

Life with Bonifaz

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In November 1982, I had a memorable appointment at Mexico City's Benito Juárez airport. I would not only be traveling to New York to give a series of lectures about new Mexican literature at various universities, but I'd also have the chance to meet, in person, one of the greatest twentieth-century poets in any language: Rubén Bonifaz Nuño.

And there I saw him, standing at the Aeroméxico check-in counter in what was then the airport's only terminal, a man of medium height with a wide moustache and a shock of gray hair,

dressed in a three-piece suit, a brocade waistcoat, a watch chain, and a National Autonomous University of Mexico pin.

"I'm so honored to meet you, Don Rubén!" I stammered, not knowing what else to say. Also I was young and needed to appear serious. I had read his book *De otro modo lo mismo* (Otherwise the Same) and had even written a synopsis of it in the *Revista de la Universidad de México*.

"Yes, of course," he replied in a faint voice. "I've read it. It lacked adjectives . . ." And after a couple of seconds he

burst out laughing. That's how I met Don Rubén: a joker, supportive, generous, and wise. He only showed his serious side when speaking about the literature he cared for the most, about his teachers, about what one can learn from our elders, about what is worth learning. In contrast, he took himself much less seriously and was very easy going, and that's how he was with the new friends we would make on that trip: René Avilés Fabila, Bernardo Ruiz, Martha Robles, and myself. Rubén had previously met Marco Antonio Campos, Vicente Quirarte, and Carlos Montemayor during the course of their university work. In fact it was Carlos (1947-2010) who had organized the trip as the Autonomous Metropolitan University's "culture tsar."

I try not to be inopportune when sharing moments with *famous people*. An interval exists between first meeting someone and developing an informal relationship with them, one filled with shared experiences and emotions. In that period, I never knew whether my presence is welcome or bothersome. But Rubén never made me feel that way. We were on friendly terms from the start and he never refused to engage in conversation with me, to offer me literary or personal advice, to take my calls, to explain some minutiae of Spanish grammar, to read or comment on one of my poems. But I'd think twice—or more—before asking him a question or calling him on the telephone, before I conquered my fear of showing him a new poem or translation that I was working on. I knew that Don Rubén was always busy with some project, whether it was university work, translating Homer or Virgil or Propertius, or writing essays about indigenous iconography.

I once accompanied him to the Anthropology Museum. Just the two of us. I don't recall how I had been given this miraculous opportunity of seeing the serpents, jaguars, and other stone sculptures on display in the Mexica gallery through Bonifaz Nuño's eyes and sensibility. He explained what happened when the two serpents' heads were joined together, in profile, and touching each other: standing in front of it you could see between them another head—of a human being, a serpent?—,

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an image that we also relate to Tlaloc.¹ The left-hand serpent's right eye was the left eye of the third figure. The right-hand serpent's left eye was the right eye of this image of Tlaloc. Suddenly it hit me that you had to see almost all Mexica sculptures not only in three dimensions, but also in their context and realize how they both fitted into—and represented—the world.

We stood before Coatlicue. Rubén confessed that he had been scared of her, and that he felt she was sending out very strong vibrations, strange sensations.

"I visited she every day for several weeks," he confided, "and I asked the stone: 'What do you want to tell me? What are you? Who are you?' And I sat down to listen to her, until one day she spoke to me. And when I finally understood, the world opened up."

He spoke about the skirt of serpents and the necklace of hearts, about the claws on her hands and feet, ferocious eyes and mouths at the joints. The whole thing seemed like a fabric woven out of serpents and skulls; hands, eyes, fangs, and hearts. He took me behind the statue, showing on the way how Coatlicue's sides were also perfectly sculpted.

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"And not only that," he continued. "The base of Coatlicue is also sculpted, because you needed to see it from the other world, from the bowels of the earth."

