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Ramón López Velarde 1888–1921

Mexican poet and essayist

Modern Mexican poetry begins with Ramón López Velarde. He is undoubtedly one of the most genuine poetic voices to inhabit that hard-to-classify period in Spanish American literature that stretches from Modernism to the vanguard poets. As a major representative of Spanish American *postmodernismo* (that is, the period that followed *Modernismo*), he is the first writer in Mexico to thematize the Mexican province in a new way. But he ought not be reduced to being the poet of the province. López

Velarde was above all the creator of a new poetic language; this alone distinguishes him from González Martínez, for example. The value of his verse resides in having rescued from oblivion the simple and the minuscule by means of a deceptively prosaic language. If, in his haiku, José Juan Tablada delves into the small and colourful, and Carlos Pellicer manages to compose beautiful symphonies to nature, López Velarde turns inward; consequently, the themes of his poetry are his conscience, his anguish, his vacillations, his childhood memories, his feelings of guilt, etc. His poetry constitutes one of the most dramatic confessions in Mexican letters. As regards the themes, they were not new to Mexican poetry; what was new was the sensibility with which he approached them. One theme stands out among all: love, or, as Octavio Paz, one of his best critics states, “la pasión de amor” (the passion of love). Other prominent themes are women, sensuality, religion and death. Though López Velarde was not a great reader, he felt the influence of Baudelaire, Laforgue, Góngora, Quevedo, Darío, Herrera y Reissig, Francisco González León (1862–1945) — a minor Mexican poet who wrote about life in the provinces — and especially Leopold Lugones, from whom he learned to create surprising metaphors by avoiding clichés and commonplaces.

López Velarde's literary production is rather small, since he published only two books of poetry in his lifetime: *La sangre devota*, 1916 [Consecrated Blood] and *Zozobra*, 1919 [Anguish]. Posthumous works include his collection of poetry *El son del corazón*, 1932 (*Song of the Heart*), and two prose collections: *El minuterero*, 1923 [The Minute Hand], and *El don de febrero y otras prosas*, 1952 [February's Gift and Other Prose Writings]. Generally speaking, *La sangre devota* is characterized by a partially *modernista* atmosphere which gradually becomes a timid exercise in avant-garde experimentation via the use of obscure metaphors and colloquialisms in the second half of the book. In *Zozobra* and *El son del corazón*, clearly more complex texts than *La sangre de-*

vota, López Velarde reaches the maturity of his style not by abandoning the themes of province, woman or impossible love, but by complicating them formally by means of new avant-garde imagery. In all of his literary production, however, there are certain paramount concerns that never leave the poet's imagination. The most significant is the struggle that the lyric voice wages between the thorough idealization of woman, woman as the pure love object, and woman as primarily a creature of flesh and blood who makes the staunchly Catholic López Velarde unreservedly give in to the temptations of the flesh. From this perennial conflict, in effect, emanate not only the attendant dilemma of an incessant wavering between good and evil but also the linguistic contradictions as well as the unusual juxtapositions of adjectives which are part and parcel of his style.

The most vivid incarnation of the poetic voice's spiritual predicament in the early poems (written between 1905 and 1912 and not included in *La sangre devota*) and in the poems of *La sangre devota* is Fuensanta, an almost mystical figure from the province who arguably becomes the archetype of woman in the poetry of López Velarde. Fuensanta's real name was Josefa de los Ríos, and she had a love relationship with the poet which ended abruptly and definitively. In his verse, she represents impossible love; the lyric voice describes her as a chaste and pure woman very much like the ideal woman of the courtly love tradition. It is not an accident, therefore, that critics have found parallels between the poetry of López Velarde and that of his compatriot, Amado Nervo. *La sangre devota* has been portrayed as a passionate spiritual biography. In the process of the transfiguration of Fuensanta, the poet does not know whether to venerate her or to desire her, for she in fact simultaneously embodies mystical temptation and physical attraction. This is especially evident in "En las tinieblas húmedas" [In the Moist Darkness], where a state of absolute confusion and conflict prevail, and also in "Pobrecilla sonámbula" [Poor Sleepless One], where Fuensanta is

depicted as an intangible being, a phantom who walks in her sleep. Thematically, in López Velarde's first poetic phase eroticism is always associated with religious and liturgical themes; hence, verbs such as to venerate, to revere, or to canonize, as well as nouns belonging to the Catholic rite and to the Bible, abound. Formally, this first phase is characterized by the use of an intimate and authentic language very different from the *modernistas'* often superficial expression. Among the best poems of *La sangre devota* are "Mi prima Agueda" [My Cousin Agueda], "¿Qué será lo que espero? [I Wonder What It Is I Want?]" and "Y pensar que pudimos ..." [To Think We Could Have ...].

