

Juan Gelman (Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1930-Mexico City, 2014)

Juan Gelman, an Argentinean poet of Ashkenazi background, is widely recognized today as one of the most important poets in the Spanish language. Because of his political activism (he was a member of the Peronist Montonero Movement), Gelman had to leave Argentina in 1975, living the rest of his life in a prolonged exile that took him to Rome, Madrid, Paris and, finally, Mexico City. A significant part of his work, then, was conceived, written, and published in exile.

According to Monique R. Balbuena (*Homeless Tongues: Poetry and Languages of the Sephardic Diaspora*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2016.), there are at least three factors we need to consider when trying to explain how a poet of Ashkenazi background writing in Spanish, with no previous knowledge of Ladino or traditional connections with Sephardic communities and cultures, was able to write a book of poems in Ladino, *Dibaxu* (Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 1994.), in a process that Balbuena calls *self-Sephardizing* (*Homeless Tongues* 107-08).

The first factor is exile itself, which Gelman experienced firsthand and indirectly in the exile of many of his friends. It seems that these experiences had a deep impact on his personality and creative power. Balbuena reminds us that in his preface to *Dibaxu* Gelman identifies himself publically for the first time as a person of “Jewish origins” (*Homeless Tongues* 114), implying that through his own exile he was able to see himself as a part of a long chain of displacement that affected many Jewish poets.

The second factor is the writing of three books (*Citas*, 1982; *Comentarios*, 1982, and *Composiciones*, 1986) in which Gelman (re)connects with the works of Converso poets (Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz) and Spanish Hebrew poets. In this way, he set the stage for what would come later: the writing of a book of poems in Ladino.

The third factor is Juan Gelman’s encounter with the poetry of Clarisse Nicoïdski, as Gelman acknowledges in the preface to *Dibaxu*. Also, *Dibaxu* is dedicated to Aurora Bernárdez, the great Argentinean translator who introduced Gelman to Nicoïdski’s poetry. The threads that connect *Dibaxu* with the poetry of Clarisse Nicoïdski are many and present themselves on several levels (See Balbuena 134-51). One of those levels is language itself. “Gelman writes *Dibaxu* in this Balkan Ladino... the Ladino he uses is basically the one he reads in Nicoïdski and learns from her—the vernacular Balkan, or Sarayli, Judeo-Spanish, with its particular sounds and spelling” (Balbuena 139).

Balbuena proposes that “dibaxu” is the search for roots or the past; that it is also a *substratum*, the place of Ladino in the vast universe of the Spanish language, or the place where words come from (orality). *Dibaxu* can be the social space of the oppressed in our societies, the location of Argentina at the end of the Southern Cone or the people living under a dictatorship. On a personal level, ... “‘under’ is among the last words written by Gelman’s son before his kidnapping, ‘disappearance,’ and murder at the hands of the Junta on August 26, 1976” (Balbuena 152-53).

For many years Gelman conducted a campaign “... to learn the whereabouts of his grandchild, whom he located only in 2000, when the child was already twenty-four and living with the family of a policeman in Uruguay” (Balbuena 111). For some reason, when I see the photos of the poet and his granddaughter María Macarena, I think of Gelman’s encounter with Ladino: full of emotion and love, full of hope.

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