I immediately thought of the Kabalistic—and obviously geometric—concept that every solid object has not just four but six sides. A simple brick illustrates this truth: it has four sides, as well as an upper and lower surface. The seventh side is the one we cannot see, and is the one that represents *entirety*. It is invisible to the human eye because it represents the vision of God. "The Coatlicue is not a sculpture of a god but a representation of the moment just before the dawn of creation."²

In other words, you must see it as a kind of three-dimensional, 360-degree mural, visible both from the sky and the underworld. It is also a sculpture that depicts time, the instant just before what we call the big bang, translated into the language of Mexica iconography, when everything else is embryonic and about to expand. No wonder it was sending

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out such strong vibrations! You needed the sensibility to receive them and understand them in their own dimension, without confusing them with the background noise of Western iconography and symbology. Bonifaz Nuño developed these ideas in great depth in his books on the “indigenous stones,” as the poet fondly called them.³

He always identified himself as indigenous, never as a mestizo or a European. Initially, this struck me as both funny and curious in equal measure: Rubén would have blended into London perfectly, sitting in a coffee shop or poking around one of the city’s old libraries in the early decades of the twentieth century. No one would have said he was out of place. Afterward I realized that this self-identification was not at all laughable or curious. He genuinely allied himself with the Mexicas, the Toltecs, the Olmecs, and their descendants. I know that a strong and inspirational bridge of communication exists between these peoples and Rubén, a connection evident not only in his essays on the pre-Hispanic world but also in his poetry, particularly, I believe, after *Fuego de pobres* (Fire of the Poor), when its presence starts to be felt with increasing force.

Although I had to overcome my timidity and fear of being inopportune each time I spoke to him by telephone or when I asked for an appointment for him to check one of my texts, in person he was relaxed and very generous with his time. In 1983, I invited him to comment at the launch of my book, *Los cuerpos de la Furia* (Bodies of Fury) at the Metropolitan Hall of the Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM). A couple of days previously, he felt unwell and told me over the telephone, “I’d like to be at your book launch, but I don’t know if I’ll be able to be there to give you strength.” I interpreted this as a polite excuse. The maestro did not feel well. He would soon be celebrating his sixtieth birthday—at the time an almost incomprehensible age to me, although in September 2013, I reached that same age.

I had resigned myself to doing the launch without Rubén. But when I saw him walk through the main door, I was delighted and ran over to hug him. I felt like I was floating on

air, blessed by the Gods, truly privileged. Now I think, “How did I even dare to invite him to comment on my book?” Sometimes, when we’re young and manage to overcome our fears, we experience moments that will shape us and drive us forward for years, for the rest of our lives.

During our long conversations at his office in the Central Library of the UNAM’s University City campus, I learned everything I could about translating poetry, meter, and verse. With infinite patience, he taught me how to listen to poetry. He opened up my ears, so to speak. With him I discovered that every meter has its own personality, its own *sound*. I discovered why the decasyllable and the hendecasyllable, the heptasyllable and the octosyllable are all so different. I finally understood what he sought to achieve—and he did achieve it—by combining verses of nine and ten syllables, and why they work so well together. I also understood why his decasyllables are so completely unlike the well-known patriotic decasyllables that we hear in Mexico’s national anthem. He was my first teacher since primary school to insist on the importance of memorizing.

“You have to carry verses with you, commit them to memory, for they will be models for your verses. You have to make their cadences your own. This means you’ll never have to count syllables or arrange accents. That’s nonsense. You feel them, they arrange themselves. You must think about developing an ear.”

From then on, as an exercise I began to versify everything around me: lamp posts, passing cars, the old man leaning up against his doorway. Everything could be converted into music, translated into the language of words filled with meaning and positioned strategically to sing without the need for musical instruments: poetry is its own music.

