

Salvador Elizondo

A Writer on the Verandah

Alejandro Toledo*



1971

I. Salvador Elizondo, or someone who speaks in first person for him, walks through University City's great esplanade near the area known as "the islands" and the Central Library toward the School of Philosophy and Letters, reflecting on an article about the future that Ramón Xirau solicited from him for issue 36 of the magazine *Diálogos* (Dialogues). Elizondo is looking for the tone, the words, the length and even the typeface for this future text, "the exact form that this still unrealizable piece of writing would have," when an English accent interrupts his monologue. "Excellent reasoning," says a little

man with bird-like features, dressed in nostalgic, shabby black, who seems to be a mind-reader. After a short pause, he asks Elizondo, "Don't you recognize me?"

The narrator then starts to sift through his memory. Not immediately, but in a matter of seconds, he manages to connect the character's words with others read in English a while back in junior high school or high school, or in Spanish in the *Antología de literatura fantástica* (Anthology of Fantastic Literature) by Borges, Bioy and Silvina Ocampo. Did he by chance recognize him? Didn't his words sound similar to that "Try to make them know that I did exist!"? Who was that by?

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“You are...,” exclaims Elizondo, or the one who uses the first person in the story “Futuro imperfecto” (Future Imperfect) and leaves the sentence unfinished.¹

“My name is Soames.”

“Of course! You’re Enoch Soames, the greatest literary researcher who ever lived!”

The excessive compliment might have pleased the other man, even though the “who ever lived” part sounded a bit like a rhetorical trick.

Max Beerbohm, or the first-person narrator of the story “Enoch Soames: A Memory of the Eighteen-nineties,” describes his main character as “a stooping, shambling person, rather tall, very pale, with longish and brownish hair. He had a thin, vague beard, or rather, he had a chin on which a large number of hairs weakly curled and clustered to cover its retreat.”² He wonders whether

to call him “dim” or “hungry, but—hungry for what?”

He encounters him for the first time at the Café Royal at the end of 1893; he there discovers that Soames is the author of *Negations*, assembled stories, poems and aphorisms. While later conversing with Soames, he finds out that the man

had rather unfavorable opinions of Shelley and Keats, of whose writing he thought only a few passages salvageable. He approved of Milton, finding a dark intuition in his work. The narrator’s last encounter with Soames takes place in the first week of June 1897 in the Restaurant du Vingtième Siècle.

He remembers all this while reviewing a book about 1890s literature by Holbrook Jackson, where he finds no reference to Soames in the index. He has faded from view; the narrator may be the only person in the world who hasn’t forgotten him. Both his books, *Negations* and the later *Fungoids*, were ignored by the critics. By way of consolation, the narrator tells Soames, “An artist who gave truly new and great things to the world had always to wait long for recognition.” He had to wait for the judgment of posterity, to which Soames reacted

ill-humoredly, “Posterity! What use is it to me? A dead man doesn’t know that people are visiting his grave, visiting his birthplace, putting up tablets to him, unveiling statues of him. A dead man can’t read the books that are written about him.”

That is when he comes up with the idea of projecting himself into the future, of going to the British Museum Reading Room 100 years hence and looking up “Soames, Enoch” in the catalogue, to see the “endless editions, commentaries, prolegomena, biographies.” And he pronounces his fateful words: “I’d sell myself body and soul to the devil for that!”

Another diner is listening closely to what the two men are saying. It is, of course, the devil. They introduce each other and come to an agreement. The devil transports Soames into the future, to June 3, 1997. He goes to the reading room and

finds no reference at all to himself. A few hours later, it occurs to him to look up “Beerbohm, Max,” the man he has been talking to, the only witness to his pact with the devil, and there he finds his name listed as a character in a short story by this intellectual he despises.

But that is his key to being

remembered. On his return to the Vingtième, “‘Try,’ was the prayer he threw at me [Beerbohm] as the devil pushed him roughly out through the door, ‘try to make them know that I did exist!’”

