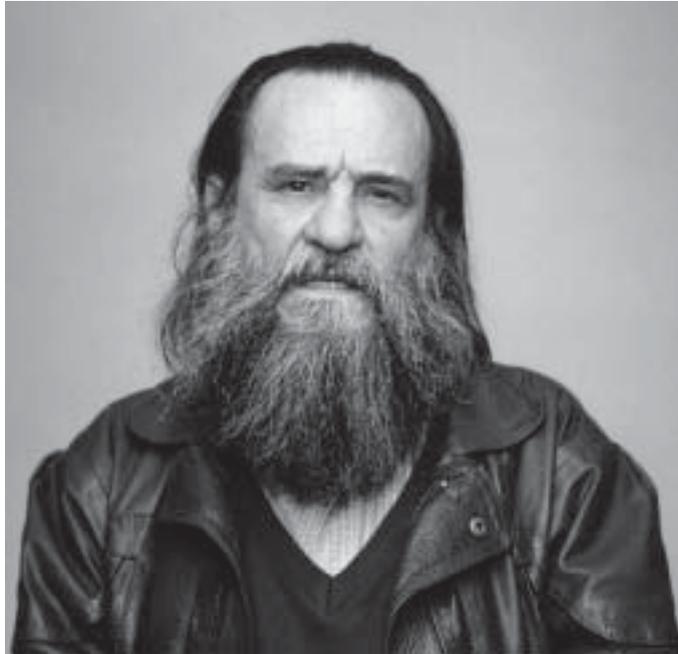


ENCUENTROS



A Country, A Decade

Lecture by

Salvador Garmendia

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The IDB Cultural Center *Visual Arts Program*, and the *Concerts and Lectures Series* stimulates dialogue and a greater knowledge of the culture of the Americas. The Center's *Cultural Promotion in the Field Program* funds projects in the fields of youth cultural development, institutional support, restoration and conservation of cultural patrimony, and preservation of cultural traditions. The *IDB Art Collection*, gathered over several decades, is managed by the Cultural Center. Many pieces in the collection reflect acquisitions in tune with the relevance and importance the Bank has achieved after four decades of existence as the leading financial institution concerned with the development of Latin America and the Caribbean.

A COUNTRY, A DECADE

Salvador Garmendia

I thought it prudent to begin by invoking the presence of a decade: the nineteen sixties, which happened to coincide with my own thirty-second year. Looking back from this turning of the century, the specter of the sixties rises like a colossal wave, a scintillating spectacle closing off all other perspectives. For those who were active participants, that extravagant montage left us breathless for a long time; perhaps some have even stayed back there somewhere, their skin still tingling, still wondering if it all really happened.

For me that meteoric decade left moments of thunder and lightning that still sparkle. It was a blinding play of light that burned itself out, without waiting for the curtain to fall, leaving the dais empty and the skeletons singed.

At this moment, a particular image projects across my mind. I can see the final sequence of *Woodstock*, the historic cinematographic report of that amazing concentration of humanity, that spontaneous impulse of a liberated generation which made the world hold its breath as

though in thrall to a magic resurrection. Routine reality was made numinous, infused with ingenuous spontaneity, and amplified many thousands of times. The camera brings us right up onto the dais where, hours before, Jimi Hendrix had appropriated the U.S. national anthem, rending the air with its rhythms and electronic howls. From that dais, we get a complete view of the great meadow that for three days harbored 300,000 youths. (Such a concentration of young people had not been seen since the days of fascist political rallies, before the Second World War.)

Now what we see is rain, a pale, discouraged sunrise. A lone couple wanders uselessly through the trash, which the tired wind barely ruffles. All that is left is desolation and abandonment. No bodies, no souls, no music, no smoke—the ground is bare. A minute later, the cameras are turned off. The screen is empty. The decade is teaching us its legacy.

We could add as an epitaph—or gather up like a leaf left by the wind—the severe,

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crepuscular poetry of Jim Morrison, one of the era's fallen angels. A single fragment sends us hurtling back:

They still stand and in
their silent rooms still wander
the souls of the dead,
who keep their watch on the living.
Soon enough we shall join them.
Soon enough we shall walk
the walls of time. We shall
miss nothing
except each other.¹

In the midst of all the cacophony and irreverence that impregnate the decade of the sixties, Venezuela embarked on a new period of political democracy. In those first moments, everything was happening in the street. Actions and events were sudden, short-lived, evanesced within twenty-four hours. During the provisional government, Caracas went for over a month without police. Although no one can remember exact details, the fact is that everyone got along well, without asking any questions. Illusions overflowed a reality without immediate references, a reality that seemed to get invented day by day. It was like an outbreak of adolescent acne, which spread, without any consideration, to the most indifferent sectors of society.

