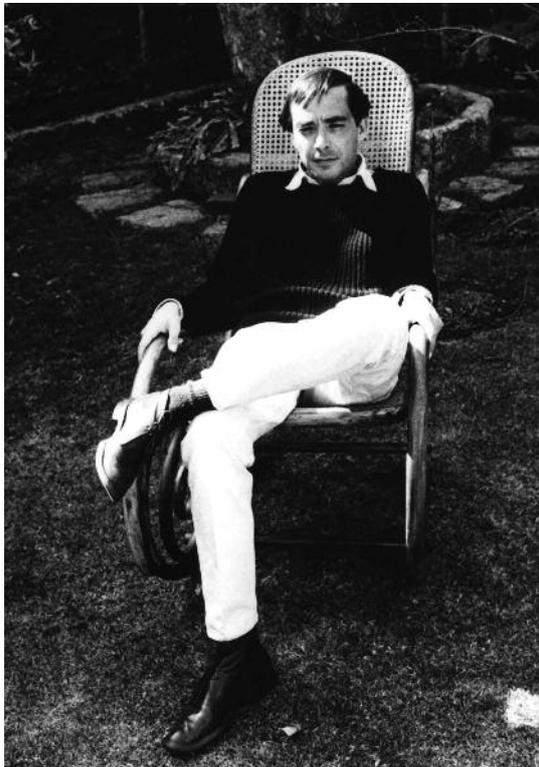


Between Love and Death Salvador Elizondo's *Farabeuf*

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In 1965, half-way through the decade, a great diversity of expressions and ways of understanding letters emerged in Mexico. While on the one hand, the *Revista mexicana de literatura* (Mexican Journal of Literature) stopped coming out, on the other, the most recent production of the avant-garde writers was published in the also cosmopolitan *El corno emplumado* (The Plumed Horn) (1962-1969), edited by poet Sergio Mondragón and writer Margaret Randall. Avant-garde experimentation blossomed even more with the presence in our country of Chilean Alejandro Jodorowsky, who in the early part of the decade began to direct Beckett's plays. As a kind of turning point, in 1965, books were published that were as different as *La hija del rey o Electra* (The King's Daughter or Electra) by playwright Luisa Josefina Hernández; *La señal* (The Sign), with its 14 short stories, by Inés Arredondo; *Gazapo* (Young Rabbit/Great Lie) by Gustavo Sáinz, with its return to day-to-day life and colloquial language; *José Trigo*, by Fernando del Paso; and a predominantly descriptive work with certain influence of the French *nouveau roman*, although with a handling of symbols and existential ingredients that separate it from that current: *Farabeuf o la crónica de un instante* (Farabeuf or the Chronicle of an Instant) by Salvador Elizondo.

For many, this novel (or "anti-novel") was very difficult to read. It turned its back on what



has been considered the "Mexican literary tradition" and was one of the great experiments in the novel during the 1960s. In the words of Octavio Paz, *Farabeuf* describes "an erotic ritual that is simultaneously a surgical operation, a political-religious conspiracy, and a ceremony of divination."¹ To this precise description, we should add that Elizondo follows Charles Baudelaire's lead in *Fusées*, where he compares coitus with surgery and torture. Baudelaire knew that in the three cases there was *intervention* of a foreign body and an experience in which individual identity was annulled. *Farabeuf* also borrows from another text by Baudelaire, *Ma-*

* Fiction writer and essayist.

dame Bistouri, as well as from Franz Kafka's short story *The Penal Colony*, in which the torture consists of writing with needles about his own guilt on the victim's body. Elizondo's profound admiration for Chinese culture is also evident (he took formal courses in Chinese at El Colegio de México, and it is not by chance that *Farabeuf* begins with a reading from the *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*, the oracle of the Chinese emperors). But above all, his work shows admiration for Georges Bataille's concept of eroticism and the "scientific" discourse taken from a real surgical manual written by a Dr. Farabeuf, of no relation to the main character. And while, as I already mentioned, the novel admits the influence of the *nouveau roman*, in reality, it goes further by including the questioning of identity from the existential point of view.

For Elizondo, the face of the victim he based himself on reveals "something like the mystical essence of torture."² However, *Farabeuf* is both a reflection about representation and about writing about representation. Here is where a marked coincidence with Jorge Luis Borges appears.

For that reason, beyond Baudelaire, in *Farabeuf*, coitus, surgery, torture but also writing are all related. The four activities contain the experience of the "otherness": leaving oneself and destroying identity.

