POEMS

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**IN THE ENCRYPTED COUNTRY OF SYNTAX**

By Romina Freschi

Eduardo Espina was born in Montevideo, Uruguay in 1954.  Considered one of the most important and original poets of the Spanish language, he has published a dozen books of poetry and essay, among them, Valores Personales (1982), La caza nupcial (1993; 1997), La condición Milli Vanilli. Ensayos de dos siglos (2003), *El cutis patrio* (2006; 2009), and *Historia Universal del Uruguay* (2009). He has won the Premio Nacional de Ensayo of Uruguay twice for the books *Las ruinas de lo imaginario*, (1996) and *Un plan de indicios* (2000). In 1998 he received the Premio Municipal de Poesía, the most important poetry award in his country, for the book *Deslenguaje*.

Doctoral theses have been written about his poetic works, and extensive academic articles have been published in prestigious academic journals. The Spanish linguist Enrique Mallen has published the book Con/figuración sintáctica: poesía del deslenguaje (Santiago de Chile: 2002), a comprehensive study of Espina's poetry, as well as Poesía del lenguaje: de *T.S. Eliot* a Eduardo Espina (Mexico City: 2008).

Espina’s poetry is studied in universities in the Latin America, Europe and United States, and his poems have been translated partially to English, French, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, German, Albanian, Chinese and Croatian. He is included in more than 40 anthologies of international poetry. In 1980 he was the first Uruguayan writer invited to participate in the prestigious International Writing Program at the University of Iowa and since then he resides in the USA. In 2010 he obtained the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship.

**What is time in poetry?**

An indefinite today that promises perpetuity to the present. A time of Uruboros, biting its tail. It’s a time where other senses of time emerge, in that, beginning and end, upon being superimposed, dissolve. It’s infinity as applied to (relatively) short phrases. Could it be that time is almost complete, for which we cannot repent, and events have no clear reason for being? It’s a voluntary time, although its demands lack a sole reason. In that time, necessary, though lacking specific characteristics, onesself experiments with all the moments intuited as near. It doesn’t feel self-abandoned. On the contrary, it fulfills the itenerary which accompanies it. Carlito Brigante, the gangster played by Al Pacino in *Carlito’s Way*, remind us that “some shit never changes” it only loses force. In poetry it’s the opposite: that which loses force with the pass of words in the syntax is time. A time which, by not being linear, represents a de-westernizing practice; nothing ends and everything comes from before. Although its circular condition, it should be stressed, is discontinuous, made in complexity by mute spaces or transparent speech which appear in the poem and which maybe are, I don’t know, the absolute blank for which Mallarmé aspired. In the poem we see the resurrection of casuality acting simultaneously with the logic of randomness. Calderón de la Barca wrote: “Fortunate is the man who has time to wait.”  Poetry is fortunate; it lives awaiting its continuity, working so that this arrives when it still has time. I write and all of the sudden, in the middle of this vigil, I awake within a duration which didn’t previously exist, of which I wasn’t aware was there, and is also here, in the instant passing towards the next phrase, only possible in an already existing time. Time in poetry is, furthermore, a time that cannot exist without words. In them, it is encrypted so that duration doesn’t realize it. Disolute and proverbial time (time which hasn’t had time to quit being time) in route towards a goal that can even be the same which it left behind – could it be the origin of everything and of nothing? – although, in the process it becomes different in order to preserve the inevitable condition of its existence. Could time in poetry be the antecessor of true time, where the soul writes in order to ask how many minutes of infinity are left? It’s true what Sandor Marai affirms: “In the sick room, as in jail, time does not exist. Day and night, hours and minutes found a single line,” but also it’s true what San Agustín en *The Confessions* says: “Now we see, my soul, if present time can be much time, then it has the possibility to experience and measure duration.” I write poetry to respond to the questions of time in poetry.

**Your poetry deplays torrents of forms and meanings. What is it (theme, referent, form, tradition, etc.) that might be left out of your poetry and why?**

