

Juan Luis Campos

Provinces of Eros

The Poetry of Ramón López Velarde

On, Psyche, oh my soul: a new sound rings, the sound of the jungle, the sound of orgy and of the sea, the sound of the heart! RLV

At the very Christian age of thirty-three, José Ramón Modesto López Velarde, a martyr of asphyxia and of ill-fated dualities, died after receiving the holy oils, thus forsaking a poetry whose adornments lay in ruins from the whirlwinds of his passions, the consummation of the impossible love of woman in the lechery of poetry.

López Velarde wandered the provinces in search of woman. He abandoned the set ecumenical boundaries of Catholicism, wandering among his earthly recollections in revolutionary subversion. He migrated through the relentless streets of Mexico City, through the fickle routes of politics, and breathlessly surveyed the sinuous curves of womanhood. He ventured through the twists of language, and as a pilgrim within himself.

Not Such a Soft Fatherland

Political misfortune pursued our poet beyond death. A year before, he had been left unemployed, along with others who needed the State Treasury in order to survive, following the execution of President Carranza by the crafty *Caudillo*. López Velarde was not yet buried when he was converted into a

A convinced Catholic to the end, López Velarde had to abandon formal religious expression since his impulses steered him towards worldliness

national poet on the merits of his last poem, *La suave Patria* (*The Soft Fatherland*). In the prologue to *Son del corazón* (*Sound of the Heart*), which brings together the posthumous poems of Ramón, Djed Bórquez (pseudonym of Juan de Dios Bojórquez, founder of the Intellectual Workers' Block), notes the following:

1921. He died. This morning, upon reading the news, I go to Chapultepec. I accompany General Obregón (President of the Republic) on his morning walk through the forest.

- A great poet has died - I say. And I tell him of Ramón and I quote his verses, which impressed the poet in Obregón.

At midday, at the University, Vasconcelos arrives elated and says:

- What a great President we have! I just spoke with him about López Velarde and he recited his verses.

- Give him a sumptuary burial, on the government's tab - ordered the invincible one-handed leader.

Faced with the elation of the Univer-

sity rector, I could only remember the poetry of López Velarde that I had just recited before the formidable memory of General Obregón.

There is nothing futher from the lyrics of the poet than nationalistic exaltation and propaganda. His political concerns did not lead him to create epics, let alone when the heroes whine with their weapons in hand. If the poetry of López Velarde is heart breaking, then this peculiar hymn has to continue its poetic inspiration. The following is the opinion of Xavier Villaurrutia, who knew him as Spanish literature professor in the National High School:

Mexican poetry is lyrical; it barely touches the epic and is not happy in it; its tone is lyrical, intimate. When a Mexican poet, Ramón López Velarde, proposed to write, from a strange inspiration, a characteristic poem, what did he say at the beginning of *Soft Fatherland*? -- "I always sang the exquisite notes of the intimate." Why did he say that? To make poetry the measure of the medium and to say a poem he wanted to be epic but which continued to be intimate.

Undoubtedly, there is excellence in this civic poem. Perhaps more than civic it should be said that it is a poem of identity. Thus, due to the steep paths, to the worry of each moment and of every place, one must return to what Octavio Paz recognized:

Journalist.

The fine polishing which López Velarde gave his verses came from deep in his soul, and they have made him a poet of the shadow, which is not to say that his poetry is obscure

The originality in *Soft Fatherland* consists of it being a hymn with irony, tenderness, modesty, and a certain bashfulness...Its sound is low and it avoids eloquence, and grand speech and words. His Mexico is not a heroic fatherland but a quotidian one.

The López Velarde of *Soft Fatherland* is the culmination of a sentiment lodged in highly incisive language which touches on the novelty of the fatherland for the Mexican being. Thus, it is the conclusion of an intimacy in which the permanent values are found in a process of transfiguration, where certainties are not respected. Each one of those values is a province which vanishes when it is visited.

