

“Poetry is the last religion we have left”: Eugenio Montejo

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Between Tuesday 13 and Saturday 17 October 1998, the VI New Floral Games were held in Manizales, a poetry meeting organized by the writer and journalist Orlando Sierra Hernández, who was murdered three years later. Poetry recitals, conferences and academic events held at the now defunct Fernando Mejía Poetry House and the National University auditorium included the participation of writers such as Rossella Di Paolo from Peru, José María Zonta from Costa Rica, Humberto Ak’abal from Guatemala and Eugenio Montejo from Venezuela; and the Colombians Miguel Méndez Camacho, Rafael del Castillo, Dominga Palacio, Juan Carlos Acevedo, Andrea Talero, Mauricio Franco, Mario Armando Valencia, Jaime Jaramillo Escobar, Piedad Bonnett, Flober Zapata, Antonio María Flórez, Conrado Alzate Valencia, Alberto Verón, María del Pilar Murillo, Juana María Echeverri, Luis José Badel, Alejandra Echeverri, Olga Lucía Estrada, Giovanni Quessep, Francisco Gómez Campillo, Philip Potdevin and Felipe García Quintero.

This interview with Eugenio Montejo (Caracas, 1938; Valencia, 2008) was conducted within the framework of this literary meeting. Two decades later, *Escribanía* reproduces that dialogue still in place with one of the most important authors of Venezuelan poetry, at a time when the presence of Venezuelans in Colombia is estimated to be close to 1.5 million immigrants.

Montejo in Manizales

About Eugenio Montejo, literary critics have said that in his work he claims for Latin American poetry the abolition of political boundaries; that his poetry is characterized by thickness, rich textual range and naturalistic and mythical recreation; that in addition to the constructive passion and almost perfect control of the development of the poem - which excludes the divagatory and disjointed - he is one of the few Hispanic-American poets who has such a demanding sense of verbal forms; that he is an author who with extraordinary clarity sees the need to integrate the poet into society and to link him to life. ..who is one of the most important voices in Latin American poetry.

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Montejo is a simple and kind being, full of clear and understandable words for any interlocutor. Although Manizales had not travelled, in Colombia he is remembered for his participation as a judge in 1983 in the University of Antioquia Poetry Prize and in 1996 in the José Asunción Silva Poetry Prize, which was won by José Emilio Pacheco. He was also in 1997 at the Medellín Poetry Festival and is a friend of Colombian poets such as María Mercedes Carranza, Alvaro Mutis, Elkin Restrepo, and Darío Jaramillo, among others.

Poet, essayist and literary critic, the Venezuelan has written the books of poems: *Elegos* (1967), *Muerte y memoria* (1972), *Algunas palabras* (1976), *Nostalgia de Bolívar* (1976), *Terroridad* (1978), *Trópico absoluto* (1982), *Alfabeto del mundo* (1986), *Adiós al siglo XX* (1992) and *El Azul de La Tierra* (1997). He is also the author of two collections of essays: *La ventana oblicua* (1974) and *El taller blanco* (1983); as well as a volume of heteronymic writing: *El cuaderno de Blas Coll* (1981).

A tireless traveler, he lived two years in Argentina, three in Paris and nearly seven years in Portugal. However, he says that his main influences, apart from silent films (“because of their speed, which is faster than the real thing”) are the geography of the tropics and local speech. Among the poets who write in Spanish, Francisco de Quevedo, Fray Luis de León and the Peruvian César Vallejo stand out.

“There are poets from other languages that I have only read in translations and that have attracted my attention a lot, like for example Jules Supervielle, who was born in Uruguay but writes in French, the Swedish Gunnar Ekelöf, the Czech Vladimír Holan and the Romanian Lucian Blaga. I am interested in them because I have always believed that a poet can read many others, but he will always find some with whom he has a similar universe, even if they write in different languages and live in different geographies. It is like the affinity of blood: I can have a friend who accompanies me in good times and bad, but who cannot give me blood because he is of another type, and instead, a person who is much more distant from me does share my type of blood. In poetry, it is a verbal blood, because they try to do what I want too”.