Those who were trying to write creative literature had to confront the dark horizon tacitly established by the military regime of Marcos Pérez Giménez (1952-58). The guidelines and procedures reflected a military nationalism, a permanently furrowed brow, which derived more from style than from content. The style was the same we knew from earlier periods. (Walking backwards, without looking, is

one of the most refined graces adorning our country's history.) The mannered, dancing *criollismo* of the official folkloric groups; the cowboy shows transplanted from the plains; the baroque indigenist murals that adorned (and still adorn, in their whimpering, whining way) certain of the regime's public works sites, exuding an exhausted, ponderous socialist realism appropriated from the enemy, calling to mind the wrappers for La India chocolates, one of our most tenacious traditional industries. In terms of content, there was none, aesthetically speaking; so now we can only remember these works as bad jokes.

In those years, it was forbidden to celebrate May 1 as the International Day of the Worker, owing to the not entirely erroneous presumption that it had communist roots. In its place was installed the Week of the Fatherland, whose most distinctive feature was that participation was obligatory.

We all went to the big parade dressed in white *liquiliqui* (the traditional suit worn in Venezuela and Colombia), whose origins apparently go back to ancient China. (Please don't be surprised: practically all manifestations of Venezuelan folklore are imported: whiskey, for instance, whose patrimony we share with the Scots). Remember the Mao suit—white or gray drill shirt, closed at the neck, gold plated buttons, but only if the rains that year came on time, and gold cufflinks if the harvest was good. I can't say whether or not this suit is also part of other rural traditions on the continent. But it must have enjoyed enormous prestige in our neighboring Colombia because, in lieu of a tuxedo, the suit was worn by Gabriel García Márquez in Stockholm, during the

1982 Nobel Prize Ceremony.

When I saw our great fabulist, our Gabo, wearing Caribbean white to receive his prize on the imposing stage of the Opera, I had the sensation it was one of his stories come to life. At that moment, the jovial *costeño* who, thirty years before, had pounded the pavements of Caracas as a reporter for a weekly magazine of questionable prestige, could have taken wing and flown over the whole ceremony, and to all of us it would have seemed perfectly natural. Now he had all the prestige in the world, and in *liquiliqui*, no less. What more could we Venezuelans want? We didn't win the Nobel Prize, but we had received it in spirit, when Gabo wore the national suit to the ceremony.

Seeing Gabo that day on television, it seemed I was seeing an uncle of mine who every day of his life wore that same outfit: the essential masculine suit, the uniform of robust, early-rising, working men. But my uncle's nationalist fanaticism was basically decorative, befitting a person who always knew how to avoid any productive activity. I can almost see him now, walking up and down a runway, modeling his *liquiliqui*, newly starched and sprayed with violet water.

In any case, that was the traditional profile of Venezuelans in the last century; or to put it more exactly, of the settlers of a century that kept itself going for an unnaturally long time, until at least 1935, the year that the dictator General Juan Vicente Gómez died. (I've been talking about Venezuela for only five minutes and already mentioned dictatorship twice.) Gómez, as we know, governed for twenty-seven years (1908-1935), a period broken up by the patriarch's strange depressive pauses, oscillating between disappoint-

ment and boredom. Then he would withdraw, clinically and constitutionally, to his haciendas—he actually had the Constitution amended for these ends—where he devoted himself to the animals in his private zoo, the garden he called *Las Delicias*. Animals don't talk, and they don't laugh. So the old, poorly educated general relaxed among his family. In the interim, some person of confidence, preferably a Doctor, assumed institutional and protocolar responsibility for the State.

And it turns out that, when I recalled that brother of my father who reminded me of Gabo in *liquiliqui*, I was, unbeknownst to myself, tracing the prototype of Venezuela before the oil boom: the Venezuela dedicated to agriculture or coffee, embarrassingly poor, illiterate, unhealthy, and historically depopulated. Barely three million inhabitants distributed, for geographic reasons, over a little more than one million square kilometers. We had a superabundance of land, but everywhere, agriculture never flourished. The poor earth went from orchards to weeds. The herds roaming the plains stayed wild.

