

Efraín Bartolomé

Poet of Emotion And Intelligence

Juan Domingo Argüelles*

A little more than a decade ago, Efraín Bartolomé (Ocosingo, Chiapas, 1950) wrote that a poem has achieved its greatest consummation when it is “the happy union of music, image and meaning, capable of creating in its reader an emotional change similar to the emotion that engendered it.”

In a milieu and at a time in which many makers of verse were losing sight of the essence of poetry, Efraín Bartolomé emerged with a lyrical force and vitality that immediately got readers’ attention. Consciously removed from juggling games and verbal pyrotechnics, and against the current of authors “of the rhythmic pirouette and the vertex of the word,” as Marco Antonio Campos has aptly called them, Efraín Bartolomé shook the milieu of Mexican poetry with a particularly intense first book, charged with emotion and intelligence that from the very beginning, from its title, announces a surprising perception and poetic instinct: *Ojo de jaguar* (Jaguar Eye).

Jaguar Eye was published in 1982 by the National Autonomous University of Mexico, edited by Marco Antonio Campos, who was

able to discern that this poet—who, in contrast with other members of his generation had not published books as a youth— had a different voice, a sure voice, that he brought to this first book at the same time that he underlined it with an emphatic, energetic personal reading, from the first page, from the first poem:

Why talk/ of the *guayacán* protector tree of weariness/ or the cedar drum upon which the axman plays/ Why tell of the foam/ at the mouth of the Lacanjá river/ Mirror of leaves / Cradle of alligators/ Fount of silver-scaled *macabiles* with wondering eyes/ If this tongue were to change into an orchid/ This voice into the ptarmigan’s call/ This breath into a puma’s snuffling/ My hand a black tarantula writing should be/ A thousand monkeys in a troop my joyous heart would be/ An image the jaguar’s eye could quickly see/ But nothing happens Only the green silence/ Why talk then/ Let this love fall from the tallest ceiba tree/ Let it fly and weep and repent/ Let this wonderment be quenched till it be earth/ Aroma of *jobo* plums/ Otters/ Fallen leaves.¹

“An intelligent, sensitive poet,” wrote Campos then, “whatever Efraín Bartolomé sees, hears and touches, he interrogates, shades and turns into verses of a smoothness and cadence that you experience. We feel the rain falling interminably, the humid air flowing through the

* Mexican poet and literary critic, his recent publications include *Leer es un camino: Los libros y la lectura: del discurso autoritario a la mitología bien-intencionada* (Mexico City: Paidós, 2004), and *Historias de lecturas y lectores: los caminos de los que sí leen* (Mexico City: Paidós, 2005).



Drawings by Héctor Ponce de León

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skin and the lungs, the green humidity shrinking and darkening; he makes us hear how ‘a sound of crickets echoes birds/ scrapes the skin of the air.’ We see with him the quiet fury of the river, we breathe in the smell of the coffee that the night spills.”

To his trade as a poet, Efraín Bartolomé brought another version of the healer of minds and spirits. A psycho-therapist by profession, he knew about the power of the exact word. The word—always the word—at the service of human improvement.

For all these reasons, just as he made it known through the poem, parallel to that, in affirming his craft, Bartolomé affirmed his certainties without the slightest doubt. He explained

that psychology has taught us that the most complex form of behavior is emotion, and that this is so because it is combined behavior, made up of sensations, perceptions, cognoscitive activities (imagination and thought) and muscular, visceral and glandular reactions.

With absolute knowledge of the processes of sensibility and intelligence, he said, “A verse charged with poetry is capable of producing that behavioral complex. The poet registers it and produces it in the reader. Intellectual verse (which transmits ‘ideas’), sense-laden verse (that produces ‘sensations’) or image-laden verse (that generates images and often dazzles) are poor forms of true poetic verse. That is, they only reach the senses, only the imagination, or only thought. They are necessarily less charged than the magic in which a group of words with a specific sonorousness leads to a tempo, an image and a meaning united in such close harmony that, by touching the spirit of the reader, it produces an effect of an explosion of the emotions.”

Today, 23 years after the publication of that first masterful book and after having published 10 other books of poetry, the work of Efraín Bartolomé is a fundamental reference point and a permanent presence in contemporary Mexican poetry. Other equally masterful books followed *Jaguar Eye* and were collected in the impressive volume *Oficio: Arder (Obra poética 1982-1997)* (Craft: Burning [Poetic Work 1982-1997]), also published by the UNAM. This 545-page tome contains several of the most extraordinary moments of Mexican poetry in general and in particular of the works produced by the poets of Chiapas, the land of Rosario Castellanos and Jaime Sabines, the land of *El rescate del mundo* (The Res-

cue of the World) and *Al pie de la letra* (Literally) the land of Tarumba and *Algo sobre la muerte del mayor Sabines* (Something About the Death of Major Sabines).