The Style of the Will

Ramón López Velarde was born in Jerez, Zacatecas, in 1888. At age 12 he entered the Conciliary Seminary of Saint Mary of Guadalupe. Studying to be a priest, he was inculcated with a fine education, as was the norm during the end of the Porfiriato period. In those cells, the religious fathers were dedicated to teaching the Greek and Latin classics, especially since many of them were fine poets in their own right. Of course, Ramón already wrote verses. A convinced Catholic to the end, he had to abandon the religious provinces since his impulses steered him toward worldliness.

He then decided to study law in Aguascalientes. He was an outstanding pupil who drifted into Maderist politics and into the marauding of the women who agitated his blood.

During his lifetime, López Velarde published two books of poetry: *La sangre devota* (*Devoted Blood*), 1916, under the pseudonym of Fuensanta, a name given him by Josefa de los Ríos, and *Zozobra* (*Shipwreck*) 1919, under the pseudonym of Margarita Quijano.



Ramón López Velarde. Reproduction by Rosa María Torres from the book *Un corazón adicto* (*An addict heart*), Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1989.

Certainly a brief work, but it is written with the will of style. At the same time, he dedicated himself to political and cultural journalism, publishing his articles and chronicles in *El minuterio* (*The Minutehand*) and *Don de febrero y otras crónicas* (*February Talent and Other Chronicles*). His prose preserved the cadence of his lyricism.

That will of style, evident since his first poems, is nothing more than the will to say what is essentially human. In 1908, he wrote *Elogio de Fuensanta* (*Fuensanta's Eulogy*) about which

Guillermo Sheridan gives the following opinion:

It is a poem that contains the seed of an arduous system of contradictions, of compensated guilts, of cravings that are not melancholy, and pornographic passions that mark later poetry...

The decided polishing which López Velarde gave his verses came from deep in his soul, making him a poet of the shadow, which is not to say that he is obscure. For him, all poetry possesses

the ambiguities of the irreducible to the preciseness of reason. All words are metaphors, an approximation. Yet is it more difficult when what is not defined is meant to be said. To establish that language was the triumph of the man from Jerez; he founded one of the principles of modern Mexican poetry. Jorge Cuesta, in his *Antología de la poesía mexicana moderna (Anthology of Modern Mexican Poetry)* 1928, considered the following:

López Velarde could maintain pure sentiments and original language. He did not get this easily nor did he always attain it; he needs, very fre-

