

THE TYRANNY OF POETRY

Juan Luis Campos

*Pero en mi lecho, solo
dulcemente, sin recuerdos, sin
voz, siento que la poesía no ha
salido de mí.
Salvador Novo*

But in my bed, alone, sweetly,
without memories, without voice,
I feel that poetry has not left me.

Before Salvador Novo López was thirty years old he was already an important poet. He was a tireless writer, although he defined himself as the opposite of a man of letters, and dedicated himself to other tasks: essay, theater, translation, history, criticism, journalism and even chronicles.

Vocation requires abandon. All poets have experienced the tyranny of poetry. The poetic is created when feelings are combined with intuition. Feelings that have not only been experienced but also contemplated and shaped in the mind; intuition captures the depth of things, beyond intellectual pragmatism. It does not organize the world, it gives it an esthetic and personal meaning. So, this intuition must necessarily conflict with other uneven types of intuition. What lives on in the mind of a reader is not pure literature, but living words. But a personality with this type of impulses requires the influences of other personalities to from its esthetics.

The *Group without a group*, as Villarrutia called it, took upon itself

The Group without a group. formed at the end of the 1920's, aimed to modernize Mexican literature

the task of modernizing Mexican literature. The group of strong personalities and profound affinities which at the close of the twenties edited the magazine *Contemporáneos*, avoided the triviality of art with ideals, which eventually becomes ideologically obvious politics. They also risked leaning towards Western culture. Jorge Cuesta summarizes:

Those who distinguish themselves among this group of writers have in common with all the young Mexicans of their age: having been born in Mexico; growing up in a feeble intellectual milieu; being self-educated; learning about literature and art principally through European magazines and publications; having access to only a few, isolated, complicated and arguably brilliant examples; lacking the company of great talent from an early age, which is decisive in the fate of youth; and, above all, having near to them a body of literature whose most basic quality is an absolute lack of criticism. This last condition is the most important one.

The objective of Xavier Villarrutia, Carlos Pellicer, Gilberto Owen, Jorge Cuesta, Jaime Torres Bodet, Enrique González Rojo, Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano, José Gorostiza

and Salvador Novo was to bring Mexican literature up to date, but without making chauvinistic, and therefore ideological, concessions. Literary discipline. Again, Cuesta:

"It is wonderful the way Pellicer deceives our landscape, the way Ortiz de Montellano deceives our folklore, the way Salvador Novo deceives our customs, the way Xavier Villarrutia deceives our literature."

The precociousness of these young men was based on French symbolism, which in the final years of the last century had followed "decadentism" in criticizing and destroying a mediocre, even degenerate, literary and social environment. Its efforts created "free verse", whose principal supporters were Jules Laforgue and Gustave Khan, and which was considered a moral conquest more than a truly poetic one: it would replace the mechanical rhythm of classic meter with a rhythm which expressed the soul. The "symbolists", whose literary techniques were elaborate, would not replace the end with the means: they would adopt the symbol as the element capable of profoundly directing the new developments. The *Contemporaries* received their inspiration from the avant garde artists who since the beginning of this century declared the dissolution of academic and traditional arts forms and wanted to make life into art. Therefore, imagism, headed by Ezra Pound, the lyricism of T.S. Eliot, etcetera, proposed art for art's sake. They gave themselves up to the passion of art at a time when in the political arena the passion for arms still burned.

Poet, essayist and collaborator for the newspaper *El Nacional*

The Contemporaries wanted to make life into art; they gave themselves up to the passion of art

The Tradition of Change

Art is paradoxical. When a group of artists wants our art to grow out of its provincialism, but has not manifested its own esthetics, they prefer to criticize the contemporary poets acidly (*Antología de la poesía mexicana moderna*, edited by Jorge Cuesta) and establish their own definition of desirable poetry. Following other paths, individual artists and groups of artists tried to reflect the revolutionary spirit and provide culture to a huge population which did not even know how to read. Today we can still see the bolshevik pompousness that the muralists (Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, principally) painted on the square kilometers of walls of public buildings. Of course, there is also art. All artists are fighters and their strongest weapons are their tongue and spittle. The conflicts of the twenties and thirties demonstrate the tortuousness of cultural ventures.