During the nineteenth century, peasants in my country were better prepared for military than for country life. The Venezuelan rural laborer was more soldier than farm worker. Peasants fought the war of independence, and then became permanent cannon fodder under the same patriotic landowners (who wanted independence) or their descendants, be they centrists or liberals.

The war ended in 1909, with the country in ruins, after the palace coup that the previous year had brought Juan Vicente Gómez to power. "The warlock," he was called by his single panegyrist, the Colom-

bian Fernando González. I don't know if anyone here knows of that unclassifiable biography, personal diary, or notebook with the arbitrary, anachronistic title, *Mi compadre* (My Godfather).^a Upon publication it was immediately, and widely, savaged. Today, the sarcasm and irony are still buried head down in those pages, but they kick madly to get out. Let's turn to that almost radiographic portrait of the dictator in his sacred intimacy:

"He doesn't speak. He eats slowly, chews a lot, distractedly, with a smile of satisfaction, his eyes gazing vaguely into the distance. He seems to be enjoying, delectating the graces of his physiological soul. To his son...he replied, after a while, as though his mind were returning from a voyage, from his organic functions. He is, most definitely, a great poet. Then, he lays down to rest, alone; Tarazona guards the door..."

Elsewhere he tells us what happened the day of the coup against his godfather and Cipriano Castro, his military chief. Gómez went to Yellow House in Caracas (the seat of government), to popular acclamation. Here again, we quote Fernando [González]:

"He called in the governor of Caracas, who tried to resist, even calling [Gómez] traitor. Gómez slapped him across the face. A Venezuelan revolution that began with a slap." Needless to say, our beautiful *caraqueña* Teresa de la Parra adores Fernando González. She says, "My books by [him] are riddled with fingernail scratches, because when I mislaid my pencil, I'd use my nails."^b

The death of Gómez facilitated the start of the twentieth century in Venezuela. From 1936 until January 1, 1948, there spans an arc of difficulties, upheavals, errors, impro-

visations, bitter struggles, frequent stoppages, and merciless reversals, right up to the beginning of the unpredictable 1960s. In terms of art and literature, it was our point of re-entry into modernity. At the same time, it brought our barren isolation from the rest of the world to an abrupt end. Suddenly Venezuelans were living on the moon, with store windows full of imported luxuries. A bragadocious and pathetic self-sufficiency became the grotesque substitute for reality.

The re-establishment of the democratic regime opens the road to thirty years of institutional development, which today seems to be living its final moments. We contemplate a scene that surprises us with its incoherence and confusion, a kind of stupid parody that makes us laugh.

We should now ask ourselves: What was the process that gave rise to contemporary Venezuelan society, and in what way, to what point, did we writers participate in that movement? As for myself, my adolescence was spent trying to balance on the line between two nations.

The old, rural, carrion territory had been vanishing into indigence, leaving nothing of value; and the new, maddening, accelerated era of oil arrived all of a sudden, with great fanfare. The latter was imported, consumerist, spendthrift, carnivalesque, democratic, and vulgar. Our democracy was mimetic; its first sparks caught fire spontaneously in the 1930s, while the old dictator was napping. The system was organized through the hurried appropriation of behaviors, inclinations, practices, and superficial social codes suddenly introduced to the nascent middle class, but without the necessary withdrawal of the ancient patriarch. The new urban population launched its insurgent

projects, but still remained under the indifferent shelter of tyranny.

The descendants of those pioneers still cling to a nostalgia for the despotism that served as their guide. At this moment, as we approach an electoral process potentially fraught with disaster, many are seduced by the possibility of electing a military man to the presidency. It would seem that civil society, like an inexperienced adolescent, lacks the self-confidence needed to govern itself, and so confesses to a pathetic inclination to obey.

But let us return to our own gaps and conflicts, letting our gaze slide over what happens in a country where fanfare and triumphal march still mix with, are superimposed on, the ancient cries of the peasants and the sounds of lament and punishment. In the mid 1940s, democracy used to make intermittent, devastating appearances on the national scene, emulating the cold fury so common then. There was surely little time for meditation then, but somehow—as lecturers tend elegantly to note—I had the perhaps timid conviction that my career was to be a literary one, and that it was too late to turn back.