When Salvador Elizondo met him between the islands and the Central Library in University City’s grand esplanade around 1970 or 1971, Enoch Soames was already a consummate time-traveler. He even had issue 36 of the magazine *Diálogos* containing the article Elizondo was trying to write for Ramón Xirau. And he gave it to him so he could copy it out in full, which Elizondo did, taking care to be absolutely faithful to the “original.” But Elizondo, or whoever spoke in first person, thought that Soames’ was a senseless tragedy.

So, just as every June 16, we celebrate Bloomsday, in honor of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, we should

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dedicate June 3 to the Enoch Soames of this world. To be sure, on that day, but in 1997, a few innocent readers waited in the British Museum's Reading Room to see if Soames would appear to look in the card catalogue. One swore he had seen him.

2. For Salvador Elizondo, the year 1965 was crucial in deciding his fate as a writer. His novel *Farabeuf o La crónica de un instante* (Farabeuf, or the Chronicle of an Instant) came out that year, a 180-page volume in the Joaquín Mortiz *El volador* (The Flier) Series, whose chapter seven included the terrible image of a man being subjected to the Chinese *Leng-tche* torture, or the Torture of the Hundred Pieces. The book was disconcerting not only because of the photograph, taken from a work by Georges Bataille, but also because of the plot, both terrible and diffuse, in which horror mixes with eroticism, perhaps stylistically akin to the French *nouveau roman*.

"Forty years ago I started something with an uncertain future," remembered Elizondo in early 2005, the last time I spoke to him. "Not even my vocation had been decided. I wanted to be a movie director because I had failed as a painter. Then I published *Farabeuf* and they gave me the Xavier Villaurrutia Prize. That way someone led me to understand that that was my road, something I had never understood before."

Elizondo let me visit his home in Coyoacán, but our talk had to conform to the conditions of someone who was recovering from a 10-hour surgery, which he perceived as a first look at death, and limit itself to the few topics he thought about after living through what for him was an extreme experience.

"The operation changed my face and therefore also my behavior and personality. It is very difficult to face. I have friends who do what I had done to me on purpose, for reasons of vanity, to look more beautiful or younger. But I had to have it done to me out of necessity. I am a kind of a curiosity because the operation was very difficult and changes the skeleton a lot. From this Mephistophelian operation, without wanting to, just because of memory, I returned above all to my adolescence, when for many reasons you are not aware of what you are doing,

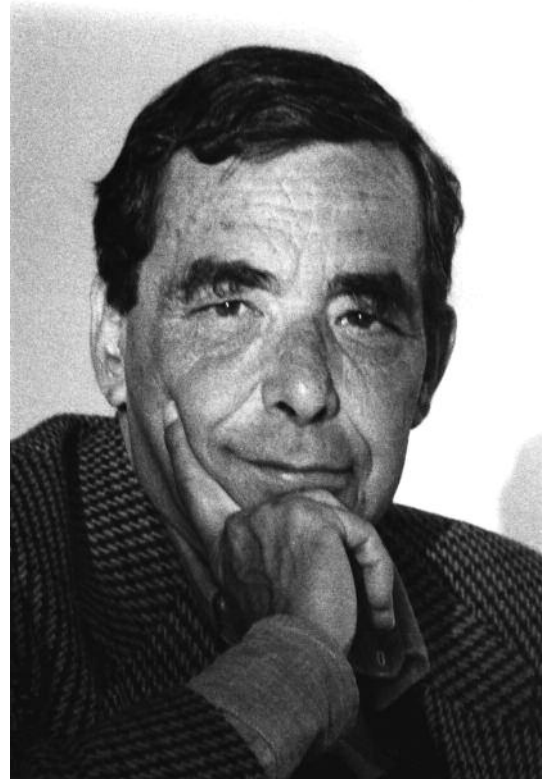
more than the memory that remains in your mind and that revives now that I'm about to turn 73."

