

# Conversation with Enrique Labrador Ruiz

By JOSE B. FERNANDEZ

Born in Sagua la Grande, Cuba, in 1902, Enrique Labrador Ruiz made his debut as a novelist in 1933 with the publication of *El laberinto de si mismo* [*His Own Labyrinth*], a novel characterized by its experimental features. *El laberinto de si mismo*, together with his subsequent novels, *Cresival* (1933) and *Anteo* (1940) are part of a trilogy known as *novelas gasiformes* (gasiform novels). Although this trilogy established Labrador Ruiz as one of the leading figures of the experimental novel in Latin America, his greatest triumph as a novelist came in 1950, when his fourth novel, *La sangre hambrienta* [*Thirsty Blood*] (1950), was awarded the "Premio Nacional de Novela."

Some critics have considered Enrique Labrador Ruiz as a forerunner of the new Latin American novel, and to an extent, they are right, for a series of stylistic techniques characteristic of the new Latin American novel—such as fragmentation of the plot and characters, distortion of time and space, mixing of fantasy with reality, use of imagination, interior monologue, and flashbacks—are present in the novels of this Cuban writer.

In addition to the novel, Labrador Ruiz has cultivated the short story with great success. His "Conejito Ulán" (1946) received the "Premio Hernández Cata" in 1946 and his three volumes of short stories, *Carne de quimera* (1947), *Trailer de sueños* (1949), and *El gallo en el espejo* (1958), are known for a variety of experimental devices which Labrador Ruiz utilizes to portray the anguish of his Cuban characters.

Enrique Labrador Ruiz's literary production is not solely confined to the narrative. He has published a volume of poetry, *Grimpolario* (1928), and three essay volumes: *Manera de vivir* (1941), a collection of articles dealing with literary topics; *Papel de fumar* (1945), a series of informal essays known for the quality of its prose; and *El pan de los muertos* (1958), a controversial collection of essays analyzing literary conditions in Cuba prior to the Cuban Revolution.

Labrador Ruiz has not enjoyed the popularity of his two other Cuban contemporaries, Alejo Carpentier and Lino Novás Calvo, yet he remains one of the most important figures in twentieth-century Cuban literature. The

author left Cuba in 1976 and has lived in Miami since 1978. The following interview took place in Miami, Florida, on August 16th, 1979.

**J.B.F.** When you published *El laberinto de sí mismo*, you broke away from the type of literature that was being written at the time. Why did you do it?

**E.L.R.** The novels and short stories that were being written were lacking in initiative, impetus, and energy. I was tired of reading works which were tasteless, gaudy, flimsy and even despicable. Literature was just too classic and conventional. The authors were not creating but rather recreating. Everyone knows that Spanish is a rich language, yet the writers were not taking advantage of the richness of such a language. As far as structure in those works, the plots were too linear and there were many explanations and intrusions on the part of the authors. As a result, the reader was excluded from participating in the creative process and how could an author exclude the reader, his most important collaborator, from his works? Therefore new ways were needed to make literature more appealing, and all I did was to change and modify certain aspects of literature because I am a firm believer that each writer must try to change literature and add something to it in one way or another.

**J.B.F.** Do you then consider yourself as one of the forerunners of the boom in the Latin American narrative?

**E.L.R.** No, I am not that arrogant. All I did was to find new ways and new techniques in narrative fiction. I don't like the word forerunner, I would rather use the word collaborator, for I was not the only one involved in this process. During those years, there was a group of writers composed of Miguel Angel Asturias, Vizconde de Lascano Tegui, Lino Novás Calvo, Austin Yáñez, myself and María Luisa Bombal, who by the way was the best one of the group, and all we tried to do was to revolt against conventionality. So if some of the critics say that I am one of the forerunners of the boom, then that is their opinion and I guess they must know what they are talking about. I don't have any pretensions or claims to being a forerunner of the boom.

**J.B.F.** For the average reader, are your works difficult to read?

**E.L.R.** Naturally.

**J.B.F.** Do you consider yourself a person who writes for a select minority?

**E.L.R.** Yes, I have stated many times that my works have not enjoyed great popularity because they are difficult for some people to read. In addition, it has been stated that the language I use is somewhat refined and that my prose is made out of marble and steel. My language might be refined but it is not flowery. There are writers who use too many words and too many descriptions which in their opinion will make their works more popular, but I do not follow that idea. I try to get my point across by using only a few words, for it is my opinion that one simile or metaphor is more effective to describe a particular character or a particular situation than a paragraph full of rhetorical devices.

So if some say that my style is harsh and that my prose is made out of steel, I have to deny that assertion. I am only a writer who does not fall prey to vulgarity and banality. In summary, when I write a literary work I only wish for it to be clear, succinct, complex and baroque.

**J.B.F.** What is the most common theme found in your works?

**E.L.R.** How man expresses himself with regards to life. In other words, I am interested in portraying how an individual reacts when either tragedy or happiness strikes him.

**J.B.F.** How would you describe your characters?

**E.L.R.** They are just individuals like any of us. They are people who are real. I do not try to write a literary work in which the characters talk as I talk; otherwise, I would be inventing them rather than portraying them as they are. Psychologically, I am interested in how they react when confronted by today's problems.