Three years elapsed between the publication of *La sangre devota* and *Zozobra*. During this time López Velarde moved to the capital and abandoned politics, utterly disillusioned after the death of his friend and hero Francisco L. Madero. Fuensanta and the province continue to be present in *Zozobra* and *El son*, but they are transformed. The erotic aspects of love which begin to surface in a number of poems of *La sangre devota* seem to overcome the poetic voice in these two texts as the lyric succumbs to the pleasures of the flesh in a desperate attempt to attain impossible love. Of the many women who are poeticized in these two collections of poems, María Nevares, with whom López Velarde corresponded for a good many years, plays a fundamental role. *Zozobra* represents the poet's highest literary achievement. It has been called López Velarde's most personal book. One of the best poems of the collection is the first one, "Hoy como nunca" [Today as Never Before], which functions as a type of thematic bridge between *Zozobra* and *La sangre devota*. Here the lyric voice invokes Fuensanta and reminisces about the past as he sinks deeper and deeper into a sea of desperation; this poem also introduces the theme of death, one of the most prevalent themes in López Velarde's second poetic phase. In *Zozobra* the poet reacts strongly against sentimentalism. This is especially discernible in the abundance of rare adjectives, juxtapositions of dissimilar re-

alities, combinations of surprising words and horrific images of death as in the best paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. Some of the most successful poems of *Zozobra* are “La mancha púrpura [The Purple Stain], “Tierra mojada” [Wet Land], “El retorno maléfico” [Evil Return], “Hormigas” [Ants] and “La última odalisca” [The Last Odalisque], the last of these being one of López Velarde's most hermetic poems.

El son del corazón represents the final stage in the spiritual and aesthetic evolution of the artist. The presence of tangibly identified women disappears, and the women who do appear, such as Ligia and Zoraida, constitute symbolic representations of the now distant Fuensanta, who is not mentioned by name. In the poems of *El son* woman is in effect spiritualized and made less concrete. Availing himself of cosmic images, the more mature and reflexive poet re-elaborates the major themes of his previous works. There is a certain attitude of resignation even, as the lyric voice comes to accept the corruptibility of the flesh. The outstanding poem of *El son* is “La suave patria” [The Gentle Homeland], though “Treinta y tres” [Thirty Three] and “El sueño de los guantes negros” [The Dream of the Black Gloves] are equally excellent compositions. Going back to Othón before him, López Velarde evokes in “La suave patria” not the most typical but rather the most intimate and lyrical aspects of the homeland. In this sense, López Velarde was much more than the poet of the Mexican Revolution, as José Vasconcelos liked to think.

In *El minuterero* and *El don de febrero* are contained a series of prose pieces that López Velarde wrote for different Mexican magazines and newspapers. According to Allen W. Phillips, López Velarde's prose is not inferior to his poetry: rather, thematically and formally both poetry and prose run parallel to each other. Phillips underlines above all the lyrical quality of López Velarde's prose and links it to the prose writings of Martí instead of to the most flamboyantly fancy compositions of Darío.

The poet's prose writings encompass prose poems, two short stories, literary and political articles and other prose pieces that are more difficult to classify. In the end, it must be clear that this part of López Velarde's literary production, and especially his prose poems, offer an exceptional insight into the major aspects of his poetry.

J. AGUSTÍN PASTÉN B.

Biography

Born in Jerez (now Ciudad García) in the state of Zacatecas, Mexico, 15 June 1888. First born of nine children. Educated at the Seminario Conciliar de Zacatecas, 1901–02; the Seminario Conciliar de Santa María de Guadalupe de Aguascalientes, 1902–05; and the Instituto Científico y Literario de Aguascalientes, 1905–07. Entered law school in San Luis Potosí in 1908 and graduated in 1911. While a student co-founded the little magazine, *Bohemio*. Contributed to various newspapers and from 1909 his signature became well known in the provinces. Moved to Mexico City shortly after graduating and spent the rest of his life there. Contributed articles to several metropolitan journals and was active also in the administration of Cultura, an important publishing house for intellectuals of the period. Died prematurely of bronchial-pneumonia in 1921.

Selected Works

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