“No line of verse exists that cannot be translated,” Rubén decreed as we were analyzing, in his library offices, one that was particularly difficult to translate into Spanish, from Robert Browning’s *Andrea del Sarto*, in a fixed meter as found in the original.⁴ And he was right. Perhaps it does not yield on a first attempt. Maybe we hit a brick wall, but it remains true: *no line of verse exists that cannot be translated*. In some corner of the Library of Babel that Jorge Luis Borges dreamed up for us, we can find the solution to the enigma, we can find the translation. We must let the music and the meaning find their vehicle, and they will fit themselves into limpid, beautiful poetry.

The poet’s final years were difficult. He liked to eat with the “*Calacas*” (the skulls)⁵ at Rioja, a Spanish restaurant on South

Insurgentes Avenue, very close to University City. He preferred it to *Tasca de Manolo*, on La Paz in the San Ángel neighborhood, a restaurant we used to frequent, because Rioja was much better lit: there he could see his friends, through the *fog*. And every time we met there —Fausto Vega, Vicente Quirarte, Carmen Carrara, Bernardo Ruiz, Raúl Renán, Josefina Estrada, Marco Antonio Campos, and I were the most constant— his other friends, writers, and university officials would invariably join us and a party would start. After we had eaten the hors d'oeuvre, the salad, the soup, and the main course, the standing joke was to say, “That was just a *snack*. Now let’s order the *real* meal.” But before the feast began, Rubén always said, “Right, then. Let’s get smashed and have a good time!” We were sure to order at least one or two bottles of good Spanish red wine —with Don Fausto usually picking up the tab— but by then Rubén would only drink a little.

In his apartment on Don Manolito Street, sitting among his incunabula and other ancient tomes, accompanied by daggers and coins from the Roman Empire, he poured me a cognac. The taste was new to me, but it would become a ritual. Some time later, I had the fortune of teaching poetry workshops for many years in the city of Oaxaca’s House of Culture, and at the Benito Juárez Autonomous University in the same state. There I developed a taste for mescal, and now I consider that a good mescal is on a par with cognac.

One of my Oaxacan pupils, plastic surgeon César Mayoral Figueroa, was an avid reader of Don Rubén. When Mayoral Figueroa was appointed rector of the Benito Juárez Autonomous University, he suggested to me, in the mid-1980s, that we invite Rubén to offer a keynote poetry recital, which



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took place in the House of Culture. It was a very emotional reading to a packed auditorium, with many people standing. The poet was happy. He read out the poems he had prepared, and even recited from memory others requested by the audience. But he was happiest of all when I took him to Monte Alban and he could wander freely about the large ceremonial esplanade. These were the last years he could use his eyes, even though it was like “seeing through the increasingly narrow hole in a roll of tape,” as he himself described the progress of his retinitis pigmentosa.

I could honestly never list everything that Rubén did for me as a teacher and a friend. For example, he wrote the text for the back cover of my book, *Redacción sin dolor* (Writing without Pain), which came out in 1994. He was a witness at my wedding with Josefina ten years earlier. We met for the ceremony held at a Civil Registry office on Reforma Promenade, almost next door to the old *Excelsior* building. Vicente Quirarte, the poet Guillermo Fernández (1932-2012), the painter Rafael Hernández Herrera, and Don Rubén were our witnesses. Before the ceremony, Vicente, Guillermo, and Rubén gathered around a tamale vendor’s food cart for a quick, “delicious” breakfast.⁶

He read and made detailed comments on my book *Línea de fuego* (Line of Fire) (1989). About *Corredor nocturno* (Night Corridor) (1993), he told me: “It’s a symphony.” I never knew how to interpret this comment and didn’t ask him. I was overcome, once again, by timidity, or rather, by fear. “He can’t have liked it. They’re verses. In *Corredor nocturno* I abandoned the strict meter of *Los cuerpos de la Furia* and *Línea de fuego*.” On three occasions and with utmost generosity, Rubén allowed me to prepare anthologies of his poetry. The first one, *Rubén Bonifaz Nuño para jóvenes* (Rubén Bonifaz Nuño for Young People), was published in 1989 by the National Fine Arts Institute (INBA). My own publishing house, Editorial Colibrí, brought out the second one, *Amiga a la que amo. Antología de poesía amorosa de Rubén Bonifaz Nuño* (The Girl I Love. An Anthology of Rubén Bonifaz Nuño’s Love Poems) in 2004. Spain’s Visor de Poesía Collection published the third in



2007, entitled *Luz que regresa. Antología* (Returning Light. An Anthology).