Interview

What does poetry mean in this industrial age? Poems are attempts at writing that help another man because they reveal his identity. In poetry, you look for a word that is telling its truth. You cannot deny a man the attempt to make a poem because that poem is his truth that he is trying to communicate. The poem is an affective truth in which the man believes. When I am promoting a product and I say “take this” or “use this soap” and you buy it, there is a kind of secret pact between you and me because you know I am lying to you and I know you are not believing me. In poetry the opposite is true. Poetry is always a voice that pretends to be in the center. That’s why it has rescued the place that prayer once had and is the last religion we have left. And I speak of religion not as a proclamation of churches but as a search for truth. That’s why at the end of this century poetry has a bigger audience every day: poetry festivals like those in Europe or Medellín are full of people, especially young people. What are

they looking for? Why do they go? I think they go because they are looking for words that are close to the truth, because the language that surrounds us is very devalued.

What is your vision as a man of the end of the century? We are living in a very difficult time. The 20th century has been one of the most terrible in history because for the first time the whole world has been endangered by atomic energy. We are crossing a gorge, which is the atomic gorge. That's why it's a dangerous future ahead. Some thinkers say that this will be so until the 22nd century, when probably a century of great spirituality will come, so it is quite a long way to go to get there.

Do you make poetry thinking about society's need for it? One doesn't write poetry 'thinking about'. In poetry there is no predisposition because you don't say "I'm going to write about this subject". Obviously each author is marked by his or her geography and in my case the tropics and the voices around me are decisive. I am also marked by my speech and intonation. Juan Ramón Jiménez said: "I write as my mother spoke". The intonations, the mother's voice, are fundamental to enter a poem.

In Manizales, you will give a workshop for young poets. What do you recommend to new writers? One is trained in their language and that's why I tell all the young poets who are just starting out that you have to go through the whole river of our language, which is already 1000 years old: It was 500 when Columbus came and it has been another 500 years getting rich. We have to reread the classics, the Romancers... The great Latin American poets are also important and we must learn to recognize the differences in intonation and voice, with those of the Spanish poets. Another piece of advice is to learn to recognize when the voice comes from the inside out and when it goes from the outside in, because that is the strength of the text: If today a shoemaker or a salesman comes, who is not a poet, but suffered a tragedy and wants to communicate it, that man will have strength in his voice, even if he makes grammatical mistakes. The opposite case is that of the very educated, highly trained and intelligent man, who is trying to say something from the outside in, something that is not 'born' to him, one feels that the words sound forced, that they are in the air and not in the center.

How do you write? I write at night. I have a lamp that I thought I should name these days because it has been with me for a long time and so I am trying to write something called "The name of my lamp", thinking about it. At night I write letters, I make notes and... if a poem comes, I work late.

Do the poems 'come' when you sit down to write or do you mature them in your mind and then write them? It is difficult to explain because the moment when you feel a poem is not easily verbalized. The first thing that comes is an image, but a nebulous image. A French poet said that the first verse is given by the gods and it is up to the poet to work on the rest. That image that comes to me is like the tremor of a fisherman who feels that he has caught the fish on the rod: he has to squeeze it so that it doesn't go away. Sometimes a magnificent fish comes and goes, sometimes he thinks a huge fish is coming and disappears and sometimes he manages to catch something.

Amantes

(del libro "El Azul de la Tierra")

Se amaban. No estaban solos en la tierra;
tenían la noche, sus vísperas azules,
sus celajes.

Vivían uno en el otro, se palpaban
como dos pétalos no abiertos en el fondo
de alguna flor del aire.

Se amaban. No estaban solos a la orilla
De su primera noche.
Y era la tierra la que se amaba en ellos,
el oro nocturno de sus vueltas,
la galaxia.

Ya no tendrían dos muertes. No iban a separarse.
Desnudos, asombrados, sus cuerpos se tendían
como hileras de luces en un largo aeropuerto
donde algo iba a llegar desde muy lejos,
no demasiado tarde.