At the same time, I had gotten some warnings about the essentially heterodox nature of the writer's profession. It was clear that the Venezuelan writer garnered prestige and position, but these came more through political action than from books. In fact, it seemed that publishing books and having readers was the least important part of earning the virtual diploma of Venezuelan writer. No one can remember a single line written by some of our most famous poets. Nonetheless, hats are tipped when poets are met in the

stairwells of the Ministry.

Our great men of letters have sometimes been unfortunate recipients of power. Rómulo Gallegos^c was president of the Republic. Arturo Uslar Pietri,^d minister, party chief, and candidate for prime minister. Andrés Eloy Blanco,^e minister and public orator. From its men of letters, the country requires more than literature. The nation wants something resonant, shining; something that won't fade into the shadows like José Antonio Ramos Sucre,^f or willingly dissolve into a gray hotel room like Julio Garmendia.^g

"Profession?" asks the functionary, filling out the form. "Writer." "Excuse me, I meant, what do you do?" In our countries, literature is not an activity. Perhaps it will come to be thought of as a failing. What, then, is the "role" of the writer? I used to see it as a pile of papers that one day would have to be filled. At eighteen, I was a clerk at my district's Military Registry and Draft Office. I filled out thousands of tickets without even looking up from my desk, even though the characters in my books must have been right there, waiting for me, at least maybe one of them. "Profession," I would ask. Practically everyone answered, "Worker." "Very good," I would say. "We have a country full of workers."

But history still had not been written for us, and to be conscious of our own participation in the approaching decade we needed to observe it all in perspective. Now, finally, we have a cross section. We can see the smallest details, in a perfect scale reduction, full of color and movement. Today, events are registered, developed, and stored minute by minute, and human activities age and die, often before we realize what is happening.

In terms of art and literature, the sixties unleashed into the world such impetus and acceleration that a simple enumeration of the events becomes problematic, prone to errors and omissions. In earlier centuries, art moved with a solemn slowness. Decades elapsed between the musical creations of Leoninus and [Magnus] Perotinus,^h yet the evolution of the Gregorian chant and the subtle aesthetic variations fostered by the School of Notre Dame, are today barely discernible to connoisseurs, and totally unknown to profane listeners.

In 1913 Paris, Igor Stravinsky unleashed an aesthetic and formal revolution with his *Rite of Spring*. The night of its première, the disconcerted audience practically staged a mutiny. Fifty years later, with even the twelve-tone scale already going gray, the *Rite of Spring* sounds to our ears like Romanticism with drums.

Let us cross a threshold to the last postwar period, and try to discern how it all began, from a South American perspective. Certain films, particular songs, some revealing books, painted the European postwar period in dark, shadowy tones, emphasizing the spiritual precedent of Sartrean existentialism. Destroyed cities, empty stomachs, black sweaters, faces without make-up. The remains, more or less salvageable, of an ancient culture rescued from the ruins, yet without answers for the present. Terror and disillusion seemed to color all of daily life. The powerful nations stockpiled enormous arsenals of atomic weapons and the survival of humanity began to depend on a single button. The cold war sharpened its knives.

Venezuela received barely a reflection, a distant echo of this depressive social

tableau. We were spectators in the grandstand, naive and stupefied, open-mouthed, really. We had followed the events of World War II as though it were a world champion soccer match. The enemy was scoring goals. Our defenses were falling, while Allied propaganda tried, in a thousand ways, to inculcate a triumphalist idea of what was happening and its ideological frame.

Entry into the new decade coincides with a general attitude of challenge. Invent, create, imagine, assume every risk—even when the objective isn't quite clear. Everything was bankrupt or under observation, although now it seems the final verdict had been redacted and signed from the very beginning. The old morality, beliefs, ideologies, courting behavior, even the music we habitually listened and danced to, had become stale, unserviceable.

Perhaps many young people were convinced they were still Marxists, but at the same time they realized that the Bolshevik revolution was a mummified cadaver, and that nothing could be done with the tools handed down to us by our elders. The last dawning of world revolution took place in the Caribbean, in Cuba, the era's center of hope and expectation. Would Hispanoamericans stop being spectators to history, and become actors? Who said it first? For a time, the single star continued to light up the end of the road: epiphany. The disappointments started coming too soon, but the impulse that provoked the first shot truly shook the world.