**J.B.F.** How would you describe your style?

**E.L.R.** Well, I have classified my style as *gaseiforme*. It is a word which I myself coined and it means that everything is in a gaseous state. All I do is to jot down things and then I expect the collaboration of my reader to decipher them. If my reader is intelligent, he will immediately find what is behind that gaseous state. If my reader is somewhat slow, he will have to read the work again, but he will find what I am trying to say. I do not explain things that much, for things are in a gaseous state and one must decipher them. As far as technique is concerned, I use many techniques but all in all, I suggest things and then I paint them.

**J.B.F.** Would you amplify on your concept of *gaseiforme*?

**E.L.R.** In my novels, *gaseiforme* means that time, space and even language become distorted. There are no boundary lines between reality and fantasy and words acquire new meanings. For example, in one chapter a chair is a chair, but in the next chapter it becomes a cloud or whatever the reader's imagination wants it to be. At the end of the novel, however, all of these things which appeared to be nebulous, vague or in a gaseous state, solidify themselves and are reconstructed.

**J.B.F.** Do you classify *La sangre hambrienta* as *gaseiforme*?

**E.L.R.** My first three novels are a *triagonia*, not a trilogy, because in them I narrate the universal agony of my characters. In *La sangre hambrienta*, however, I am more traditional, but many elements from the other three novels are present. *La sangre hambrienta*, together with *El ojo del hacha* which I have finished writing, and *Custodia de la nada* which I am finishing, are part of a trilogy that I have designated as *novelas caudiformes*. In other words, these three novels are not in a gaseous state anymore, but rather in a stormy state, full of thunder and lightning.

**J.B.F.** How would you describe your technique?

**E.L.R.** I sit down in front of a typewriter and begin to write anything that comes to my mind; then when I have written all the pages, I mix them and arrange them in the following manner: the most brilliant pages are reserved for the conclusion; those that are opaque are selected for the beginning and the ones that I know are going to perplex the reader are placed in the middle so that the reader can use his imagination and thus participate in my work. All in all, that is my technique: I suggest things and then I paint them.

**J.B.F.** Have any writers influenced you?

**E.L.R.** Although I am an avid reader, and I have read the works of many known and unknown writers of the world, I don't think that I have been influenced that much by other writers. If there is one writer that has influenced me, he is Francisco de Quevedo.

**J.B.F.** But critics such as Jose Antonio Portuondo and Max Henríquez Ureña have indicated that certain influences from Kafka, Joyce and Faulkner are present in your works?

**E.L.R.** I have read works of Kafka and Joyce extensively and there are points of contact, rather than influence, in their works and mine. As to Faulkner, I have not read all of his works but I can assure you that there is no influence from him in my works. I must reiterate that I am a follower of Quevedo, who in my opinion, is the greatest writer that ever lived. I don't try to imitate him because his particular style is not followed in the twentieth century, but I do follow his thoughts and philosophy. In short, he is my master?

**J.B.F.** I would like to know which, among your literary works, is your favorite and why.

**E.L.R.** From a literary point of view, I have to choose *La sangre hambrienta*. That book won the National Prize for the Novel and is one of the best known novels in Cuban literature. It also reflects many intellectual preoccupations in Cuba at the time it was written. From a sentimental point of view, my favorite is *El laberinto* because it was my first book and the one that placed me apart from any literary group.

**J.B.F.** Do you belong to a given generation of writers?

**E.L.R.** No, I don't. In fact, I have written an essay about that question. Who is my generation? I don't know. I am out of any generation because my generation starts only with me. I never had any followers, nor have I created any schools or movements. Therefore, I am my own generation.

**J.B.F.** Some critics have suggested that your prose is an example of *vanguardismo*, I would like to know your opinion of *vanguardismo* and whether you consider yourself a *vanguardista*.

**E.L.R.** In my opinion, *vanguardismo* was an acceptable but transitory movement that had a certain degree of impact in poetry but not in prose. Those who accuse me (note that I am saying accuse) of being *vanguardista* don't

know what they are talking about. The only *vanguardista* work in my repertoire is my volume of poetry, *Grimpolario*, which I wrote when I was young and which I hardly mention. I have always denied that I am a *vanguardista* and will continue to do so.

**J.B.F.** Has the fact that you are also a journalist influenced your literary work?

**E.L.R.** Definitely. Being a journalist has given me the opportunity to come into close contact with human beings, with their psychology, with their different attitudes. I have interviewed many people, from street vendors to the Pope, and in them I have found the necessary ingredients for my works. So I have found the ingredients not by reading books but rather by observing and coming into contact with people on the streets.

**J.B.F.** How would you classify yourself as an essayist?

**E.L.R.** It seems that I am aggressive and many are of the opinion that I am too passionate and emotional in my essays, but one must be passionate until death arrives.

**J.B.F.** Why do you say that it is more difficult to find a good reader than a good writer?

**E.L.R.** Because the reader must collaborate with the writer. There are many writers who are unknown simply because they do not have good readers. Borges, whom I regard as the unquestionable master of the Latin American narrative, once said that a good reader was "more difficult to find than a black swam."

