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IN MEMORIAM

Daniel Sada

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Roberto Bolaño considered Daniel Sada to be without rival among Mexican writers of their generation. Both were born in 1953. Bolaño spent his adolescence in Mexico, and even though some of his greatest novels and stories have Mexican settings, he never set foot there again after moving to Spain in his early twenties. I imagine that Bolaño must have relied, at least to some extent, on Sada's novels—Sada's perfect ear and exuberant re-creation of Mexican voices, the voices of the Mexican desert north especially—while writing his own Mexican masterpieces. Sada's works were a polyphonic parade of voices, a Mexican cacophony: shouts, laughter, violent, lewd curses, sweet whispers, song.

"It was a place rarely visited, but attractive, four kilometers to the south of Sombrerete. There was a barranca whose abyss made you want to stop and contemplate it, and a cascade of crystalline water, thin and capricious." So opens, modestly enough, Sada's novel *A la vista*, published months before his death this year, on November 18. In the next sentence, Sada strikes a more characteristic note: "También había un ornato de árboles por doquier"—that *ornato* is a peculiar and Sada-esque word, impossible to translate, the whole phrase delicious to pronounce, though all it means, really, is that there were also a lot of trees around, and "a temperate year-round climate." "The great thing about that place," Sada goes on to write, "was that it was limited to the efficacy of words, as no photograph existed to give a more precise notion of the supposed marvel." The description, the reader realizes by the end of the paragraph, is a set-up for a real estate scam. (As it turns out, there is no cascade, and no trees, only that abyss, and the climate.)

Bolaño compared Sada's baroque writing style to Lezama Lima's, by way of making the point that because the Cuban Lezama's baroque reflected the crowded natural effulgence of the tropics, Sada's baroque is a more impressive verbal invention, a baroque of the desert. It, too, came only from "the efficacy of words." In *Porque parece mentira la verdad nunca se sabe* (Because it seems like a lie the truth is never known), Sada's huge, dense masterpiece (a novel routinely referred to as Joycean, with 650 pages and 90 characters, narrated almost entirely in alexandrine, hendecasyllabic, and isosyllabic verse-prose), the desert and its sparsely populated towns teem with all the political turbulence, corruption, and violence of modern Mexico. Sada is to Juan Rulfo—author of only one, hundred-page novel, the Mexican desert ghost-town masterpiece *Pedro Páramo*, voted by readers of Spain's most important newspaper, *El País*, as the greatest Spanish-language novel of the twentieth century—what Beckett was to Joyce, only inverted. Beckett's minimalism was his response to Joyce unsurpassable maximalism. Sada's maximalism was his response to Rulfo's unsurpassable minimalism.

Sada was touring around Mexico with *Porque parece mentira la verdad nunca se sabe* when we met, about twelve years ago. Martín Solares was his editor at Tusquets Mexico and also wore a publicist's hat. In one of those acts of crazy generosity that typify Martín, but that also seem to occur nowhere else but Mexico, he invited me along on the stretch of tour stopping in Culiacan and Mazatlan. Sada was a monumental storyteller, and I remember many of the tales he told us over those few days. One was about working, when he was younger and new to the city, as a butcher in Mexico City's labyrinthine old downtown market. Another was about a job he had driving a minivan for a convent of nuns. Sada, unsurprisingly, was a great mimic. He told us that the novelist Salvador Elizondo once made a newspaper photographer who was taking his picture include his pet parakeet in the shot because Elizondo wanted, later, to be able to hold the newspaper up to the bird and say—Sada's imitation of Elizondo's nasal drawl is still vivid in my ear—"Look, *perico*, you're in the newspaper." Sada had taken a fiction workshop taught by none other than Juan Rulfo. That led to my favorite story. The agonizingly shy Rulfo had somehow been convinced to accept a great honor in China. He was to change planes in San Francisco. There he sat at the departure gate watching fellow passengers board the flight to China but decided not to join them. He just sat there and didn't tell anybody. In Peking, the official Chinese and Mexican delegations and the press waited on the airport tarmac.