Meanwhile, the miracle machine went out of control. Disequilibrium, frenzy, irrational rudeness confounded everything. Drugs, sex, stridency, and a never-

satisfied yearning for freedom, self-contemplation, and ecstasy. The Beatles announced a new realm—fragile, untouchable, recently discovered. *Yellow Submarine* became a lullaby. Carlos Santana, a New York Latino musician, lit the fire under a jazz that had become European, intellectualized, almost academic, with the unexpected combustible of African drums and bongos. From that moment, the century's music would be different.

These steps forward already have their places in the firmament. It was the decade of commitment, whose end became apparent when the squelching of slogans, as well as the attempts to corral intelligence in ideological barracks, stopped. One could almost say that, as writers, we recuperated our freedom, but only while wearing a straitjacket. The phantasm of commitment had left the scene without having totally clarified its role. Commitment to what, with whom, to what point?

As far as I know, the line that was to separate the territories in conflict—individual passion and readiness for combat—were never clearly drawn. And yet, if we look back on those years, we will see that the schema seemed very concrete: the intellectual's responsibility to the moment, a militant response from writers and artists to social inequality, a belligerent position concerning class struggle, a rejection of elitist individualism, and an acceptance of public positions consonant with popular liberation movements. In these and other well-worn phrases of that old, now stale and tiring, political rhetoric, we find the passport to respectability for intellectuals, who had never been sufficiently trustworthy.

A paragraph from Adriano González León from 1956 exemplifies, better in

form than content, the insurrectional project embedded in the avant-garde texts of the sixties. The defiant, belligerent, poetic language made it possible to amalgamate the material of individual writing with the destructive clamor and impetuosity of the latest non-orthodox revolutionary slogans: "The act of writing is justified by fulminating possibility. It consists of a sharp hormonal determination to tear to shreds all the oily sheets of literature, in order to extract the visceral content—so vilified—where we are certain to find the buds of a possible resurrection."²

It was precisely during these years that the proposition took root that a writer's literary commitment entailed responsibility to society. As writers and artists we shared an intransigent, unruly attitude, rejecting conformity and bourgeois hypocrisy as vehemently as we did those pale, orthodox Marxist manuals (denounced by Fidel Castro himself, who ended up falling asleep with his head in the book). The various literary groups for young people that sprung up in Venezuela after the dictatorship of the fifties, testify to the authenticity of this behavior.

In one of his penetrating essays on Venezuelan cultural life, the Uruguayan critic Angel Rama, who lived in our country many years, had this to say: "Of the numerous artistic movements that contributed their particular tumultuous note to the decade of the sixties in Caracas, there was one that distinguished itself by its violence, anarchic spirit, and deliberate public aggression, making provocation an instrument for human investigation. It called itself *El Techo de la Ballena* [The Roof of the Whale]."³

Before you today is one who partici-

pated in that adventure. I was accompanied by Adriano González León, a fiction writer of some renown in Spanish, who won the 1967 Seix Barral Prize; a group of avant-garde poets, including Juan Calzadilla and Francisco Pérez Perdomo, Ramón Palomares, Luis García Morals, Efraín Hurtado, Caupolicán Ovalles, Damazo Ogaz, Rodolfo Izaguirre, and Edmundo Aray; and especially the poet and visual artist Carlos Contra maestre, the great magma of that generation of rebellious aesthetes, who baptized the movement by situating it beneath the mythic invocation of the whale, just in time to launch the first volley [of insults] with the Necrophilia Exhibit in 1962.

It was a genuine Sadean cataclysm, which sowed panic and consternation in the oasis of cultural ignorance then reigning in Caracas. The bones and innards of recently slaughtered animals covered the walls of the garage that served as the site for the consummation of the sacrilege. In one catalogue photograph, we can see Contra maestre leaning on a public slaughterer's satanic-looking counter, selecting the most suitable pieces for his work. The caption reads, "The Artist in His Studio." More than an irascible, exhibitionist gesture, that arbitrary pirouette was a response—loaded with blood and irony—to the very real daily exercise of armed repression by the regime's police in the city's streets.

In that moment, for the "Whalers," as perhaps for all of Caribbean literature, Jorge Luis Borges was still a distant figure. A discomfiting but intriguing neighbor who stopped in for a visit, patiently hung up his hat, and sat down to wait. Later, our reading of "El hombre de la esquina rosada" ["Man on Pink Corner"]

confused us even more, as it trapped us in its shifting, suggestive web. This was the language we had been waiting for. On that Borgesian corner, the speech we wanted for ourselves fought tooth and nail for that space. For many of us, Borges became the point where everything converged and radiated outward in all directions.