**J.B.F.** What is the mission of a writer?

**E.L.R.** The mission of a writer is to be a creator. Things in life come and go, even names are forgotten, but the ideas of a writer are not forgotten, for a writer has to say something. The works that a writer creates serve as a legacy to mankind.

**J.B.F.** What does a writer have to do in order to triumph today?

**E.L.R.** In order to triumph today, as well as tomorrow, a writer must create a good work. One must create and this costs time and effort. It also involves a considerable amount of anguish and solitude.

**J.B.F.** Who are your favorite Latin American literary figures?

**E.L.R.** In the short story, one of my favorites is Horacio Quiroga. In my opinion, he is one the greatest Latin American short story writers of all times. I also like Rulfo and of course, Borges, the absolute master. As far as poetry is concerned, there are many good poets in Latin America; I have many favorites but not a specific one. In the novel, I would have to go back a few years and choose the Argentinian Ricardo Güiraldes, simply because his novel *Don Segundo Sombra* is a masterpiece. I also like the Brazilian Guimarães Rosa.

**J.B.F.** In the course of this conversation, you have referred to Borges with great admiration and respect. Why?

**E.L.R.** Because Borges proceeds from Quevedo. The mastery that he has over the Spanish language, his great use of the imagination, his magnificent portrayal of human beings, his subtleness and his thoughts, all of them, remind me of Quevedo. Perhaps Borges might disagree with my statements but I am saying them with great admiration and respect for him. One must understand that it was this Argentinian writer who brought the Latin American short story into the mainstream. It is very unfortunate that some envious and not too well-intended people have prevented this great master from obtaining the Nobel Prize for Literature, which he clearly deserves, for no one's prose is as excellent as Borges'.

**J.B.F.** In your opinion, which Latin American literary figure, besides Borges, deserves the Nobel Prize for Literature?

**E.L.R.** Octavio Paz. He is not only a great poet and essayist but his thoughts are of great caliber and it is the duty of all Latin Americans to nominate him as a candidate for such a prestigious award.

**J.B.F.** What is your opinion of Carpentier?

**E.L.R.** I think that Carpentier is not a good novelist because he only uses historical elements in his writings. He just writes about things which have already been described. I do not want my statements to detract anything from his personality or his works, but the materials that he uses in his novels do not allow him the opportunity to become a creator. He just recreates historical situations and that tendency, from a novelistic point of view, is not a solid thing.

**J.B.F.** What about Cabrera Infante?

**E.L.R.** He is a great writer. He is a master when it comes to the manipulation of language. He has a subtle sense of humor and knows about life.

**J.B.F.** What do you think of Lezama Lima's novel *Paradiso*?

**E.L.R.** Your question is a difficult one for me to answer because I have a tremendous admiration for Lezama Lima as a poet. He is an outstanding poet who creates beautiful images. As far as his novel *Paradiso* is concerned, I think it is a great poem written in prose. I do not think that I can give anyone a specific verdict about Lezama Lima as a novelist because I will always see him as the genius of modern Latin American poetry.

**J.B.F.** How do you see the future of the Spanish-American narrative?

**E.L.R.** Without doubt, the narrative in the Hispanic world is in the hands of the Spanish-American writers. I say this in simple terms, without intending to offend the Spanish writers. All of the necessary ingredients that characterizes good works of literature are found in the Spanish-American narrative. It has opened new roads not only in the Hispanic world but in the whole world.

**J.B.F.** What was the status of Cuban literature prior to the Revolution?

**E.L.R.** There was good literature. My contemporaries (note that I am not saying my generation) had done an outstanding job. All that ended with the

institutionalization of the regime, which affected all aspects of Cuban society including literature. Literature is something that needs independence. The creative writer can not be under the control of a Committee for the Defense of the Revolution or a censoring committee which tells you this is good or this is bad. These people simply don't know anything about literature. That kind of attitude kills one's works. That is the reason I left Cuba, I was not able to create there.

**J.B.F.** How do you feel about living outside your country?

**E.L.R.** Very good, Although I long for Cuba every day, I feel very good in the United States because here I have my most important things, such as my little office, my little house, a few books, my typewriter and my reminiscences. Although I am seventy-six years old, I feel fine.

**J.B.F.** What are your future plans?

**E.L.R.** To stay here until Cuba becomes absolutely free and then go there and die.

**J.B.F.** Do you plan to continue writing?

**E.L.R.** Yes, of course. At present, I am continuing with my works. You must understand that I am a creator and I am doing what a creator wants to do most and that is to create.

**J.B.F.** How would you describe yourself as an individual?

**E.L.R.** I am not a gregarious human being. I am always by myself. I have very strong opinions and convictions which at times have caused me some difficulty but in short, I am as I am.

**J.B.F.** How would you summarize you life in one sentence?

**E.L.R.** I was born in Sagua la Grande and I am a writer.

**J.B.F.** What are your main ambitions in life?

**E.L.R.** To be born again in Sagua la Grande, and to be born again into my profession which is that of being a writer.

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