The points of his personal geography were well-known: a portal or internal corridor where he used to sit around midday facing a large garden crowned by a robust jacaranda tree. He called this place the "veranda" (or "verandah", as he preferred), a border or threshold, a light blue lightning rod.³

"For 70 years, my life's point of view has been the place where I am now, and that ridge on the wall at the bottom of the garden where a tree I planted now grows, serving as an easy yardstick to measure the growth of things, the passage of time."

A few days before, the equilibrium of the verandah was broken by a loud crack that got Elizondo out of his chair. He thought that a small plane or a helicopter had crashed into the house. He ran to see what had happened and found that a badly placed three-meter iron beam had slipped out of its railing and fallen noisily without hurting anyone. The maids were looking at each other, frightened, but they said they hadn't heard anything.

It was a scare. Just that. To remember it, Elizondo wrote the word "beam" in his pocket day-book.



So, the verandah was the point where literary and personal stories met.

* * *

Politics, said Elizondo, was something that had never interested him much and when they did, only as a joke. He thought that we had gone from a perfect dictatorship to an imperfect democracy, worse than any dictatorship. “There’s one thing that really bothers me: Mexico’s immediate political fate is a mystery.”

He didn’t want to say much about his books: “Fortunately, they’re all a little different. And for me, there are too many of them. One critic called me infertile; he could have called me other things. I have other, simpler, descriptions. It’s the most I have been able to do in 40 years.”

And although he declared himself without any kind of literary concerns, saying “they have all been more than satiated,” the chat moved through the areas of writing and reading.

He remembered, for example, a phrase of French writer André Maurois that a friend had told him in his youth and that had stuck

so vividly in his mind that he wrote it on the wall of his study: “Into your hands will come the book you must read and the woman you must love.”

About women, he said, “This business of women always happens. Every one that comes along, you think, ‘This is the right one.’ And this happened to me several times until I realized that it wasn’t, or until one really was. . . . But for me, that’s a problem that has long been resolved.”

The matter of the book is perhaps more complicated: “I believed that it was also resolved because I was already very familiar with the work that for me seemed to be the absolute end of literature, unless a whole other system of writing could be devised, which was *Ulysses* by James Joyce, the perfect construction. And then I realized that the book that I must read had come to me, richly

supplemented by the attempt to take writing and the known language to the end: I’m speaking of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* together. That’s clear. I clearly realized that beyond *Finnegans Wake*, our ability to read, as readers, was at an end.”

Nevertheless, in December 2004, he went to a bookstore and found on the “recent arrivals” table the IV Centenario edition of *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, with the seal of approval of the Spanish Royal Academy of Language.

“That’s when I realized that my knowledge of this strange thing called literature was not complete, because I had already seen its final limit, but not its exact point of origin. Therefore, I didn’t know where this thing that I and a few others in the universe understand by literature had begun.”

Elizondo had had varied encounters with the work of Cervantes. As a boy, his grandmother recited Chapter 11 of the *Quijote* to him from first to last, including the speech about the Golden Age (“Blissful age and happy centuries to which the ancients gave the name of golden.”), with no literary comment at all.

“At home I have gathered editions, at least ten

different editions of the *Quijote*, which simply came to me. I paid no attention to them. To me, it was not the same to read *Don Quijote* as to read *Ulysses*. Supposedly I understood everything because I knew the ending, but I was ignorant of the beginning of the period of literature that concerned me. For a long time, I have known that literature has ended; that I intuited without realizing it, like intuitions always are, when in a completely indirect way I began studying Chinese, interested in the way it was put together, something I also found in Eisenstein’s cinema. With this rediscovery of *Don Quijote*, I realized that I had completed the scheme of things, the alpha and the omega. Now I believe I know where modern literature begins and where it ends.”

“That was the book you had to read.”

y no le preguntaba al mesero ni un
cudmor. También un libro comido
por los ratones.



From Elizondo’s diary.

