

Eduardo Lizalde

Sketch-Artist's Rendition of the Poet (With Poetry's Wild Beasts)

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*To Hilda Rivera,
with the admiration that respect demands.*

*It is better to present one image in a lifetime than to produce
Voluminous works.*
Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect" (1918)²

THE POET AND HIS CIRCUMSTANCE

The genesis of a poet, just like that of any poem, is more often than not something that only the demiurges of myth know for certain. So, there have been poets for whom, like Rimbaud, adolescence marked the end, not the beginning, of poetic exploration. Others, like the one we celebrate here, had to wait until the fourth decade of life to see his voice, his true poetic voice, express itself fully from the intimate margins of writing.³

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Very early on, however, around 1948, Mexican poet Eduardo Lizalde did involve himself in ground-breaking poetic experimentalism when he founded, together with Enrique González Rojo and Marco Antonio Montes de Oca, the movement they dubbed “poeticism.” Disenchantment soon followed, and he hurriedly distanced himself, to the point of later disowning the work published under that name.⁴

However, despite the glum opinions of the poeticist movement’s former members, and at the risk of its being considered a kind of ghost inhabiting the limbo of Mexican poetry, it is worth including in the history of our literature. As writer Evodio Escalante said, “It attempted to renovate the procedures of poetic creation from their very foundations, establishing complicated rational schema that would be useful to create enormously original images and metaphors.”⁵ But, as was the case of most avant-garde aesthetic programs, these guidelines rarely went beyond being a well-intentioned recipe. That is why the majority of its poetic “products” were of a rather modest quality, asphyxiated by the dogmatic application of artificial parameters that sought to have total control of the poetic event, a little in the manner that ultra-orthodox serialism attempted to do with musical composition in the mid-1900s.

Once the poeticist stage was over —“a deadly trap for more than one book and less than one poet,” as he called it—⁶ Lizalde looked to philosophy and its relationship with language and the latter’s relationship with the thing named. This ontological concern with unraveling the intimate relationships underlying reality and its linguistic abstraction matured poetically in what Lizalde considered his first “legitimate” work: *Cada cosa es Babel* (Each Thing Is Babel) (1966). This utopian and poetic tower with paper foundations would be the quarry from which the foundation stone of Lizalde’s poetry would be hewn, since it is in this volume, as Luis Ignacio Helguera so aptly comments,⁷ that the poet appropriates the word in such a way that he achieves with “an almost Cartesian clarity and precision...the manufacture of poetic concepts, images and metaphors in which deliberate, pre-directed semantic polyvalence [predominates].”⁸

The year *Cada cosa es Babel* appeared could be merely occasion for celebration, but it is also a year for bewilderment. We should remember that in that same year, Octavio Paz, Alí Chumacero and José Emilio Pacheco achieved one of the publishing paradigms of modern Mexican poetry: the anthology *Poesía en movimiento* (Poetry in Movement). But one of the great absences from its pages was one of the most solid

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voices of current Mexican poetry: I am referring, in effect, to Eduardo Lizalde. One of the reasons for this absence is that by the time the intellectual threesome summed up Mexican poetry, Lizalde had published only a handful of poems inspired in poeticism that did not make it possible to guess the great poetic voice that they foreshadowed.

I mention this only to show how true poetry will get where it belongs despite the fact that the unwritten laws of the literary dictatorship —whether by omission or by treachery— exclude from the canon the voices that from the sidelines demand their place in history. Lizalde is conscious of this, as he is of the relativity of writing and its intrinsic value. This is why he asks the question, “Why ink up the presses of the world with a poem that may have already been expressed —and perhaps better— by other authors?”⁹

As other commentators of Lizalde’s work have noted, there is no doubt that Ezra Pound’s imagism is a strong presence in the “intellectual” conception of *Cada cosa es Babel*. However, emotionally, Lizalde is completely original. He himself, together with writer Gabriel Zaid, considers this long poem thwarted.¹⁰ Perhaps it is, if we look at it as an organic entity that should maintain a balance among form, rhythm and content. But I’m not sure about it if we read the text not as an attempt at a long poem (in the style of Valéry, Paz or Gorostiza), but more as a group of premises/images that, in the mode of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,¹¹ seeks in fragmentation to form a probable melding of meanings rather than a linear “landscape” in which poetical concepts are consistently and logically linked together.