I work in simultaneous articulation, synchronic in superposition, of temporalities, ideas, holes which we call desires, and of experiences that can be feelings or memories that lose part of these emotions. Therefore, it’s more a question of what can be included, that which I leave in the path to be able to complete it using a method. I avoid, however, and the purpose is more than implicit, to fall into the story, in the linear narration of personal experiences so common in poetry these days, which for the most part I loathe. The disclosure of evidence or punctual reference seems to me a *sine qua non* to the act of writing poetry. Only at the risk of putting the mind to work in a different way, in trying to say it in a different way than it’s been said, poetry can achieve to be “something” re-foundational in thought. These days, in times when poets talk because they don’t know how to sing, this affirmation can seem an anachronism, although in truth it is, I believe, a version of futurity acting within language so that it isn’t always the same. This liberates it from repetition and redundancy; it permits it to make its center on the basis of the accumulation of the slums (those of speech). The poem makes a construction in the imagination which was previously non-existant and even after having been made, it conceals the twists and turns of its existence. Therefore, to answer the question, “what is it (theme, referent, form, tradition, etc.)” that is left out of my poetry, I respond: history. History in the sense of an archive of deeds and facts. Any history that isn’t foremost that of language at its best, that is, when each word takes on the responsibility of saying something to the rest of its species, is ruled out. The only and primary history, from which all others come, is that of language saying its own in the ear of the reader. Not in vain, it costs the poem to reach its immediacy. A theoretical indignation comes out of its own telling, elaborating the question of great importance: What is it we read when we read poetry? The reading, in any case, has an alternative epistemological function in that the linearness that articulates poetry goes in every direction: it’s a spiderweb of linearness. With this design (here’s the paradox, a spiderweb placed in a cloth of judgement), poetry imposes a primordial obligation. Therefore, to try to conceal it, you have to pay attention, going as slowly as possible, forcing persistence to the maximum capacity.

**Such is the excess your poetry plants that it seems as if one of the uses of parenthesis has to do with the continuation of speech, to insert a parallel way of saying something, a syntax of the juxta-intra-position. What is inserted in parenthesis?**

Within and without the parenthesis a velocity of syntax is inserted, which doesn’t come from the simple fact of pressing the accelerator of diction (the process presents major complexity). In the carrying out of that velocity coincide all the tributaries of the phrases and in that confluence, assimilated in exact and paratactic order, language recuperates the instantaneity anterior to certainty. When I finish a poem, I feel that the act of writing has been an atypical introspection at the edge of autism, or ignorance – many things happen directly and simultaneously, and illustrative words emerge which before might be deemed unclassifiable. Just like color doesn’t need form in order to exist, nor do phrases need to say something in order to exist. They make their habitat by articulating an anachronic, temporal fluidity. That time out of time, polydimensional and saturated with events, can make it so that the assembly of parallels cross and coincide within and without the parenthesis. In this aspect, my poetry is “realist,” because it represents the reality of the mind when all things happen at the same time, a time that, from the moment in which it begins to exist, it becomes atemporal. In the parenthesis, therefore, temporalities surplus of time are inserted, which are those that contain annotations of the ideas when they still haven’t stopped being thought. Everything in the poem, I should admit, although I believe that each poem recognizes it before I do, is a grand orquestration planned to the minute detail. It knows its premeditated kind. Each word achieved by merit its definitive place in the syntax, after arduously writing, correcting, and rewriting. That’s why each book takes me 10 years of interminable elaboration. There is no surrealist imposition, nor a mechanical utilization of flow of consciousness, and least of all an irrational gymnasium. The scene of writing has been meticulously studied before each word populated it. And after arriving, the words suffer a rigorous scrutiny in order to delimit which stay and which go. Of course, someone might ask me, and reasonably so, how do I know if the latest version of a poem is superior to the first, or the second, or all those posterior to the final and perhaps definitive. I don’t know. I’m just sure it should be that way. That’s why, at a certain moment, the rewriting happily ends, and I say happily because it ends just at the moment in which it has yet to end.

**What value and place do you give to humor?**

Humor is like masturbation: each person practices it for different reasons. Nonetheless, nobody can obligate it to come. It’s considered funny or it isn’t. In my case, I don’t need to call it, it comes, and after it does, how am I going to tell it to leave? Impossible. Jimmy Carter’s translator told me the story of when Carter visited the Chinese Prime Minister. The then president made a typical southerner joke that was impossible to translate to Chinese. The translator, to get out of the situation and to avoid a war in the making (a bad joke can even cause the use of an atomic bomb), he told the Prime Minister: “Laugh please. President Carter made a good joke.” This man, a Chinese with manners trained for the occasion, took the translator’s advice and laughed as if he’d understood – it was part of the protocol and intent to improve the damaged relations between the two nations. Humor, such as we consider it, is not a Chinese joke. I come from a country, a republic not Chinese but Oriental[[1]](http://bl144w.blu144.mail.live.com/mail/RteFrame.html?v=15.4.3096.0406&pf=pf" \l "_ftn1" \o "" \t "_blank), where the capacity to exercise humor is limited, as if the laughter would generate a collective inferiority complex, as if it represented an intolerable moment of neutrality. And it’s not like that. Humor is the gestual photography that captures the absurdity of existence and serves at the same time to allow language to recuperate its histrionic and megalomanic capacity. I exercise it for those reasons, and furthermore so that words don’t get bored of their human intermediation and serve in a different way than to represent ideas and interior events that happen to those who use them. Words too have the right to laugh.