Sada looked like a stereotypical butcher: a chunky, rugged, prematurely balding man. He grew up in a northern Mexico desert town of a thousand inhabitants. I used to sense in Sada—and identify with, thinking of New York counterparts—an insecurity and discomfort around the urbane, supremely self-confident Mexico City literary types, all those *Letras Libres* and "Crack" writers who dressed and comported themselves, as my late wife, Aura, once remarked, "like international bankers." Sada had a beautiful face, with a proud forehead, a sensuous mouth, and long, narrow eyes that used to make me think of Japanese scroll paintings of samurai.

It was devastating to watch his kidney disease slowly waste him, as if he were imprisoned in fast-forwarding time. Over the past few years, I'd been struggling with my own trauma, the death of my wife, and so I shied away from seeking him out, preferring, whenever I was in Mexico, to wait to run into him at the Pendulo bookstore café or elsewhere in our neighborhood. I always encountered the same incredibly sweet, generous man, quick with a kind word. The last time we spoke he asked me at least



twice what I thought of the English title of his novel *Casi Nunca*, which will soon be published by Graywolf as *Almost Never*. I told him that I thought it was great. Sada read everything. He was full of praise for a writer from Mexico's north, the young Yuri Herrera. And he told me that he thought Rivka Galchen's *Atmospheric Disturbances*, published by Martin Solares at Almadía press, was the best book that the wonderful Oaxaca-based independent press had produced in the past year.

Solares, a close friend of Sada's, sent me this reminiscence and reflection, which, with apologies, I've translated: "He woke every morning well ahead of his occupations. If he was inspired, or finishing a book, he'd jump out of bed at four-thirty in the morning and write until sunrise before starting in on his other work. He wasn't interested in luxury or power, though his prose is a true luxury. Nobody could write the way he could. In life, he only ever boasted about one thing: his way of writing. To the students who took his writing workshops, he gave one of the simplest but most valuable pieces of advice: in literature there are no excuses. You have to organize your life to be able to write at least a half a page every day. After a week, you'll have enough words to finish a story, after a month enough for a novella, after a year enough for a novel or a collection of stories ... Some of his first novels were written under great economic duress, but they are among his best: *Una de dos*, *Albedrío*. It took him six years to write his most ambitious novel, amid personal upheaval and much moving around, but he never lost his energy or concentration ... His last two novels were completed despite his illness, in heroic conditions: dictated to his wife, the great Adriana Jiménez, without any sacrifice of style. Do I need to say that *El lenguaje del juego*, still unpublished, is extraordinary? In barely one hundred pages, just a little more than *Pedro Páramo*, Sada has bequeathed us his dazzling personal explanation of Mexican violence ... Thinking it over, I realize that all his books reinforce this conviction: literature is a voice that emerges out of the dark, and that seeks to relate fascinating acts in a unsurpassable style ... [This voice] is obligated to search through the most antiquated Spanish along with the speech of the streets, choose whatever works, and with that create the story, in verses that astonish or make us smile on the darkest of days."

Francisco Goldman is a novelist, journalist, and the author, most recently, of [Say Her Name](#).

TAGS A la vista, Almadía press, Almost Never, Atmospheric Disturbances, Juan Rulfo, Letras Libres, Lezama Lima, Martin Solares, Pedro Páramo, Porque parece mentira la verdad nunca se sabe, Rivka Galchen, Roberto Bolaño, Salvador Elizondo, Spain Mexico, Tusquets, Yuri Herrera

2 Comments

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Daniel Sada descansar en paz (Rest in Peace)

Carolinus | December 22, 2011 at 1:48 pm

Excuse me, but is there a typo here? Do you mean: "También había un ornato de árboles por doquier"?

"Árboles" I know, "árobles" ("á roble", si), not so much.

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