard
say something to me,
talk to me in metaphors the way they're supposed to.
This wine is bitter.
I have a beetle under my tongue.

How nice if my room
were left to itself all night,
turned into a fool, staring!

The Signal (1951)