Three years earlier, and again at Editorial Colibrí, Josefina and I published what we imagined was an important collection of Mexican and Latin American books of poetry. We decided to call this new collection “As de Oros” (the Ace of Golden Coins, a suit in the Spanish deck of cards), in honor of Rubén Bonifaz Nuño. And to make this homage clearer still, Josefina suggested that we asked to borrow Rubén’s silver-handled walking stick so that poets, authors of the collection, could pose with it. The photograph would be printed on the margin in black and white, on the front cover of each book. Francisco Hernández’s *Soledad al cubo* (Loneliness Cubed) was the first to be published, followed by many more, including works by Vicente Quirarte, Francisco Cervantes, Juan Bañuelos, Adriana Díaz Enciso, Blanca Luz Pulido, Lucía Rivadeneyra, Jorge Valdés Díaz-Vélez, Alí Chumacero, Minerva Margarita Villarreal, and Rubén Bonifaz Nuño himself, with the anthology that I mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Only the photograph of Rubén on the cover came out in color. There were twenty-five titles in all. We used the actual stick for the first ten titles or so; for the others, the photographer Concepción Morales created digital images that

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could then be Photoshopped and the walking stick placed in the hands of the poets, who posed for their photo holding a broom. We eventually had to return Rubén his walking stick, which had accompanied him for so many decades.

Now that Rubén is no longer with us, my heart is filled with sadness because over the past 30 years, the best of my life, I never emblazoned him with enough adjectives, I did not ask him all the questions I should have asked, I did not take enough photographs, I did not eat with him as often as I could, we did not laugh twice as much as we laughed and we can no longer meet on Thursdays to eat tacos, get smashed, and continue enjoying all the wonderful things that this life—so short, beautiful, and fleeting—offers us. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Bonifaz Nuño explores this and many other fundamental concepts of the indigenous world view in his book *Imagen de Tlaloc* (Image of Tlaloc) (Mexico City: UNAM, 1986), 190 pp. On page 72 he writes, “The image of Tlaloc... is only formed when the serpent heads combine, creating unity, with the human figure.”

² In *Imagen de Tlaloc* (Image of Tlaloc), p. 10, Bonifaz wrote, “All [the images contained in the *misnamed* Coatlicue], without exception, mean the same thing: that power at the imminence of the act, man’s essential role in creation, the fusion of man with the god in fulfilling the supreme act... The consideration of their elements, with their backgrounds and consummations, perhaps offers forceful proof that, in these images which could be considered omnipresent in our pre-Hispanic culture, their creators *did not aim to create the image of a god, but to symbolically represent the power of the god at the exact moment when his reign was about to begin*” (the italics are mine).

³ I would once again mention *Imagen de Tlaloc; Hombres y serpientes. Iconografía olmeca* (Image of Tlaloc; Men and Serpents. Olmec Iconography) (Mexico City: UNAM, 1989); plus *Escultura azteca* (Aztec Sculpture) (Mexico City: UNAM, 1989), among others.

⁴ I tell this anecdote in more detail in an essay published in an issue that pays homage to Rubén Bonifaz Nuño, *Textos nos. 23/24*, year 7, July-December 2006, Culiacán, Sinaloa, Mexico, pp. 27-30.

⁵ “*Calacas*” is the nickname writer Bernardo Ruiz gave the group of Bonifaz Nuño’s friends. [Editor’s Note.]

⁶ More precisely, the author uses the term “*exquisito*,” which in Spanish means both delicious and refined, to refer to street food. [Editor’s Note.]