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Gordon Brotherston

Excerpt

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I. Introduction

In language and politics, Latin America, that part of the world which stretches from the Rio Grande to Cape Horn, is not a single entity and never has been. This fact is of prime importance for understanding the poetry written by Latin Americans, and considerably complicates the task of the critic who wants to discuss it at all comprehensively. At a practical level we cannot rely on the props of standard literary histories or critical studies as we may, for instance, with French or Spanish poetry. Or, if we imagine we can, we are often liable to miss the point. A rewarding study might be made of the obvious or covert search for identity in Latin American poetry, an identity in terms of cultural tradition usually taken for granted in many other parts of the world. This book by no means pretends to be such a study, but rather to keep such considerations alive while giving some account of the nature, history and main works of Latin American poetry.

The actual term 'Latin American' owes its coinage not to some compelling inner sense of origin, but to the designs of French foreign policy in the late nineteenth century. At least until recent years we find scant awareness of a common heritage in Brazil and the Spanish-American republics (and, ironically, still less in French-speaking America), some of whose citizens would still reject the epithet 'Latin American', or as poets would question it. Yet it is not wholly misleading as a description of poetry from that part of the world in Spanish or Portuguese. (French poetry in Canada and the Caribbean is a special case: the first must lie outside our scope, the second is touched on in chapter 2.) For most poets of the sub-continent have accepted not just the Spanish or the Portuguese languages, but the metrics, prosody and much of the literary vocabulary and rhetoric traditionally associated with them, and through them with Latin and the classical world. A sonnet by the Mexican José Manuel Othón (1858–1906) is formally indistinguishable from the Spanish–Petrarchan norm, just as words like 'contempt' or 'rose' have quite similar connotations whether they are found in Pablo Neruda or in Lorca. Indeed, at this level, most battles for cultural separateness, and these have

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[More information](#)

been many, have been fought with weapons supplied by the other side.

To this we might add that from the first days of European colonization, in the sixteenth century, up to the present, there is plenty of evidence of a desire to continue the Latin tradition, not just via the languages of the colonizers, but directly. Partly due to the influence of the Church, and because of centuries of isolation from the rest of the world, Latin long remained an important literary language. The Jesuit Rafael Landívar (1731–93) is recognized as one of the great modern Latin poets; and, as Pedro Henríquez Ureña has remarked, the finest neoclassical poets of the eighteenth century are those who wrote in Latin. Virgil, for example, *the* Roman poet, has been a recurrent model, and not just in poetics. His *Eclogues*, about the innocent pastoral life of the Golden Age, his *Georgics*, about the essential ethic and practice of agriculture, and his *Aeneid*, the epic apology of the Roman empire, have, since Independence, again and again been referred to as moral statements of the first order. Virgil was a touchstone for the Independence poet Andrés Bello, as he was for the Brazilian Mário de Andrade in the 1920s, and has been, more recently still, for the Argentinian Alberto Girri. Indeed in these and other cases Latin has been considered something prior and superior to the Romance languages like Spanish and Portuguese, which derived from it.

When political independence was won in Mexico, Central and South America in the early nineteenth century, under the leadership of such figures as San Martín and Bolívar, the struggle was naturally against the occupying powers. As a result, a good deal of energy was devoted, not least by poets, to proving how little Spain and Portugal mattered culturally. It is here that we first find that concern with an early, unspoiled Latin tradition; and, no less important, with all that the European conquest suppressed and destroyed in America. The Indian heritage that had survived, and had been acknowledged hitherto mainly by priests and a few rare scholars, was suddenly made much of. There was a great literary exhumation of the Toltecs and Aztecs of Mexico, the Maya of Yucatan and Guatemala, the Pipil (related to the Aztecs) of Nicaragua, the Incas and the Quechua and Aymara Indians of the Andes (Peru, Bolivia), the Guarani of Paraguay, their relatives the Tupi–Guarani of coastal Brazil, the Araucanians of Chile, and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

3

so on. This rediscovery was by no means universal or consistent. In fact the consequences of it are perhaps only now being fully realized in poetry. But as an event it did suggest the possibility of an alternative cultural tradition, of radically challenging Old World orthodoxy in literary and other ways. For this reason we may fairly associate this voluntary 'Indianism' with the enthusiasm that poets have shown from Independence onwards for consecrating or adopting such American idioms as the gaucho or the Negro dialects (the gauchos being the cowboys of the South American pampas, the Negroes being descendants of African slaves).

So far we have, then, two sets of possible 'origins': that of the 'Latin' languages Spanish and Portuguese, an imported paternal heritage; and that of violated local or 'mother' cultures like the Indian, gaucho and Negro. How attractive and unstable each has proved becomes conveniently clear when we focus on poetry which attempts to deal, precisely, with America, the birthplace, as a source of identity. Significantly enough, almost all of the many attempts to write such poetry have failed, for one reason or another. The one big exception is *Canto general* (1950) by the Chilean Pablo Neruda: a colossal work which by its excellence and felicity allows us better to approach its precedents (which Neruda himself, however, only seldom acknowledged). In both Saxon and Latin American there is undoubtedly such a thing as a tradition of poets obsessed with writing the song of their place, though in the second case they have perhaps been recognized less than they deserve. What at first sight may seem to be a purely formal problem, how a poet defines his place and identifies himself within it, in fact tells us a good deal about the nature of Latin American poetry.

