

Salvador Elizondo

The Drama of Writing

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Salvador Elizondo (right) talks with Octavio Paz (center) and Jorge Luis Borges (left).

1981

For story-line *aficionados* and realist *connoisseurs*, the writings of Salvador Elizondo (1932–2006) do not guarantee an easy read. They will not find in his work the familiar signposts they have grown accustomed to and have adamantly refused to renounce for goals more challenging yet equally, if not more, rewarding. In Elizondo's *Obras* (Complete Works) published in three volumes by El Colegio Nacional in 1994, there is scant reference to the Mexican political arena, absolutely no social comment and little or no local color. At the more formal level, plot has been scrapped and

rounded characters are few and far between, while genre, in the traditional sense of the word, is treated ironically and with a certain degree of playful disdain.

If all this is true, then what is the reader offered instead? The work of Elizondo chronicles very consistently and persistently not the drama of life but the drama of writing. The backdrop for his work is not the strengths and fragilities of human nature, or the pains and pleasures of love, or the reconstruction in words of the modern Latin American metropolis, but the vast universe of literature, art and cinema. *Literary projects* replace recognizable genres, and these projects continually mirror the act of writing, each project seeking to purify this act and cleanse it from the external world itself or from

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a literature that arrogantly boasts a faithful depiction of it.

After a premature and unsuccessful collection of poems (*Poemas*) published privately in 1960, and two years before the appearance of *Farabeuf* in 1965, in 1963, Elizondo produced a book on the Italian filmmaker Luchino Visconti. His approach to Visconti's art is revealing: he expresses no interest in the social and cultural content of the Italian's work, but rather in the film director's art, in a phenomenological description of his vision of Italian life. Elizondo analyses with an acute eye films such as *La terra trema*, *Senso*, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* and *Le notti bianche*. In each analysis emphasis is placed on the careful elaboration of technical concepts, on the use of point of view, the long shot, tone, specific lighting or photography to convey, for example, a dream-like atmosphere, as in the case of *Le notti bianche*. Elizondo's interest in other filmmakers, such as Ingmar Bergman, Sergei Eisenstein and Alain Resnais, not to mention certain directors involved in experimental cinema (the Americans Robert Frank, John Cassavetes and Richard Leacock, for example), further confirms the writer's interest in the technical aspects behind the art of film making.

The obsession with technique, particularly the application of Eisenstein's principle of composition known as *montage*, is evident in Elizondo's first novel, *Farabeuf*, published in 1965 and winner of the Villaurrutia Prize. The year 2005 was the fortieth anniversary of the book, which was and, still is, hailed as one of Mexico's most fascinating literary creations. It is a disturbing novel by all accounts: on the one hand, it is by no means easy to read; on the other, the atmosphere conveyed is one of pain and pleasure, sadism, eroticism, torture and madness. The reader—and the critic—is obliged to throw off old habits and refrain from asking the obvious: "Where are we? What's happening now? Who's who?" The reading trajectory is not linear

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but spiral; you read to feel, to experience, rather than to know; the drama is at the level of the writing itself. To piece together a storyline would serve little purpose. Like an involved poem, where the meaning behind the constellation of images is not immediately apparent, *Farabeuf* has to be read patiently, perhaps even aloud. It is the reader's task to follow the guidelines set by one of the many narrators, an impersonal voice that encourages us to retain every detail. The text begins and ends with the question: "Do you remember?" (¿Recuerdas ... ?). It also insists on the importance of these details in an attempt to chronicle what is, in fact, impossible to chronicle: the precise instant of death of a tortured Chinese boxer (China) hypothetically recorded by Dr. Farabeuf, the photographer, or of a prostitute dissected, this time by Doctor Farabeuf's surgical instruments of torture (Paris). A third moment occurs by the sea (Honfleur) and links in the reader's mind the concepts of pleasure (coitus or *la petite morte*) with pain and torture through a series of images and elements evocative of the other two macabre scenes that took place in China and Paris. The result

is a novel that, by working diligently with poetic procedures and *montage* techniques, rather than realist conventions, succeeds in building up an intensely disquieting atmosphere unprecedented in Mexican prose.

Farabeuf established Elizondo as one of Mexico's most talented young writers. This reputation was consolidated in subsequent years with two collections of short stories: *Narda o el verano* (Narda or the Summer) (1966) and *El retrato de Zoe y otras mentiras* (Zoe's Portrait and Other Lies) (1969), as well as a second novel, *El hipogeo secreto* (The Secret Hypogeum) (1968). However, while it is true that critics persist in categorizing this literary output within the familiar realm of *literary genres*, Elizondo moves expertly in and out of the world of *literature* and styles, using the whole range of



literary and non-literary conventions to fabricate, as did Borges, his own *fictions*. Elizondo reveals unquestionable talent as a weaver of tales and confabulations, yet he is quite prepared at any given moment to subvert tradition and to declare greater loyalty to personal goals.

In *El grafógrafo* (The Graphographer) (1972),¹ this loyalty, this adherence to the idea that writing is a prodigious and arduous interplay between the mind, the spirit and the *plume*, is taken a step further, this time banishing not only external reality but also the *universe of literature* from his writing den and replacing it with a mirror: “I write. I write that I’m writing. In my mind’s eye, I see myself writing that I’m writing...” The author has distilled language to a state of pure self-reflection.