THE TIGER IN THE SCORE OF THE WORD

Having overcome the experimental phase and tested the possibilities of the poem as a receptacle for philosophical and metaphysical ideas, Lizalde recognized his voice in one of the most emblematic animals of literature: the tiger. That is why in his most renowned —among both critics and readers— book of poems, *El tigre en la casa* (The Tiger in the House)

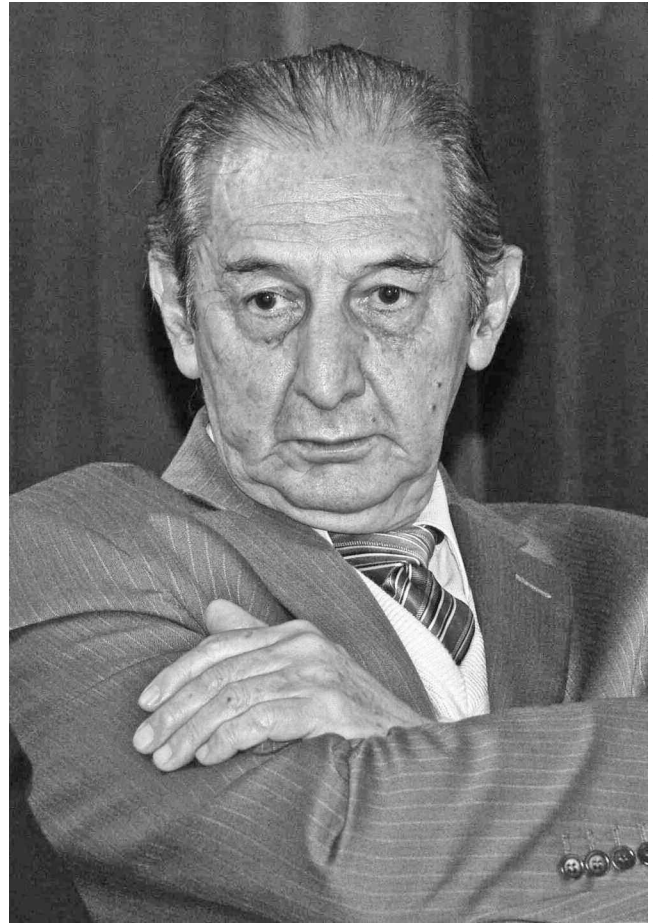
The tiger as emblem, as generative metaphor and poetic subject, also becomes the synthesis of the activity of writing and, perhaps, of that almost godlike moment in which the poetic “idea” is expressed for the first time in some fortunate language.

(1970), he alludes to and interiorizes the cat beyond its mere symbolic value. His tiger is an intimate animal, an *animal* in the purest etymological sense of the word,¹² with which death, dreams and bed are shared. However, it is also the beast that is hunting, that hunts the poetic in daily language, that seeks the musical dimension —and not just the sonorous kind of music— of the word that is verse, versicle, a blank page, that hunts in the home, from the inside, of a being that questions its today and its circumstances.

Like for Neruda and his sea of “seven green tigers,” for Eduardo Lizalde, the tiger is/inhabits each poem, while the poetry that in turn inhabits it does involve astuteness, loneliness, mimicry, the hunt for the word against-itself. Thus, the tiger as emblem, as generative metaphor and poetic subject, also becomes the synthesis of the activity of writing and, perhaps, of that almost godlike moment in which the poetic “idea” is expressed for the first time in some fortunate language.

Lizalde’s obsession for this cat that he says “smells of blood even through the glass,” may not only be a legacy of his readings of William Blake and his penchant for living among the book-loving stripes of the Borgean tiger, but a necessary consequence of his undergraduate studies in philosophy at the UNAM and of music (as a baritone) at the National Conservatory of Music. Is not the zoological *Panthera tigris* a kind of random philosopher? And, what about that stringed instrument it carries on its sides? Regardless, the tiger in the house is also death, our own deaths, death with a name and face that —in the sense of Heidegger— *is* for death.

Thus, Lizalde’s most celebrated volume of poems is offered to us beyond the philosophical sphere of *Cada cosa es Babel* (Each Thing Is Babel) as a lyrical continuum, plethoric of broad symbolism of experience which, using the poetic as its starting point, with all due certainty arrives to the sphere of the metaphysical. But Lizalde’s tiger, like any emblem, is entirely the power of meaning, an alchemist’s meld because it is still impure, and not “poetic science,” but the protean occasion for surprise and therefore, for love. Love, yes, but useless and destined to fail. In it, the idealized beloved co-exists



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At the national celebration of his eightieth birthday.

with the unforgettable whore, with the sinful prostitute who fascinates us because she is what we would like to be: spirits free of lust. Then love is only an idea, not something concrete; possibility, not reality; poetic motif and perhaps never truth.