**What value and place do you give to history?**

These days too much importance is placed on the events of reality, there’s a gigantomachine of these, all of which carries, for x motives, the fallacious intent of wanting to understand history from the perspective of personal experience and this as part of a contrary collective. That doesn’t interest me. I see life from the unpopular and complex window of the instantaneity of ideas to the point of uncertainty, entrenched in order to exist in succession and retreat, like a negation of fact and at the same time like an aspiration of continuity. And this is not an amorphous autonomy, because the poem is the only visible document, the ultimate test of life that stays to inhabit. In this aspect, the poet is a mix of archeologist and frog-man that in a completely distinct way, searched in language, photos of the language, those images – sonoric meterorites – that can only be seen with words; someone with the capacity to invent an epic lyricism that uniquely relates an inward reality, abandoned by representation. So that History always is present in the uppercase, because it is the only form in which it can reach its posteriority before it’s too late, I sustain that the only important personalities that appear in the poem are the words, those, the great irrepresentables, singing their history so as to not have to tell it, and so that the time which has touched them to live, in contrast to the ephimeral time of history, which is all that time remaining in which wars go on, political acts, passionate crimes, etc., passing economical debaucles, ideological betrayals, again, etcetera, is a time of pure and perpetual permanence; a time which, to permit that in its nucleous the past, present, and future coincide, it becomes atemporality, duration outside of the chronology. This, absolutely lyrical, is the ahistoric time we can call long duration, this is, that which isn’t affected by the events that happen outside of language. To the dessert, everything ends up being the same: something all of the sudden occurs in reality, and in order to save it from oblivion or corrosion, we write it. Wouldn’t it be extraordinary if it all happened first in language, so that there it would remain to exist forever?

**What value and place do you give to happiness?**

The only way to reach a state of joy and plenitude is to liberate ourselves from the idea of happiness, above all from the obligation of having to feel happy all the time. By the way, this is a collective sentiment very in vogue these days, when the notion of “feeling good” affects intolerable pseudo-metaphysical adornments. Were we once happy, will we ever be again? This question on occasion rivals poetry, but I don’t know if I answer it in my poems. However, when the phrases come out just how I want them to, I feel something strange inside, a kind of incomparable satisfaction that doesn’t seem like the joy of yelling “Goal!,” to have an orgasm, eventhough the doctor had said she was frigid, to eat chocolate, or to be able to drink wine of the caliber that you can only drink every once in a while. Such autosatisfaction, or accomplice complacency, I couldn’t find a name for it, we call “happiness,” although I don’t know if it’s the same happiness people say they feel upon seeing a boyfriend, watching tv, or applauding when the plane lands. “I will not be happy again. Maybe it doesn’t matter,” Borges says in a poem (“1964”), intonating an unconcerned and distressed affirmation that sounds to me like a literary pose, because still “it is magic, the world” and yes, it’s important that a person is happy or not; whether we reach it or not, that’s another story, but the search of happiness, which doesn’t go on just the South – it goes from there to the East and the West, passing also through the North (where they look for it so much), it is one of the better distractions human beings have in our short but not soft lives.

**Who is speaking in your poetry?**

Language, always. And when not, because for some reason it cannot, I try to help it by making myself present. I make like a ventriloquist. In the measurement of the possible I help it so that I can take a forward step. In (with) it, I speak to know that still I can say. And poetry will continue to exist while there is someone who has something – important or not – to say, and I for now, as intermediary of myself in language, do. I exist in the leave of absence of that time make exclusively to be able to say. Not in vain, time, mind, and language are ubiquitous protagonists in what I write. I seek to carry the mind of language to an atemporal place where it has never been, to the possible limit of communication (maybe furhter than that there isn’t anything and only music to permit that words are always another way). Poetry, for being first speech, is more than anything a communication “for onesself” a fright in the house of fascination, an expressive voyage towards the relationship with all other things in the world. In the poem, I give room to ideas that stimulate language, including when they feel abandoned by reason.