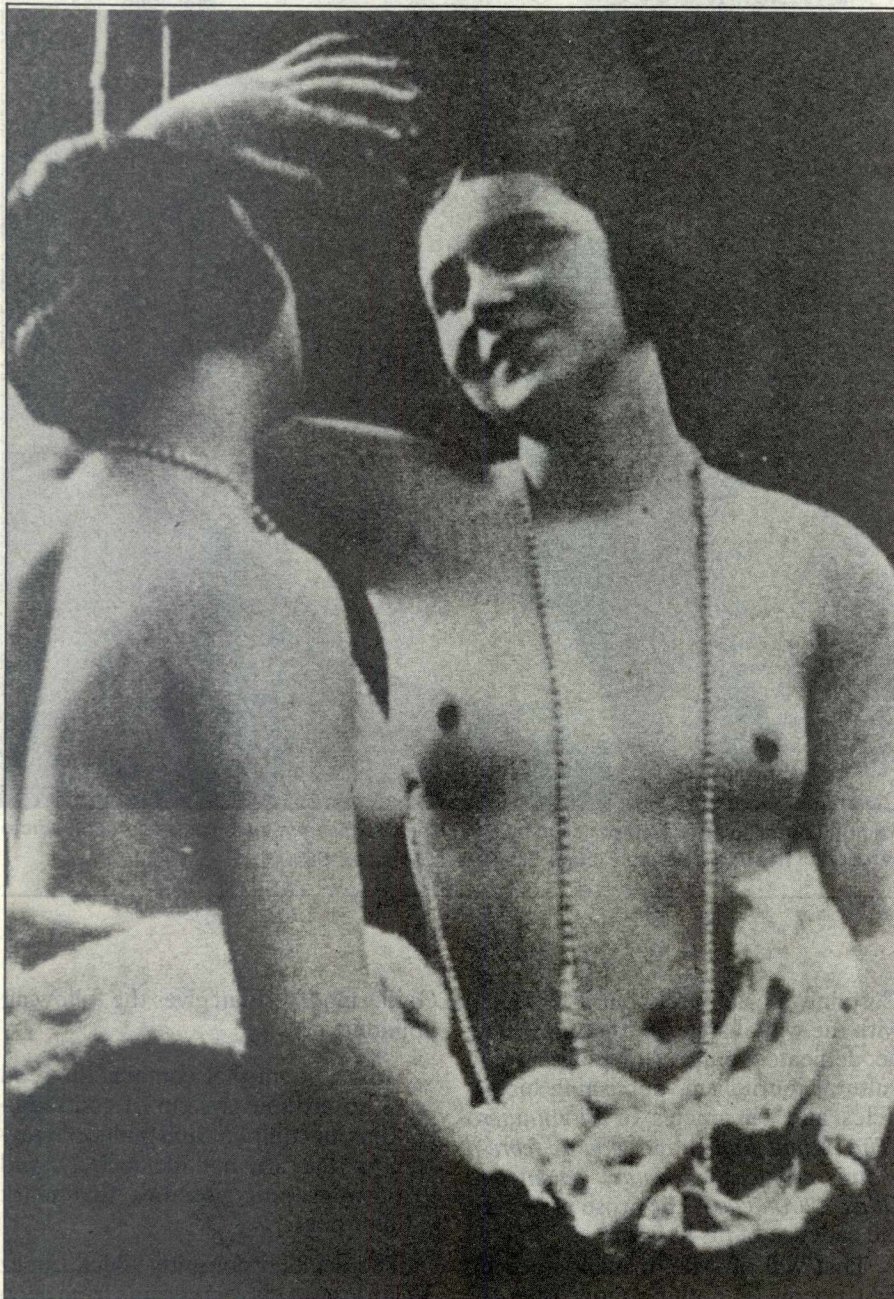
quently, to get violent; his expression contorts, he forces his images, and he prefers little-used words, with the purpose of pulling himself out of the narrow circle of commonplaceness, through the artifice of its systematic usage.

It must be emphasized that these complexities are not experimental tasks, but rather refer to difficulties in direct expression of the subjective medular matter in times of maladjustment. Its complication reminds us inevitably of Góngora, whose genius stretched the language with cult-isms, neologisms, with accentuations, and

who exercised his influences in the poets of the 1927 Spanish generation. Amado Alonso, in reference to the inextricable poetry of *Residencia en la tierra (Residence on Earth)* by Pablo Neruda, writes the following:

The poetic intuitive sense is not sentimentally manifested as something which can be named or described, but is intermediate between images and metaphors, or rather, fragments of reality constructed *ad hoc* by the poet and which are symbols, the indirect expression of sentimental intuition. In these images and metaphors there are clearly imagined intuitions and vague glimpses of suggestive power...The exceptional difficulty of comprehension found in this poetry comes from the disequilibrium between intuition and sentiment...Without a doubt this tempting equilibrium is not denied to him as it is not to any authentic poet; but the rending moments, conscious or not, are so frequent that we should take them to be characteristic.

The Velardian cult of poetic language was based on the fact that this was the only province where his eros decided. His verse was written with blood, fruit of the dualities of passion.



Eroticism was an integral part of López Velarde's poetry. Reproduction by Rosa María Torres

As Xavier Villaurrutia well said, the drama of this poet was the clarity of the knowledge that his life was two lives

Ill-fated Dualities

The conflict of Ramón López Velarde unfolds within the conflict of Mexico. In the civil waves drift

*las atmósferas claroscúras
en que el cielo y la tierra se dan cita.
(the shadowy and lighted atmospheres
in which the Sky and the Earth meet.)*

As Xavier Villaurrutia well said, the drama of the poet was the clarity of the knowledge that his life was two lives. The tense co-existence of these forces