The "Whalers" shared the surrealists' arrogant disdain for literature as a repository of conventionalism: "The inopportune exercise of refinement," to quote Adriana González León, "literature's sad lack of validity." Nonetheless, a prose fragment by the most impetuous poet of his generation, Caupolicán Ovalles, the exuberant, prophetic singer of *Yo Bolívar Rey*, will never stop being that which the poet least intended it to be. This happened often, owing to the impatience of those years, when many things came off the press before their authors had finished thinking them through—a polished and precious literary exercise infused, perhaps involuntarily, with tradition and Quevedian sonority: "Our city, empire's rose, maiden, and adulteress, our own matron of virtue. Caracas is of the sea and the oceans and, though Avila may have interposed itself, we have always breathed the sea air, and because we belong to the sea, to this city of the sea, we have evidence that some cataclysm—the earth's behavioral norm—will allow the dance of the whale on our tombs."⁴

Víctor Valera Mora, *el chino Valera*, was the predominant bard and leader of a new semi-clandestine literary wave of the sixties, whose rebellion and agitation were inspired equally by nonconformity and despair. His agonizing identity card is displayed when he admits in a poem of

adolescence: "My birth brought pain / but I live not hurting anyone." Later he writes odes that combine the traditional flavor of the street-corner bard with laughter and admonitions thrown out to the four winds.

But the times also closed doors, put putty in apartment windows so the sounds outside wouldn't come through. This same poet also writes *Oficio Puro* (Honest Work) under the fluorescent bulbs shining on the porcelain in a bathroom:

How does she walk, a woman who
has just made love
What does she think about,
a woman who has just made love
How does she see the faces of others,
and how does her face look to them
What color is the skin of a woman
who has just made love
How does she feel, a woman
who has just made love
Will she greet her friends
Consider that in other countries
it is snowing
Will she light up and smoke
a cigarette
Nude in the bath will she turn
on the cold or hot water or
let them both flow together
A woman who has just made love
how does she kneel down
Will she dream that pleasure
is a boat trip
Regress to childhood
Cross rivers, mountains, plains
spend nights at home
Will she sleep with her face to the sun
Wake up sad, happy, with vertigo
The woman's beautiful body
wasn't docile, lovable or wise.⁵

The poetry of Miyó Vestrini proposes a difficult, discordant encounter with reality, the squandered reality of the day-to-day. The mess in the sink, the song on a scratched record, the dawn rising in a glass of whiskey, a mistreated purity that only the impure can manage to reconstitute:

At this hour
no one knows what to do
and it's always at this hour of
whores and dogs and losers
when I remember.
Every day, this time is lost,
you know, my face in my hands,
legs pressed together, the vivid
image of pain in the heaviness
of the afternoon. Immobile in
the rubble, immune to disaster,
how else could it be.
The same hour all over again
today
everyday
to fuck me over.⁶

In 1979, Luis Brito García's *Abrapalabra*, a genuine literary feat, won Cuba's Casa de las Américas Prize. Never before had Venezuelan literature produced a work of these dimensions; nor had the language ever before accepted such a crucial challenge with provocation on every page, in every line of this novel without limits, without beginning or end. Is it a novel? we asked. The literature of this century has made it clear that the novel is everything which aspires to totality: time, space, form, layers of meaning whose interweaving and sub-division eventually annul all logic, all reason. *Abrapalabra* is organized along these lines and manages to be a complete novel in each of its fragments, in each

intake of breath, in each flash of lucidity. A thousand and one novels up against each other, parallel, simultaneous, projected into infinity.

I'll reiterate here what I think is the best way to penetrate the labyrinth, where every intersection is an exit and every exit a return to new passageway. I would open the book anywhere, without looking, convinced I was going to land exactly where I wanted. This time, it was paragraph 98 in *Etapas de una mano* (Phases of a Hand), an astonishing exercise in the dissection of a fragment of human anatomy which, breaking free of all confines, comes to enclose a universe:

"Swept away by the first entropic wave, the fingerprints light up, gleam like butterflies in the nights of time, dirty a face, a pistol, a check written on an empty account. Shining brightly, they are seeds that can't germinate in the box office at the movies, in dentists' waiting rooms, on steering wheels, on the coins that one hand touches and another spends, on some wall, on some thrown-away rag now worn by a beggar. The reiteration of fingerprints makes for a multitude of stains in oppressive places: the sunsplashed hair that lights up our days; the bowl of soup; the headboard of the bed; the breasts—so often touched—of a woman.