**In your poetry, but also in your essays, there is a constant preoccupation with nationalism and the problems in culture. What is it like to view the nation (Uruguay) and culture(s) from your place of residence in the United States?**

Perhaps it is nothing more than the question of he who wants to know. He who is sometimes one person, and others is barely a person on the verge of being (another, or another part of himself, yes). For almost 30 years I’ve lived in the United States, and not until recently did I write a reflective essay, called “I Am My Favorite Poet,” in which I reflect about thinking and writing in / from a country where every day I hear and practice the language I don’t use when I write. It is a paradoxical situation, although I wouldn’t say strange – there are some things stranger. Paradoxical, I say, because daily I speak in one language but I write in another. This has its advantages, since Spanish turns into a privately literary language. When I inhabit it, it’s in order to dialogue, in order to recuperate the same and the other that I’ve always been, and all of the sudden reencounter a language, native, to exercise there the most autonomous and liberational of solipsisms. Of course, as I say in the cited essay, it is difficult to write in any language, in every geographic place or in the various positions there are. The difficulty is the same, whether with a pencil, a finger in the sand, a laptop, or a Bic. When every morning or night, before or after the inutilities of the everyday life – those in which I communicate and endure in English – I enter into the country of Spanish, I feel like that country is just for me. And like that I go. I live apart in this country that has given me residence (in the United States I dis-unite) and here I write, just as I did before in other places. I go out into the street, I enter a bar, the supermarket, I pay taxes, I call a seven-digit phone number, *wrong number*, responds a computer, I see through the window then the rain left off being the only possible (there is a world out there), I prepare garlic shrimp, pasta with capers, I question the flavors, I hear identical sounds, I breathe, I scratch my back, and I drink water like everyone. Sometimes I see snow fall. Other times too. In these cosmopolitan surroundings, with universally urban fumes (I have a Chinese, another Hindu, and in between, nothing, and beyond that a Nigerian practicing Voodoo), where English is the obligatory language (in case someone goes into the street), I think, I love, I dream, I doubt, I say *no* or *sí*, I promise, and I write in Spanish. That other I without distance, my only country. And from there I see the other, the southern country where I’m from, and that I recuperate each day, like a future yearning, I barely write the first word on paper.

**In its moment you came to call the Neobaroque after the term *barrococó*. Could you explain the difference and the familiarities of your poetry to the neobaroque after the *barrococó*?**

Actually I didn’t come to the term, they ascribed it to me. When in 1982 I published *Valores personales*, my first book, in the River plate there were few of us among the recently arrived who exercized a syntax of risk and diversification of tone and prosody. According to a book of criticism at the time of publication, *Neobarrosos. Los fundadores*, there were just five of us (in Uruguay just Echavarren and me). In our continent, criticism about poetry barely exists, and the little there is in its majority greatly ignores literary historiography. Some have tried to analyze an unrepeatable phenomenon like the Neobaroque, but they have only grossly excersized their ignorance by writing about it while not knowing the necessary books, facts, and assumed risks off the script of tradition. I was doing my own thing since way before publishing *Valores personales*, some of whose poems came out even in journals some time before. When the book was edited in Uruguay, it wasn’t just one review that came out, which at the time surprised me to see, and today comforts me that the Uruguayan critics praised it at the time. In 1983, while living in Wichita, Kansas, a city mentioned in poems of Pound, Ginsberg and Cardenal, among others, I received a letter coming from Sao Paulo from a poet whom I didn’t know at the time nor had I read, Néstor Perlongher. A friendly, lucid letter, which said in one of its passages, referring to *Valores personales* (a book which, I found out later, he had sent to Reinaldo Arenas): “You’re neobarroso, where have you been?” It surprised me, because never had I heard that word before, but above all everything about the fact that someone would consider me that when I believed what I did, as I said later to Perlongher, when we were conversing in Paris, that May of 1990, it was *barrococó*, because I had arrived to the Baroque some time before, passing first through the Rococó, that artistic periphery in which the mundane, liberated from all mystifying artifice, imposes a detailed minuciosity, a mythology of things established once surpassed the condition of decorative mediators that these have. The Rococó has always moved me with its configurative, anachronic stance, so rejected by the visceral dogmatism of neopositivist criticism (today ideological), so that the Rococó (name which alludes to a composition of “*rocaille*”, rock, and *“coquille*”, seashell), represents the spuriousness of history, the iterative visual undoing of reality. The Rococó is the pagan festival of forms and in the middle of a great binging of formal alternatives strikes up a relationship with the Baroque, in that way both coincide –bingo– in an armoured denseness to the millimeter, constructed on the basis of relief, decline, and crease. The Baroque and Renaissance Venus of Sandro Botticelli is found standing of the *“coquille*” or seashell where later the aesthetic Rococó came to stand, which anticipated the quidelines in order to pass from the figurative to the abstract, better put, to that gap bordering the sublime, where the figurative and the abtract dialogue superimposed, which I call *barrococó* (because the shell is of mud and *arrorro* is its sound).