The poet's family. Reproduction by Rosa María Torres

made him the great poet whose unique voice alternately expressed itself to its inhabitants. As in a riddle, the many days, the many opposites, were unravelled with their signs, durations, fantasies and disappearances. To understand duality itself, in religion, was to divide oneself in religions that made Christianity Iberian, and thus Mexican. It is not the case to study the founding of the Asiatic-Euro-American religions, but rather to recognize the dichotomy into which *Devoted Blood* inquires:

*¿Será este afán perenne franciscano o polígamo?
(Would this perennial task be Franciscan or polygamous)*

In the Islamic faith, unquestioning obedience can be found such as that which multiple women give their spouse. In these ways, then, the abandonment in the law of God is possible within the most human impulses because they are the most intimate, and the prescriptions of Eros are not denied:

*Yo, varón integral,
nutrido en el panal
de Mahoma y en el que cuida Roma
en la Mesa Central
(I, a whole man,
nourished in the honeycomb
of Mohammed
and in that which Rome cares for
on the Central Plateau.)*

This is written in *Zozobra* (*Shipwreck*), where monotheism is added to polygamy. And covered in precious tact is woman, always innumerable, that the poet must inscribe in the posthumous *Son del corazón* (*Sound of the Heart*) so that the Christian Ligia and the infidel Zoraida, as classified by Villaurrutia, grabbed him by the back of the neck:

*Me asfixia en una dualidad funesta,
Ligia, la mártir de pestaña enhiesta,
Y de Zoraida la grupa bisiesta.
(They suffocate me in ill-fated duality,
Ligia, the martyr of the erect eyelash,
And Zoraida, the leaping rump.)*

In whatever case, López Velarde

suffered from an eternal errancy in the province of Eros, the only one to which was loyal in his pendulous and brief life.

The Poets of the Poet

Every poet has his own poets. Ramón López Velarde drank in the currents of an art which settled accounts with a world that suffered from the vertigo of its first modernity, or better said, of original sufferings of the permanent updating of the modern world. The esthetics of this interminable flight in which history demands re-orientation for the supposed horizontal constant of art, aspires to become fixed as a sum of immutable values. The French symbolists and the Hispano-american modernists have determined to dispose of the distinct form of these mutations.

Baudelaire is considered the first modern poet, because he assumed the critique of today's great subject, the city. Jules Laforgue, a direct descendant of Charles Baudelaire, enjoyed great influence in our language.

So as not to go too far, there is a

On The Tear

During the 1950's the UNESCO published the *Anthologie de la poésie mexicaine* selected and presented with an introduction by Octavio Paz, which was translated into French by Guy Lévis-Mano and presented by another great poet, Paul Claudel. The English version was translated by the writer Samuel Beckett and the prologue was written by the Helenist C.M. Bowra. The Anthology contains poets such as Sor Juana, Díaz Mirón, González Martínez, José Juan Tablada, Alfonso Reyes and López Velarde.

Beckett, who supposedly understood Spanish, more or less due to his domination of the French language, shared the work with a friend. He developed his versions on the basis of literal translations. The apparent treason of translating a piece from one culture to another without having appropriated well the original language, has been lessened by the word-artists, insofar as only poets can translate poetry. All translation will always be an approximation, without which it would not be possible to even know another side of ourselves; culture is a mirror in which we can recognize ourselves.

The writer José Emilio Pacheco had the following comment on this: for a speaker of Spanish the text is as unsatisfactory as are our translations for English or French speakers. The syllables are different, they sound different, and all the musicality is lost; and to top it off, the rhyme, which is not a decoration but is part and parcel of the material itself, disappears from the poem *The Tear*.

The translator Beckett is, in effect, a traitor, but in his unfaithfulness, in his guilt, introduces English readers to the man from Jerez who describes the fear of an untranslatable eroticism.

La lágrima

Ramón López Velarde

*Encima
de la azucena esquinada
que orna la cadavérica almohada;
encima
del soltero dolor empedernido
de yacer como imberbe congregante
mientras los gastos erizan el ruido
y forjan una patria espeluznante;
encima
del apetito nunca satisfecho
de la cal
que demacró las conciencias livianas
y del desencanto profesional
con que saltan del lecho
las cortesanas...*

(Fragmento)

The Tear

Ramón López Velarde

*Over
the angular lily
that adorns the cadaverous pillow;
over
the hardened bachelor pain
of lying like a beardless
congregationist
while the cats erect their clamour
and forge a bristling race;
over
the hunger never sated
of the lime that wears
light minds away
and the professional disenchantment
with which courtesans
sprint out of bed...*

(Excerpt)

Translation: Samuel Beckett.