“And the incredible thing is that it only cost 93 pesos, when in my situation it resolved absolutely all my problems: the greatest gift that can be given in a book in Spanish. I don’t believe there is any other more important than that one. I already knew that, but I had never managed to read *Don Quijote* all the way through. I had read the beginning, I had read the end, when the character —not Alonso Quijano, but Don Quijote de la Mancha— is born, and some stellar moments....Now I have annotated the entire book. I ask myself what had kept me from reading it until now?”

“You will have also established relations with Joyce’s *Ulysses*...”

“They are the same book. For me technically as a writer, *Ulysses* is more similar to *Quijote* than to Homer’s *Odyssey*, on which it is based. And *Quijote*, of course, is also an odyssey. That’s what’s so special about it and I have finally understood that. Even though the instrument I was using, writing, is all used up for me.”

“According to Borges...”

“For me, today, Borges no longer has any importance. Neither does Goethe, because I’m terminal. That is difficult to understand. I no longer have anything to live for but memory, to recover some things that are lost or momentarily misplaced. I have nothing to say about literature. When you say Borges, he’s erased.”

“His writing has been erased for you?”

“No. It’s there, but I no longer concern myself with it. Now the pen is useful to me only to write my appointments or what happens in my day book.”

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On the night that the Xavier Villaurrutia Prize for literature celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, when, amid the long list of prizewinners Salvador Elizondo and his novel *Farabeuf* were announced, they merited a little longer round of applause than the others, despite the fact that the author could not be present in the Fine Arts Palace. Elizondo heard comments about the evening from different sources. He did not seek out any explanations; he preferred to file it away in his folder of mysterious items. He associated the incident with a farewell.

“The other day a lifelong neighbor came to see us; she was moving away because she had sold her house. She came to say goodbye. She’s a woman whose proximity had become a tradition. I said to her, ‘Good luck, madam. I’m sorry you’re leaving.’ And she replied, ‘Thank you, Don Elizondo. I’m very happy about the success you have recently enjoyed.’”

“Your neighbor, of course, was referring to the applause in the Fine Arts Palace.”

“Those who told me about it thought that it was extraordinary that in a meeting of supposed professional writers there should be such a warm acknowledgment, given that I am practically a forgotten author. I like that non-explanation more; it must be for some reason. I’m sure that those who applauded me have spent at least two pesos on me. But it is a mystery why they should have applauded me so much that day, me compared with others. In any case, my editorial bank statement, so to speak, does not vary. My royalties have been non-existent. I have never earned a penny from literature; or I have, indirectly, by honors or awards... I’m surprised that the applause is no more than that and that my book sales don’t increase. But for me, the applause is significant because it comes from people who at least know who I am.”

“It was applause from the readers of *Farabeuf*.”

“When I was writing that novel it seemed to me that I didn’t have enough experience. It seems that when I wrote it, according to the Villaurrutia Prize or those who awarded it, I learned something. At that moment, I defined my road as a writer.” **MM**



NOTES

¹ Salvador Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1972), pp. 77-86.

² Max Beerbohm, “Enoch Soames: A Memory of the Eighteen-nineties” (New York: The Century Co., 1916), at <http://www.netlibrary.com/nlreqader> or www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=36058pageno=8

³ The term “verandah,” also used in the title of this article, refers to a literary genre that Elizondo called by that name, “the ideal sphere for two forms of English literature: conversation or nostalgia. The verandah is the place where characters talk or listen to someone narrate something. There are no women; there is no music; just a few men dressed in twilled linen who smoke, drink whiskey and listen to the story seated before the swaying lantern on a verandah in Sambir or Singapore. The narration is expanded and amplified by the voice itself.” Javier García-Galiano, “El principio de la invocación,” prologue to Salvador Elizondo, *Elsimore. Un cuaderno* (Mexico City: Asociación Nacional del Libro, 2006), pp. 17-18. [Editor’s Note.]