In real art there is no "left" or "right". *Contemporaries* was not a politically active group, although its members worked in government offices for quite a while. A true Mexican tradition. Not even those artists who belonged to the Communist Party avoided these posts. Nevertheless, the creation of new esthetic values is an act of independence from the comfortable, existing tradition. *Contemporaries* were part of what Octavio Paz has called the tradition of change. The *Contemporaries* defined their tastes: they followed the daring attitude of Ramón López Velarde, whom they knew personally, and whose subtle eroticism, deployed with rapid adjectives, contradicted by a religious vein that called for attendance at twelve o'clock mass, leaves one's soul in anguish; they also appreciated the disciplined verse of Salvador Díaz Mirón—who was in fact a collaborator of the dictatorial government of Victoriano Huerta, assassin of constitutional President Francisco I. Madero—especially in his last phase, without a doubt one of the highest points in the rich tradition of Mexi-

can poetry. Díaz Mirón influenced this tradition both in form and content, but perhaps most in the proposal:

His esthetics, with a discipline that was extraordinarily strict as well as personal, were beyond the reach of that type of imitator who tries to satisfy himself, and looks for quick success, or at least, a less difficult path towards fame.

That is how these young men described his work in 1928 in the above mentioned anthology. The *group without a group* wrote about the never-changing qualities of the spirit of man in the timeless medium of poetry, with stark images, metaphysical contents, meticulous verses, and a lyricism equal to that of the English and French poets of the era. They wanted liberty in verse.

Heart-rending Lyricism

The difficulties of understanding the program of the individualists grouped in *Contemporaries* forced its critics to simplify their criticisms attacking the sexual preferences of some of these writers. Faced with extreme forms of machismo, the modern *art purists* flaunted their homosexuality. Novo was an expert at this. His Europeanized taste in clothing, his plucked eyebrows and long fingers adorned with extravagant rings, all corroborated the impertinence of his tongue and his verses. At the same time, this shamelessness only demonstrated the



Salvador Novo in 1949. Photo by Héctor García/Foto Press

difficulty of making love endure. This conflict formed the two paths of his poetry: lyricism and satire.

The versatility of Novo's poetry is demonstrated in the skillful use of classic meters, especially the sonnet. He used this form with ease in his satires, because rhyming and using a rhythmic structure make the venom flow in the ear's memory. But Novo also used free verse, which should eliminate rhymes (even internal ones) and avoid metric repetitions. Free is the least free of verses, said T.S. Elliot.

In 1920, when he was still almost a child, at sixteen of age, Novo published a pair of poems influenced by Guillaume Apollinaire in the newspaper of the National Preparatory School. These adolescent poems resist time. At twenty he published his *20 poems*, in which he introduced the sound of day-to-day life, his scorn for mass movements, uncommon images and a preference for circumstantial things over eternal qualities. At the same time, he used irony. Novo resorted to urban imagery (as used by the artists who were part of Stridentism, led by Manuel Maples Arce-whose *Interior Scaffolding* Novo renamed *Inferior Scaffolding*-who tried to be the Mexican avant garde of the twenties) but with the dexterity that characterized his poetry. These poems, according to Novo himself:

create a new form which has liberated itself from the shapes in which my voice acquired, nevertheless, a lasting outline. These poems could be hung like pictures, above all they are visual.

The Group without a group wrote about the never-changing qualities of the spirit of man in the timeless medium of poetry, with stark images, metaphysical contents and meticulous verse

In 1933 he published two of his most important works of poetry: *Mirror*, in which he remembers his childhood, and *New Love*, a pinnacle of Mexican lyricism of this century. Novo says, to the critic Emmanuel Carballo:

In *New Love*, passion is unrestrained and feelings have reached a new



Salvador Novo with the young writer Carlos Monsiváis in 1967. Photo by Héctor García/Foto Press

maturity. It contains an agreement (but not harmony) between life and its artistic expression. These poems are the fresh, immediate, direct experience of what they are expressing: they are not reconstructions of a state of mind or experiences. For me, this is important. When it was not worth exploring this subject in the way I do here (I got old and ugly), I stopped writing love poems.

The precociousness of this poet was based on his insolence. But he gives us a heart-rending lyricism with corresponding forms that are equally heart-rending:

Tú, yo mismo, seco como un viento derrotado
que no pudo sino muy brevemente sostener en sus brazos una hoja que arrancó de los árboles,
You, myself, dry like a defeated wind which could only very briefly hold in its arms a leaf that it tore from the trees

And Novo ends with a concise and tender sadness from which there is no relief:

Lloro porque eres tú para mi duelo
Y ya te pertenezco en el pasado.
I cry because for me you are mourning and I belong to you already in the past

Now that they are not lovers any more, they belong to a place beyond physical bodies, in a world that is definitive and timeless: memory.