Mi prima Agueda

A Jesús Villalpando

*Mi madrina invitaba a mi prima Agueda
y mi prima llegaba
con un contradictorio
prestigio de almidón y de temible
luto ceremonioso.*

*Agueda aparecía, resonante
de almidón, y sus ojos
verdes y sus mejillas rubicundas
me protegían contra el pavoroso
luto...*

*Yo era rapaz
y conocía la o por lo redondo,
y Agueda que tejía
mansa y perseverante en el sonoro
corredor, me causaba
calosfríos ignotos...
(Creo que hasta le debo la costumbre
heroicamente insana de hablar solo.)*

*A la hora de comer, en la penumbra
quieta del refectorio,
me iba embelesando un quebradizo
sonar intermitente de vajilla
y el timbre caricioso
de la voz de mi prima.*

*Agueda era
(luto, pupilas verdes y mejillas
rubicundas) un cesto policromo
de manzanas y uvas
en el ébano de un armario añoso.*

Ramón López Velarde

My cousin Agueda

To Jesús Villalpando

*My godmother invited my cousin
Agueda to spend the day
with us, and my cousin
came with a conflicting
prestige of starch and fearful
ceremonious weeds.*

*Agueda appeared, sonorous
with starch, and her green eyes
and ruddy cheeks protected
me against the fearsome
weeds.*

*I was a small boy,
knew O was the round one,
and Agueda knitting,
mild and persevering,
in the echoing gallery,
gave me unknown shivers.
(I think I even owe her the heroically
morbid habit of soliloquy).*

*At dinner-time in the quiet
shadowy dining-room
I was spellbound by the brittle
intermittent noise of dishes
and the caressing timbre
of my cousin's voice.*

*Agueda was
(weeds, green pupils, ruddy cheeks)
a polychromatic basket of
apples and grapes
in the ebony of an ancient cupboard.*

Ramón López Velarde
Translation: Samuel Beckett.

profound affinity between Laforgue and Leopoldo Lugones of the *Sentimental Lunary*. Allen W. Phillips, scholar of Spanish literature, notes:

Laforgue seems to have given to Lugones certain thematic and stylistic stimuli...deliberate prose and, frequently related to those, visions of modern urban life.

The Argentine Lugones is essential for López Velarde. Laforgue is also an undoubting presence, whether he was assimilated in French, in translations, or by the resonances of the authors of the daily paper. Because to our bard, it has been said that the provincial is the only theme of his lyrics, but as Octavio Paz notes:

It would be juster to say that the province discovered in López Velarde's poetry is the capital: the horror, the sensuality and the sin.

The work of the poet cannot be reduced to picturesque recitations, despite the fact that the inevitable bureaucrats of culture fill their calendars with homages.

The Zacatecan poet resident in a city in urban expansion and with the eyes of a seer takes his own poets (Herrera and Reisig, Luis Carlos López, Amado Nervo, Francisco González León, and others) as weapons to extend his wanderings in letters for orphanhood.

Unfortunately, he who has confined López Velarde to the mere province has stigmatized him as the poet of rus-

ticity. Alfonso Reyes, who did not have an impartial view of the man from Jerez, said in 1941, 20 years after his death:

Village art and complicated art, and in whom today the critical youth seeks many secrets, conquered fame with one poem: *The Soft Fatherland*.

The mistake of Alfonso Reyes, considered the founder of the literary "chapels", was unheard by poets older than him, such as is the case of José Tablada, friend and admirer of Ramón, still a principal poet. The best tribute to López Velarde had to come from the Contemporaries, the artifices of our literary modernity, because they continued the difficult inspiration of the poet that incurred into the provinces of Eros. ■

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