**The Latin American Neobaroque and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry have various points in common, and your oeuvre has been considered as part of both movements. How do you see yourself and from where to you feel that that idetity is given to you? What influences contribute to those movements to the poetics of posterior generations and what places do you feel they assume in the most recent intellectual camps?**

Strangely, neither in Latin America nor in the United States has it been studied in depth the direct relationship between both aesthetic springs. The only book to do so, which is just coming out, published in Mexico, is *Poesía del lenguaje*, by the Spanish linguist Enrique Mallen, one of the few critics who understands (and enjoys) poetry that takes risks in those aspects of the poem where it is the most difficult to take them. The only novelties at present in syntax, prosody, and tonal construction of phrases, essential elements of Poetry (the capital is not arbitrary) are occurring in those still subversive boundaries like they are in Neobaroque (the anterior and posterior) and those of Language Poetry, of U.S. origin. I believe, nonetheless, that it would be of much use to establish the linguistic characteristics, syntactical and structural, of each one, because it ends up being difficult to understand how poetics so dissimilar and different as those for example of Robert Creeley and Susan Howe, appear under the same aesthetic conglomerate, although the same can be said of the Neobaroque space, which is demanding an actualization of the analytical criteria in order to make the readings more effective. The influence on the new poetic Hispano-American generations of the Neobaroque, and above all of a few of the various poets included in *Medusario*, is unquestionable, even though now, by the looks of it, there’s a revolt against the Neobaroque aesthetic. According to what the critic Samuel Gordon has said, the rejection responds to the fear of many of the canonization of the Neobaroque, although in my judgement the fear is arriving too late, because the Neobaroque already entered the canon and is studied (although I don’t know whether well or not) as one of the last reservoirs of novelty in literature. But, even those who disdain this aesthetic so predominant in the last part of the twentieth century and the beginning of this, they have not been able to avoid the expansive influences of the same, those which consist of all parts, in one and another region of the continent, since the virus of the Neobaroque aura has not lost its capacity to contaminate.

**What books do you re-read throughout the years?**

I only re-read those books which for some unknown reason –which is why I return to have them in mind—move me. Even now I am re-reading the complete works of Fernando de Herrera, Williams Hazlitt, Julio Herrera y Reissig (whose centennial year of death was 2010), and I began to read for the third time *The Man Without Qualities* by Robert Musil, which perhaps with *Ada or Ardor*, by Nabokov, is the most satisfactory novel of the twentieth century. I will see if after reading it again I continue to like is as much as before. I want to return to H.A. Murena, whom I first read 30 years ago, and who is almost forgotten today, someone who teaches you to exercise rigor of thought in the wrong direction, the only one capable of producing epiphanies.

**What books of poetry have you liked in the past few years and why?**

I almost never read anything new (life seems more brief to me all the time), although “almost” is made of exceptions. Among the few I’ve read I liked several, but not many. I will mention *La risa de Demóstenes, rara*, by the Colombian Gabriel Jaime Caro, a rare voice, more rare I would say than the laugh of Demosthenes. Another: *Famous Americans* by Loren Goodman, a book which I’m translating, where intelligence, humor, and the rupture of expectations prevails, and where there is no, fortunately, redeeming ideology. Goodman, who lives in South Korea, is a Black Belt in Karate, which is why I’m very careful translating him.

**What are your current poetic projects?**

I’m finishing *Mañana la mente puede*, a book which concludes the trilogy “Deslenguaje”, conformed furthermore by *La caza nupcial* (1992) and *El cutis patrio* (2009), which have desire, vision, and memory are the protagonistic motors of the poems. I am advancing at the same time on writing another book of poems dedicated to the recent death of my parents, Washington and Mabel, which is called *Todo lo que ha sido para siempre una sola vez*. Also, I am correcting, for what is to be published I hope soon, a collection of essays about poets, from Rubén Darío to the present, which is called *La distracción y el encriptamiento*. And I am halfway on a book about the act of writing poetry, written from the standpoint of analysis of the relationship between poetry and music in the modern period, that type of poetry and music (together and separate) that by imposing detainments, detours, and speed-bumps, exasperated the expectations of the reader-listener. The volume is called *Arte Po(r)ética*. I always have new projects at the door, but time, which before was always and at every moment, today is less all the time.

[[1]](http://bl144w.blu144.mail.live.com/mail/RteFrame.html?v=15.4.3096.0406&pf=pf" \l "_ftnref1" \o "" \t "_blank) Uruguay ’s official name is “República Oriental del Uruguay.”