"Fingerprints intersect, like lines of ants. Glowing, their nets recede in time. Yet they also move forward into the day, and halt."⁷

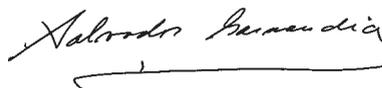
The young Venezuelans of today have fought no wars. But one must fight a war and come out of it alive in order not to ask too many questions, or at least to have an answer that seems credible. The sixties were for us a kind of war. But a war lacking a visible enemy, or where the en-

emy had decided not to take it personally. In reality, we fought those battles day by day within ourselves knowing, without saying it, that the war was lost from the beginning. The most adaptable would win. It ended as we expected, they'd saved us a place. There would be a chair for each one. A chair missing a leg, but on which we could perfectly well support ourselves.

Our juvenile guerrillas in the sixties jousted tournaments that were almost always puerile or ingenuous, or evaporated before culminating in total defeat. That skeletal armed struggle literally fell apart; as happens in dreams, it was stripped down to an immodest nudity, exposed to its bare loins. Some of the leaders of that movement, members of a suspiciously invulnerable general staff (because it suffered no losses), are today among our most notorious figures—parliamentarians without credibility, or gray-haired members of the Cabinet.

So the age of commitment came to an end, without winners, but also without losers. Defeat with dignity hadn't been part of the plan. There was no one left to close the accounts, no procedures to maintain.

All of those good intentions—"eventually they'll get it," "tomorrow will be..."—dissolved. But we must exorcize nostalgia and leave the rest in the hands of time—the only judge that cannot be suborned, because its sentences are never executed.



Salvador Garmendia

NOTES *

1. Jim Morrison, *Poemas*, edited and translated by Alberto Manzano. Caracas-Madrid: Editorial Fundamentos, Colección Espiral, vol. 2, 1993. The original English text is found in *Wilderness: The Last Writings of Jim Morrison*, vol. 1. New York: Villard Books, 1988, p. 197. The first four lines of the poem are as follows: "The Endless quest a vigil/of watchtowers and fortresses/against the sea and time,/Have they won? Perhaps."
2. Adriano González León. Cited by Angel Rama in *Antología del Techo de la Ballena*, p. 30.
3. Angel Rama, *ibid.*, see Note 2, Prologue, p. 11.
4. Caupolicán Ovalles, "Rayado sobre el techo," (Scratched on the Ceiling), (No. 3, August 1964), p. 28.
5. Víctor Valera Mora, *Amaneci de Bala* (I Was Awakened by Gunshots). Mérida: Impresora Regional Andina, 1971. His complete works are published in Spanish as *Obras completas*, introduced by Javier Lasarte V. Caracas: FUNDARTE, Alcaldía de Caracas, 1994.
6. Miyó Vestrini, "Hora de putos y perros y necios," (Hour of whores and dogs and losers) in the collection *Pocas virtudes* (Few Virtues). Caracas: Ediciones de la Dirección de Cultura de la Universidad Central de Venezuela, Serie Poesía, p 53.
7. Luis Britto García, *ABRAPALABRA*. Caracas: Editorial Monte Avila, 1980, p. 200.

* Trans. note: English translations of the works are noted; the titles of untranslated works are given literally.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

- a. The most recent edition of Fernando González's *Mi compadre* was published in 1980 by Editorial Ateneo de Caracas.
- b. Writer Teresa de la Parra was born in Paris (in a year given variously as 1889, 1891 and 1895), and died in Caracas in 1936. She grew up on her family's plantation outside the Venezuelan capital, then lived in Spain and France before returning home many years later. As Garmendia's comment indicates, she was famous for her beauty, epitomizing for many the glamour of colonial plantation society. But she was above all a modernist, with a distinct perspective on the patriarchal, gender, and sexual currents of colonial life.