OUT OF THE TIGER’S CAGE/CLOSE
TO “THE GREAT CROCODILE” EFRAÍN HUERTA

The extremely strong presence of the tiger in Lizalde’s poetry —and perhaps despite it— has distracted readers and more than one critic from the rest of the registers the poet often touches on in his work. One example is the cynical, bitter satirical vein that runs through his books after *El tigre*, in which the poet on occasion becomes a modern Goliard singing the praises of human beings’ “basest” impulses. In effect, beginning with *La zorra enferma* (The Sick She-Fox) (1974), *Caza mayor* (Big Hunt) (1979) and, particularly in

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Tabernarios y eróticos (Tavern Denizens and Eroticists) (1988), Lizalde seems to become more earthy in the sense that the things he alludes to in his poems are not only enunciated metaphorically or symbolically, like in his first books of poems, but are poetic “objects” that, thanks to poetry, become subjects of the enunciations and “victims” of the poet’s mockery. Lizalde is a silent practitioner of acidic, black humor that greatly highlights his proximity to the man who was his mentor and friend, “The Great Crocodile” Efraín Huerta. Just as a sample of this is the following brief poem from *La zorra enferma* (The Sick She-Fox):

Will and Testament

I, François Villon,
Frenchman, poet,
father of all men,
patriarch, god,
thug and pimp and murderer,
the most golden dregs of Paris
and here, under this gallows,
I crumble and die and masturbate
before all
for the glory of Europe.

But Lizalde not only shares his mocking guffaw with Efraín Huerta. He shares his love/hate for Mexico City, which he analyzes and questions in a devastating portrait: “Tercera Tenochtitlan” (The Third Tenochtitlan), a poem in which Humboldt’s highfalutin “City of Palaces” is just a “seedy little town that has spread/without Haussman, gracelessly/...the tips of the undersized palaces/pruned from its heaven by a decayed tribe of barracks/flocks, clotheslines of dirty wings/that wave over the roofs of the sky-blue back of the beast.” Only three years after Lizalde published this poem, and after the September 1985 earthquakes, finally, the putrid skeleton of its innards seemed to come to the surface and force those of us/them who say we “inhabit it” to really inhabit it, beyond the poetic schism it had been the object of.

But not everything in Lizalde is skepticism and critical disappointment with reality and the vain things that are everything that is this world. There is also erotic celebration that, in turn, celebrates the individual, the mystery *being* and “feeling,” that invites us to be aware of the wonder implied in having felt. Or doesn’t any work of poetry imply an erotica of the tongue and the senses?

Eduardo Lizalde: intellectual of vast registers; skeptic and lyrical philosopher (in the strict poetic sense of the term), music enthusiast who often lends the language an unheard-of rhythm learned from the best Erik Satie or from the audacities of John Cage lover of silence-that-is-sign; but above all, poet, stubborn, who could have stopped with his first poetic attempts, watching from the anonymity of the Mexican Language Academy, in which, to the solace of the other academy, since May 2007, he has occupied the XIV Chair. We celebrate here and now, with the reading of that (his) poetry, which attempts to transcend the language it is written in, his eighth decade of life. Congratulations, poet! **MM**

NOTES

- ¹ The author has published, among other works, the two collections of poems: *Imago* (Mexico City: UAM, 1997) and *Escenas en el proscenio* (Scenes on the Proscenium) (Mexico City: UNAM, 2000). He was awarded the Rubén Bonifaz Nuño National Prize for Poetry in 1998, and is currently a professor at the UNAM and the Anáhuac University, South. [Editor’s Note.]
- ² *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (1918) (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1954). See the whole essay at http://www.english.illinois.edu/Maps/poets/m_r/pound/retrospect.htm. [Editor’s Note.]
- ³ *Voices of Mexico* participates here in the national celebration of the eightieth birthday of Mexican poet Eduardo Lizalde (Mexico City, 1929). This year the National Fine Arts Institute has awarded him the Fine Arts Gold Medal, and the San Luis Potosí state government has given him the San Luis Prize for Literary Merit during the Fifth International Festival of Letters held in the state capital. [Editor’s Note.]
- ⁴ These works are collected in Eduardo Lizalde, *Autobiografía de un fracaso* (Mexico City: Martín Casillas Editores/INBA, 1981).
- ⁵ Evodio Escalante, *La vanguardia extraviada* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2003).
- ⁶ Lizalde, op. cit., p. 40.
- ⁷ Luis Ignacio Helguera (Mexico City, 1962-2003) was a well known essayist, editor and musical critic. [Editor’s Note.]
- ⁸ Luis Ignacio Helguera, *Eduardo Lizalde* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1989), Material de Lectura Collection: Modern Poetry no. 147, p. 5.
- ⁹ “Eduardo Lizalde: la poética imprescindible (Como el Tigre),” interview by Eduardo Milán, “El Semanario,” *Novedades*, November 2, 1986, p. 6.
- ¹⁰ Eduardo Milán, op. cit., p. 2.
- ¹¹ Lizalde will return to this philosophical text in his collection of poems *Al margen de un tratado* (1981-1985) (Outside a Treatise [1981-1985]).
- ¹² The word “animal” is derived from the Latin word “*animalis*,” meaning “the living,” and from “*animus*,” which means “gifted with breath or the breath of life,” also known as “*anima*.” That is, “animal” would be a being blessed with *anima*, or the breath of life.