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Dialogues with Myself and My Others

Isaac Goldemberg
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The poet and novelist Isaac Goldemberg has maintained a remarkable thematic unity over four decades, through several novels, a dozen books of poetry, and three plays. Since his celebrated first novel, La vida a plazos de don Jacobo Lerner (1978), he has explored the tensions between a Jewish and a Peruvian identity—both felt as essential yet somehow fragile; both thirsty for memory and history, for the mapping of peripatetic lives; both demanding constant maintenance through writing. Born in the northern Peruvian town of Chepén in 1945, Goldemberg has lived his entire adult life in New York.

His single-minded focus on his theme over the years has given us many deeply human poems, some of which are now available to English-speaking readers for the first time in Dialogues with Myself and My Others. Jonathan Tittler ably translates these poems and Cardboard House Press presents them in facing-page format with a small-press sensibility.

The volume brings together poems previously published elsewhere, principally in Libro de las transformaciones (2007). Presented here, they take on new energy and unity through the device of the epigraph. The book begins with several epigraphs, including a quotation from Theodor Adorno that seems to epitomize Goldemberg: “he who has no fatherland finds in writing a place to live.” Likewise, one or more new epigraphs appear above each poem. In his title, Goldemberg has promised dialogues with himself and his others, and the epigraphs deliver by lending the book a dialogic quality.
An epigraph can transform a poem. A work like “Umbilicus Mundi” gains notably as the poet introduces new section headings—Jerusalem, Cusco, New York—which explain much about it. The epigraphs he chooses suggest that each city in its way is an umbilicus mundi, each a labyrinthine nerve center or nucleus with a vast historical hinterland. Each is also, of course, central to Goldemberg himself.

For the Cusco epigraph, he selects a remarkable example of ekphrasis in the Latin American novel: José María Arguedas’s description of Inca stonework from the first chapter of Los ríos profundos. Goldemberg reveals his literary lineage through such dialogues, and it is largely a lineage of the Peruvian vanguard, running from César Vallejo through Arguedas to Luis Hernández and Carlos Germán Belli.

Goldemberg’s earlier works are perhaps notable in that they seek the memory of the father, the patriarch, whom he imagines as a peddler or businessman looking for connection among the Ashkenazi Jews who arrived, like him, in Callao, their bags packed with Ukrainian memories and the Yiddish language. Here, in addition, Goldemberg celebrates an indigenous Peruvian mother or maternal space linked to the desert, which he characterizes (in a fine turn of phrase) as a text “woven of sand / woven of voices, woven of bodies, woven of languages.” This is also the space of the paternal grandfather, the old grave robber, who “returns / from digging relics from the world above, from the world below” (in another sly nod to Arguedas).

This is disciplined writing of a high caliber. It shows a speaker obessively shifting and shuffling aspects of his identity as if they were photographs, now one on top, now another—and all equally indispensable to his sense of himself and of the human. Heeding Adorno, Goldemberg wields language and poetry against the displacement of exile and the loss of home.

Kent L. Dickson is Professor of Spanish at the California State Polytechnic University in Pomona. Specializing in Peruvian and Mexican literature of the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries, he has published and presented widely on Surrealism in Latin America, Mexican poetry of the 1900-1950 period, Peruvian fiction and theater of the independence and republican periods, and fictional portrayals of Peru’s Sendero Luminoso violence.