Garmendia's familiar tone in referring to her, and his use of the present tense, underscores how contemporary she feels to many writers even today. Contemporary literary and feminist scholars associate her writings with those of the Chilean Gabriela Mistral (with whom she was very close), and the Argentines Norah Lange and Victoria Ocampo. Her life companion was the prominent Cuban anthropologist Lydia Cabrera. A particularly good introduction in English is *Mama Blanca's Memoirs*, translated by Harriet de Onís and revised by Frederick H. Fornoff. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993. Among the prominent scholars contributing to this critical edition are Doris Sommer (Harvard), Sylvia Molloy (New York University), and Velia Bosch, de la Parra's Venezuelan editor. There was an homage to Teresa de la Parra in Caracas, in 1975, to commemorate the International Year of the Woman: *La Mujer en las letras venezolanas: homenaje a Teresa de la Parra en el Año internacional de la mujer*. Caracas: Impr. del Congreso de la República, 1976. Catalogue, exhibit, bibliography, etc.
- c. Rómulo Gallegos (1884-1969) is probably best-known for *Doña Bárbara* (1929) and *Canaima*, both readily available in several English editions. He was elected president of Venezuela in 1947, and toppled in a military coup the following year. The author can be heard reading from his prose in a 1960 sound recording made for the Archive of Hispanic Literature on Tape, Library of Congress.
- d. Arturo Uslar Pietri (1906-), novelist, short-story writer, and political essayist who often incorporated historical events (including the discovery of oil in Venezuela) into his fiction. He can be heard reading from his work in a 1961 sound recording made for the Archive of Hispanic Literature on Tape, Library of Congress.
- e. Andrés Bello (1781-1865), modernist poet. He and Rómulo Gallegos wrote prominently about each other's work. He can be heard reading from his work on a 1943 sound recording made for the Archive of Hispanic Literature on Tape, Library of Congress.

- f. José Antonio Ramos Sucre (1890-1930). Modernist poet with affinities to symbolism, re-discovered in the 1960s. His complete works are published in *Obra Completa*. Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1980.
- g. Julio Garmendia (1898-1967), realist short-story writer.
- h. Leoninus (Léonin) a late 12th-century composer at Notre Dame, was succeeded by Magnus Perotinus (Pérotin), who was most active from 1180-1210. Perotinus revised some of Leoninus' work, introducing, as Garmendia says, subtle (but important) innovations in organ and vocal composition.
- i. Another distinguishing feature is that these poets were very attuned to the visual arts, including film, and several have been prominent critics.

Salvador Garmendia (Barquisimeto, Venezuela, 1928) has won numerous prizes and awards, including: the Juan Rulfo Short Story Prize (Paris, 1989); the National Literature Prize (1970); and the 1960 Caracas Municipal Prize for his first novel, *Los pequeños seres* (Minor Beings). In 1959, he founded the Sardo group and edited the magazine of that name; in 1961, he helped found the *Techo de la Ballena* group. He was named director of the magazine *Actual*, published at the University of the Andes in Mérida, Venezuela. From 1984 until 1989 he was Cultural Advisor at the Venezuelan Embassy in Madrid; and in 1992 he was named editor of the magazine *Imagen Latinoamericana*, published under the auspices of the National Institute for Culture in Caracas. He is today a screenwriter for radio, film, and television.

His major works are the novels *Los pequeños seres* (Minor Beings), 1959; *Los habitantes* (The Inhabitants), 1961; *La mala vida* (Hard Life), 1968; *Los pies de barro* (Feet of Clay), 1973; *Memorias de Altagracia*, 1974; and *El Capitán Kid*, 1980. Available in English is *Memoirs of Altagracia*, translated by Jeremy Munday, Dufour Editions, 1997.

His short-story collections include *Doble fondo* (False Bottom), *Los escondites* (Hiding Places); *Difuntos* (The Deceased), *Extraños y volátiles* (Strange and Volatile), *Enmiendas y atropellos* (Amendments and Violations); *Hace mal tiempo afuera* (Bad Weather Outside); *La gata y la señora* (The Cat and the Lady); *Cuentos cómicos* (Comic Stories); *La media espada de Amadís* (Amadis's Sword),* *Un reino para Galileo* (A Kingdom for Galileo); and *El viento más viejo del mundo* (The Oldest Story in the World). Garmendia has also published numerous chronicles and edited various anthologies.

Translated by Marguerite Feitlowitz

* Trans. note: The title is a reference to Amadís of Gaul, the protagonist of the celebrated 1508 novel attributed to Garcí Ordóñez de Montalvo. Cervantes praised this book highly, and was plainly influenced by it. Amadís was the perfect knight: a valiant and loyal vassal, a lover of purity, and a poetic, faithful lover.

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