Jaguar Eye was the felicitous beginning of a poetic work that has continued with *Ciudad bajo el relámpago* (City Under Lightning) (1983), *Música solar* (Solar Music) (1984), *Cuadernos contra el ángel* (Notebooks Against the Angel) (1988), *Mínima animalia* (Minimum Animalia) (1991), *Música lunar* (Lunar Music) (1991), *Cantos para la joven concubina y otros poemas dispersos* (Songs for the Young Concubine and Other Scattered Poems) (1991), *Corazón del monte* (Heart of the Mountain) (1995), *Trozos de sol* (Pieces of Sun) (1995), *Avellanas* (Hazelnuts) (1997) and *Partes un verso a la mitad y sangra* (Cut a Verse in Two and It Bleeds) (1997).

In the same year that *Craft: Burning* was published, another great bilingual, illustrated edition of *Ojo de jaguar/ Jaguar Eye* saw the light of day, put out by the Chiapas state government, whose English version was done by Asa Zatz, the translator of other great Spanish-language writers like Alejo Carpentier, Ernesto Sábato and Gabriel García Márquez.

Zatz wrote about this work,

A couple of years ago, a distinguished colleague sent me a small volume of poems as something worth translating. It was by a poet named Efraín Bartolomé who originally came from a Mayan village in Chiapas near the border with Guatemala. Entitled *Ojo de jaguar* it concerns the rain forest of his region which he deals with in a series of short poems as a living system, touching on its vegetation, animals, the people associated with it

and their relation to it, as well as his own. He even had the temerity to write a poem that provides a thrilling description of the effects of a devastating forest fire on the environment's living tissues. He touches, as well, on the rain forest's historical past and forecasts the dismal future awaiting it....Needless to say, I was hooked with the very first poem and *had* to translate the rest of the book which turned out to be one of the most pleasurable experiences of my career.

For more than two decades Efraín Bartolomé has been building a body of poetic work in which he constantly returns to the jungle and the motifs of *Jaguar Eye*, but in which he has demonstrated that the Chiapas jungle was never exactly a “theme” in his poetry, but rather an imperious need to name reality and make it sing. When he has needed to name the city, situate it in his memory, invoke it and even curse it, he has done it. Rather, he did it immediately after his first book: *City Under Lightning* is the opposite image of the paradise he offers us in *Jaguar Eye*.

Of course, the much needed review of each of Bartolomé's books exceeds the scope of this article, but let us say that each of these books really constitutes a chapter in a work that is always advancing toward the light, with emotion and with intelligence.

In *Notebooks Against the Angel* the poet defines his craft and practically marks his path, saying, “This notebook weighs/ It is pure light/ It is pure shadow: /it is all my blood charged with meaning.” A few pages later, talking to the angel, the certainty arises that will end by naming the undeniable path that, from then on without possibility of return, the poetic work and craft will

follow: “I am the angel./ My sword cuts the day./ The tree of the night is torn apart:/ a branch of shadow will fall on your species./ I don't care:/ be known that I am a poet and my craft is to burn.”

Buttressed by his profound knowledge of poetry, that is by the poetic myth and the most polished gold of the poetry of all time—from Homer and the Dervish songs to Baudelaire, Darío and Neruda, among other great writers—Efraín Bartolomé's lyric work unites music to the meaning of the word, that word that comes down to us from the most ancient and hidden places of human beings and which in *Cut a Verse in Two and It Bleeds* makes him write the following invocation: Speak for me, tongue of my forebears/ Keep me from lying/ Keep me from ever beguiling/ about the coursing of my blood/ about the vagaries of my heart (Translation: Asa Zatz).

A no less important element of this work is the recovery of local speech and vocabulary that becomes universal. Never renouncing his own speech (which is what gives him identity and fixes forever the fidelity and felicity of the past) is one more of Bartolomé's poetic qualities.

Efraín Bartolomé's poetic work is an event, a happy eruption in the sometimes monotonous course of Mexican poetry at the end of the twentieth century, and today it is a fundamental presence and reference point in the poetic panorama of the recently inaugurated twenty-first century which, in poetical matters, often so easily beguiles.

The security with which he emerged and the firmness with which he has continued reserve for Efraín Bartolomé a solid future with his readers. Because Bartolomé has been given practically all



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the most important prizes and distinctions a poet can aspire to in Mexico: the Aguascalientes National Poetry Prize (1984), the Carlos Pellicer National Poetry Prize (1992), the Gilberto Owen National Prize for Literature (1993) and the Jaime Sabines International Poetry Prize (1996). But, undoubtedly, the highest award he receives over and over is the one given by his readers who find in his books an indelible experience in which emotion and intelligence are united in the best expression of poetry. ■■

NOTES

¹ “Where the Monkeys Dwell”. Translated by Asa Zatz.