Perhaps the most important device used in *Farabeuf*, in addition to description, is *repetition*, which cancels time and, therefore, narration. The latter is reduced to three instances: the torment of the Chinese man in the early twentieth century (with a historic and pseudo-historic discourse), a French beach (where there are a cliff and some bathers) and the house of Dr. Farabeuf, where the presence of the Ouija board and the *I Ching* make the connection with an esoteric discourse. Two characters run through the book, a man and a woman, although because of their changes, they seem to be several people: a nun and a photogra-

pher, a nurse and a doctor, a victim and a victimizer. The three instances (Beijing, the beach and the house in Paris), united by repetitions and symbols (the dead starfish, the woman in mourning, the collapsing sand castle, the rain, the Chinese ideogram, the hexagram, the position of the victim...), are also united by the experience of ecstasy as a loss of identity: death or orgasm.

In terms of the historic discourse, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Fu Tchu Li is condemned to *leng tche* or dismemberment because according to the newspaper *Chen Pao*, he was found guilty of the murder of Prince Ao-Ovan. A Western photographer went to the torture session and took photos. In 1951, Bataille published *The Tears of Eros*, including three photographs of the torture. Elizondo, who in an interview confessed finding

his inspiration in books and because of that, like Jorge Luis Borges, he considered himself a bookish author (although he excluded his novel *Elsinore* from that category), based himself on one of the photographs and on Bataille's book itself. *Farabeuf* is a *sui generis* manifestation of

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the fantastic novel that transcends dreams to connect up in a fortunate dialectic with objective reality through an almost dispassionate discourse.

Philosophically, the novel meditates about the eternity of the instant and the relativity of time. If a "chronicle" implies "successive time," the subtitle of the first editions is paradoxical: "Chronicle of an instant." The subjectivization of time, characteristic of the modern novel—remember Marcel Proust—is the heir of romanticism, and as such, it emphasizes the individual and everything the interior of the subject implies. An "instant" can become an eternity.

Farabeuf requires an active reader who creates the work as he/she goes along, organizing in his/her mind the links made up of fleetingness. It is simultaneously a reflection about the death instinct (*Thanatos*) and about the dialectical re-

relationship between *Eros* (the life instinct) and *Thanatos*. The primordial image of torture, whose victim achieves ecstasy in death, is the synthesis of that dialectic: the *Yin* and the *Yang* are joined in the *Tao*. The Being and the Non-being of the ancient Hindu and Chinese dialectic are mixed, linked in the instant of the Absolute. The relationship between the sexual act (Being) and death (Non-being)—remember also *la petite morte*, another term for orgasm—is explicit and constant.

Dr. Farabeuf, renowned specialist and the author of treatises on amputation, amputates reality and seeks the union of the fragmentary in an instant of eternity. This is why he loves a nurse, who at the beginning precisely consults the *Book of Changes*, perchance of *metaphysical amputations*. The presence of Farabeuf in Pekin, where he observes the torture, belongs to the distant past and is linked up to a walk on the beach (in another past) and with a present in the doctor's house in Paris, where the woman is the same one who accompanied him to the torture and the walk on the beach. Farabeuf, a professor of medicine, is confused with the narrator: first, second and third persons are mixed in a chaotic, plural apparent reality made of ephemeral instants that trap unity only to let it escape and trap it again. The experience of Love and Death is lived in all times and spaces. The symbolic plane is broad: external and symbolic presences that are repeated until the reader's memory is transported to other instants and tries to find the link that joins them, the unity of all the instants in a single one: the *Tao* of life and of death.

Is Farabeuf the *Yang*, the positive, the sky, the active, masculine principle, that amputates realities? Is the nurse the *Yin*, the negative and passive, the earth, the feminine principle, the victim? Both are joined in the experience of Love and Death. Observe the torture, an experience that is always the same because death or *la petite morte* always come, even if only in an ephemeral, fleeting instant, impossible to grasp without letting it escape.

Farabeuf, a “difficult” novel, despite its “difficulty,” is now 40 years old, which implies that, like many other “hermetic” works of art—remember

the electronic concert music from the mid- and late 1950s or certain abstract expressionist paintings—continues to have a readership—albeit a cultured readership—that can appreciate it on different levels. Like Inés Arredondo's *La señal* (The Sign), *Farabeuf* is part of Mexico's cosmopolitan, universal literature that 40 years later continues to be studied and admired not only for its stylistic quality, but also for its profundity. ■■■



NOTES

¹ Octavio Paz, *Generaciones y semblanzas. Obras completas* vol. 4 (Mexico City: Círculo de Lectores-Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996).

² Salvador Elizondo, *New Twentieth-Century Mexican Writers Present Themselves Collection* (Mexico City: Empresas Editoriales, 1966), p. 43.

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