Novo was skillful in the use of classic meters, especially the sonnet, but he also used free verse

Satirical Verses

Lyricism presumes the individualization of the poet. It is no longer the bard giving voice to the multitude that fights and dreams for and of their gods. It is no longer the epic. With lyricism, the poet admits his own existence as a character, he is one who feels and lives between the margins of the page. Romanticism aggravated this subjectivity. And when the avant garde tried to achieve the complete subversion of art, they did so under the influence of romanticism. The post-avant-garde, disenchanted with this century, picked up the pieces and took shelter in permanent themes. In the end, the lyric poet wants his emotional state to be exemplary, of value: he offers himself in the hope that he will be eternalized in others.

In the nineteen-thirties Novo published a variety of books of poetry that were frankly provocative. In a time of nationalistic fervor, *Seamen Rhymes and Never ever* [partly written in English] were published as well as his *Proletarian Poems*, in which he mocks revolutionary regimes. In this way Novo confronts his enemies in the government and political parties.

Nevertheless, our poet used satire frequently and with a particular cruelty. Novo is our Quevedo.

Satire expresses the sharp opinion of a subtle subjectiveness. In satire we find not only wit laced with poison but also criticism based on art. Novo aimed satirical poems at his enemies, at his friends and even turned his pen on himself. His shamelessness did not lose opportunities to make puns or double meanings, or refrain from invading his victims' privacy.

Novo dedicated the following sonnet to Diego Rivera, who painted the *Contemporaries* in the Secretariat of Public Education and whose presence in national art circles was intimidating during this era:

Cuando no quede muro sin tu huella,
recinto ni salón sin tu pintura,
exposición que escape a tu censura,
libro sin tu martillo ni tu estrella,
dejarás las ciudades por aquella suave, serena, mágica dulzura,
que el rastrojo te ofrece en su verdura
y en sus hojas la alfalfa que descuella.
Retirarás al campo tu cordura,
y allí te mostrará naturaleza un oficio mejor que la pintura.

Dispón el viaje ya. La lluvia empieza.
Tórnese tu agrarismo agricultura,
que ya puedes arar con la cabeza.

*When there is no longer a wall without your mark;
nor a room or hall you have not painted,
an exhibition that escapes your censorship, nor book without your hammer or your star,
you will leave the cities for that soft, serene, magic sweetness,
that the pasture offers you in its greenness
and its shining alfalfa leaves.*

*You will take your wisdom to the country
and there nature will show you
a better occupation than painting.
Make the trip now.
It is starting to rain.
Turn your agrarianism into agriculture,
for now you know how to plow with your head.*

Salvador Novo criticized the fact that this great artist governed the art world from a leftist position that owed so much to the bourgeois state. He also criticized the commitment to an agrarian reform that came down to more paperwork than actual land reform. He reminded Rivera that his previous wife, Guadalupe Marín, a matron of the arts, changed husbands: Jorge Cuesta, member of the *group without a group*, was her new partner. There are numerous poems like this one, in a variety of meters. Octavio Paz sums up *this* Novo very well, unimaginable for those of us who saw him on television in the early seventies.

He had a lot of talent and a lot of venom, few ideas and no morals. Full of deadly adjectives but not so many scruples, he attacked the weak and flattered the powerful; he did not serve a belief or an idea but instead his passions and his interests; he did not write with blood but with shit.

His lyric poetry described the itineraries of love. His social portraits were written with the same acid used in engravings by Goya. There is no doubt that his modernity, and above all his sarcastic humor, came from reading North American authors like Edgar Lee Masters in the first *Spoon River Anthology* and Carl Sandburg; also Europeans like Oscar Wilde and Jean Cocteau. His self-mocking in his lyric poetry and his satire proves to us that he was a poet who knew about love and verses. His cynicism is delightful; disillusioned with the world but *bon vivant*. The rest of his life has the same qualities: as an old man he covered his baldness with a Beatle's wig; as a public employee he wrote sonnets with biting criticism and at the same time sang the praises of the president. He was a great poet who could not resist the gratification of seeing, while he was still alive, his name hung on the corner of his own house. A poet who reduced his poetic constants to the circumstances, humor and desolation.