Refreshed perhaps by this literary purge, unburdened by an endeavor that can go no further unless it is the blank page (*la page vide que sa blancheur défend*), Elizondo adds significantly to his own literary tradition in subsequent years. *Miscast* (1981) represents the writer’s initiation into the world of drama with a play on playwriting, on the theatrical mechanisms involved in producing laughter (*Miscast* is, according to the sub-heading, an “opaque

farce”). In essence, *Miscast*, rather than being a play to be staged is the staging of a writing to be read; the protagonist is “the written word.”

Camera Lucida (1982) brings together a series of writings published on a monthly basis in the magazine *Vuelta*. Returning to themes, images and memories that have fascinated Elizondo for many years, he manufactures instruments and machines (*el anapoyetrón*, *el cronostatoscopio* and *la camera lucida*) and parodies techniques and conventions, in order to depersonalize or capture on the page an essentially subjective obsession or experience. In *Ein Heldenleben*, for example, the author returns to a name from the past or, to be more precise, the name returns to him: “its sudden presence . . . leaped onto the blank page of the notebook.” However, in order to recall this person with a minimum degree of fidelity, the writer is obliged to have recourse to his literary patrimony. The person can only become *real* as a *literary figure* via the technique of constant digression as employed by Conrad.

In *Elsinore* (1988) Elizondo, as he had done in *Ein Heldenleben*, returns to a specific period of his past life, a time of precociousness, self-discovery and adventure. The storyline, potentially very

straightforward and *realist*, becomes an intriguing exploration into the various and varying dimensions of a writer's mind, from the real event in time, to its invocation through the mysterious and magical world of dream, fantasy, imagination and writing. The beginning of this "chronicle" sets the tone for what is to come: "I'm dreaming I'm writing this story. The images appear one after the other and circle about me in a frenzied whirl. I can see myself writing in the notebook as if I were locked in a parenthesis within the dream, in the motionless center of a vortex of figures both familiar and unknown to me, which emerge from the mist, reveal themselves momentarily, move about, speak, gesticulate, then freeze like photographs, before disappearing into the abyss of the night, overcome by an avalanche of oblivion, lost in the unquiet stillness of the lake."

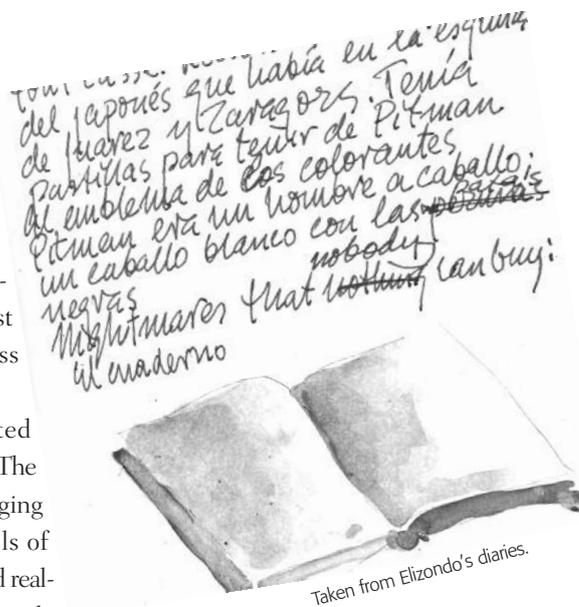
Elsinore is narrated with meticulous care. The interlinking and merging of the different levels of dream, imagination and reality provide great depth to the writing while offering an infinite number of possibilities at the level of reading. It also brings to a successful close a cycle of *literary projects* begun 23 years previously with *Farabeuf*.

Elizondo leaves behind an impressive volume of work, published and unpublished. As well as being a writer who, from an early age, opted for the secluded life of his study and steered clear of the polemics of the so-called "literary groups," he contributed willingly and, when necessary, publicly to the growth of cultural life in Mexico. He was a professor at the National University for some 35 years; he sat on the editorial board of two key cultural magazines, *Plural* and *Vuelta*; he founded and directed the magazine *S.Nob* (1962);

he co-founded the magazine *Nuevo Cine* (1961-1962); he translated major international writers from English, French, German and Italian; he not only held a scholarship from the Mexican Writers Center (1963-1964) but, in subsequent years, worked closely with Juan Rulfo in advising and supporting other young Mexican writers; he worked frequently for Radio UNAM and for many years ran his own program on which, on occasions, he interviewed prominent national literary figures such as José Gorostiza.

Elizondo will be remembered for the overall artistic persistency of his work. While each *literary project* exhibits its own inner coherence, so too does the entire creative trajectory as a whole. Whether it is a short story, a novel, a play, a premature autobiography, a translation or an essay, Elizondo develops and executes each piece of writing with consummate skill, with surgical precision. As the years pass, there is increasing evidence of a more playful approach; in *Miscast* and *Camera Lucida* a touch of

light humor and irony infiltrates what is, undeniably, an on-going and utterly consequential meditation on the art and craft of writing. The artist has reached full maturity. ■■■



NOTES

¹ Grafógrafo (graphographer) is an invented word from the Greek *grafé* (writing) which means "the writer of writing." This is explained in the story that begins the book and that Mario Vargas Llosa used as the epigraph for his novel *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*: "I write. I write that I write. Mentally, I see myself writing that I write and I can also see myself seeing that I write. I already remember myself writing and also seeing myself writing." [Editor's Note.]