Novo said he stopped writing love poems when he got old and ugly

Novo enjoyed cooking, and did more than write about it; he had his own restaurant in Coyoacán, in the southern part of Mexico City. On the same location he had his theater: The Chapel. He wrote theater and patronized it through the National Fine Arts Institute. He was prolific in his chronicles and journalism where he did not spare anyone his praise or criticism. Just one example would be his *Lombardotoledanology*, aimed at the Marxist philosopher and organizer of union corporations such as the Mexican Workers' Confederation during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas. A great variety of volumes compile his opinions about social life during different presidencies. He wrote memoirs which are practically unknown that refer to his adolescence and dare to go into detail about his sexual tastes. He wrote travel logs, most importantly *Return Ticket*, of which José Gorostiza says:

Novo overcomes sin and invents the art of being reborn on each stop of his itinerary. He does not travel, he transmigrates. He does not transplant himself, he sows himself... His argument is travel, moving from place to place.

Our poet wrote charming, skillful prose, with a diversity taken from his poetry, without complications, direct and full of irony. During the term of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, whose name the descendents of those sacrificed on October 2 in 1968 will never forget, Novo became the official historian. He

was named chronicler of Mexico City, a city that was already beginning to overflow. He wrote the history of times gone by: the city of a century ago, his neighborhood of Coyoacán, he remembered boulevards and avenues that no longer exist. He did not criticize the president for the massacre of the students. In his youth he was a dandy who scandalized "upright citizens"; in his old age he acquiesced to official policies that were removed from art. But in his soul he knew that all poetry had not gone out of him although:

poetry written for others—a spontaneous flower—has gone, and in its place, the useless, bitter fruit of daily prose... I take refuge in it, now that I dare not tackle the other.

His poetry had a few surprises even after his youthful passion had faded. Bureaucracy swallows us up mercilessly, and Novo was no exception. But the richness of his poetry rises above the sea of paperwork of the official Novo. In any case, he also suffered the tyranny of poetry, that is, the tyranny of that which is most human. □

He was Chronicler of Mexico City during the government of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz at the end of the 1960's



Novo established a restaurant and published a book on "The Gastronomic History of Mexico City". Photo by Héctor García/Foto Press

From *Seamen Rhymes/1933*

II

“Take a man like myself—
See these hands?— They’re dirty.
This finger is all torn from my work.
You know —if I were on land
—see those tubes and screws and engines?
My job would be to keep them fit.
That is what I do on the ship.
If some passenger loses his trunk keys
I make one to fit
And the bathrooms, and the waterpipes, and all.

I work for a living.
But I’m no socialist or bolshevist or anything
I just go along the best I can
'cause I think the most money goes to the most brains
And since I only get 55 a month
It must be that I’m only worth 55.
't ain’t much, is it?
But still I think if I’m not happy with that money
Somebody must believe it is a lot of dough
And wish he had it.

My name is Neville,
Neville Charles Rogers, but they call me Buster
'n account of my father.
You know, during the war
They say I was nine months of age
And was lying on a bed
When an old friend of my father came into the room
And he said to me
“Hello, Buster junior”
'cause my old man’s nickname was also Buster
And so they have been calling me ever since.

You are one of them passengers
You’re traveling on this boat for some reason,
For business
Or just because you want a vacation
And you enjoy yourselves thoroughly.

We see you at night
Dancing on deck
Or having swell drinks at the bar
Or may be you stare at us
Because you wonder
About real life
And men who work for a living
As we do.

I also like a good drink
I can have it in my room when work is finished
And I can play cards
Or read stories
But I have to do all that in the same little room
And I keep on doing the same things everyday
On this same ship
And getting 55 every month.

I have a brother in New York
He’s married and he has a child
But he has no job now.

Well —he has a home
They must be happy
I’m glad to share my 55 with them
And whenever we get to port
I take the child some toy for a present
Because he must be happy.

Sometimes at night
I feel kind o’ lonesome
But then I know some very old seamen rhymes
And I sing them.

I’ve been a good fellow
And I earned all I spent
I’ve paid what I’ve borrowed
And I lost all I lent.

I once loved a woman
But it came to an end.
So I’ll get me a damn dog
—He’ll be my friend.

Salvador Novo