The first part of this book, which takes up the points raised here, does not then, pretend to be a historical survey of the first poetry written in what is now known as Latin America. Chapters 2 and 3, 'Vernacular American' and 'The Great Song of America', are as much thematic as historical, and deal as much with the modern as with earlier periods. Very little was written during the Colonial period, and even during the nineteenth century, that need occupy us; and that little is often more properly considered as a sub-chapter of Spanish and Portuguese literature. Our emphasis is very much on what was and is new in the context of those

Cambridge University Press

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Gordon Brotherston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

LATIN AMERICAN POETRY

languages. Consistently, it is taken for granted that the Spanish and Portuguese poetic traditions, even though essential to the beginnings of Latin American poetry, exist in their own right and are to be known about separately; and they are specifically invoked only to enforce a particular point.

If we want to say when, in time, Latin American poetry became independent and something for itself, we must first of all distinguish between Spanish America and Brazil. Although, in relation to Europe and America, Spanish American poetry has at most periods closely resembled Brazilian, historically they are normally considered to have 'come of age' at different moments. In both cases, however, the phenomenon was called by the same name: Modernism (*modernismo*). In Spanish-speaking America this term refers to the prolific flowering of poetry between about 1880 and the First World War, which not just announced an unmistakably American style but profoundly affected poetry in Spain itself. Much of this writing, with its initial debt to nineteenth-century Western literature, chiefly French, may seem to us outdated and boring. But without it Spanish America would have remained heavily dependent, poetically, on Europe. The writers who mattered most to the Modernists, Hugo, the Parnassians and Symbolists, Edgar Allan Poe, also left their mark in Brazil, among the *simbolistas* like Olavo Bilac at the turn of the century. But it was not until the 1920s that the Brazilian Modernists emerged as such, under the influence, in turn, of *avant-garde* movements like Futurism and Surrealism. While given social and economic conditions can hardly be expected automatically to *produce* a given kind of poetry, they can at times appear indispensable, a prerequisite. In this sense the modern 'world city' (*Weltstadt*, to use the German word) of São Paulo was for Oswald and Mário de Andrade and the Brazilian Modernists what Buenos Aires had been in the 1890s for Rubén Darío and the Modernists of Spanish America.

There is little magic in the term Modernism, which has the disadvantage of being widely used to refer to movements in Western literature as a whole. And fully to define what it means in Latin American poetry is probably impossible. Apart from the big difference between Spanish America and Brazil, so much of the detail is diffuse. The two chapters of this book which deal with the subject (4 and 5) are the most historical, and rely most on a

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

5

recording of that detail as it seemed important to the poets involved. Perhaps part of the difficulty stems from the fact that those poets did not achieve their highest ambitions, innovatory as they were. Darío, or the Andrades, if historically indispensable, recognized an ideal greater than they themselves could embody. This is what the Uruguayan critic José Enrique Rodó seemed to express in his review of Darío's *Prosas profanas* (1896): there he spoke of Modernism as 'a return of the galleons' to Europe, a redressing of the cultural balance between the Old and the New World, at the same time as saying that in Darío, for all his creative energy, we could not yet discern 'the poet of America'.

If writing a history of Latin American poetry before Modernism is uninviting because there is little to say, after that event the same is true for the opposite reason. Spanish American poetry since the First World War, and Brazilian poetry since 1930, are dauntingly rich. And the three chapters of this book which concentrate on this period (6–8) could by no means present a complete picture (if such a thing is ever possible or desirable). We are faced with several major poets, who are both prolific and of international stature, among them a number of women writers of pronounced independence, like the River Plate poets Alfonsina Storni (1892–1938) and Juana de Ibarbourou (1895), and the Chilean Gabriela Mistral (1889–1957), who won the Nobel Prize for literature. We find an intricate interaction with the literature of other cultures: responses to, say, T. S. Eliot, André Breton, Ezra Pound, in a wide variety of poets. We also find, for the first time, numerous internal traditions, a sense of organic growth within Latin American poetry that is subtle in detail: César Vallejo drawing on Darío, for example, but quite differently from Octavio Paz; or João Cabral de Melo Neto drawing on Carlos Drummond de Andrade, who draws in turn on the Brazilian Modernists. And so on.

To make some sense of this it seemed a good idea, first of all, to dwell on two poets whom only the most parochial could refuse to acknowledge as great: the Peruvian César Vallejo, and Pablo Neruda. These two have, independently, received far more critical attention than any other Latin American poet. They both began to write when heavily conscious of Modernist precedent. After a period of intense introspection in the 1920s they struggled to express a larger communal self. Because of this, and of the high

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

quality of existing commentaries on their work, I have chosen to compare them in detail in what has turned out to be the longest chapter in this book.

The main disadvantage of spending so long on Vallejo and Neruda is obviously that contemporaries or near contemporaries of theirs, important in their own right (the Mexicans Ramón López Velarde, José Gorostiza, Xavier Villaurrutia, for example), go barely acknowledged. To attenuate this tendency, in chapter 7 Octavio Paz is discussed as much for his criticism as for his poetry. He proves a convenient if contentious guide. He has gone deeply into the poetry of his country (Mexico), his sub-continent (notably in a brilliant essay on Darío), and beyond, and has borne out his discoveries in his verse, in the phases of a vivid intellectual development. But he has also ignored whatever failed to fit into his notion of tradition at any given stage. In this he may be fairly compared to T. S. Eliot, equally fundamental and provocative in his interpretations of English-language poetry.

In the final chapter I try to suggest that the co-ordinates of Spanish American and Brazilian poetry are today perhaps closer than they ever have been. The emergence of Latin America as not just a geographical but a nascent political area, if not part of a controversially-named Third World, has been reflected in poetry, not least in a concern with what poetry is and should do in these circumstances. The choice of poets discussed will unavoidably seem wilful (the Nicaraguan Ernesto Cardenal, the Peruvian Carlos Germán Belli, the Chilean Nicanor Parra, the Brazilian João Cabral de Melo Neto and the Argentinian Alberto Girri). At best, some idea may be had of their work both for what it is, and as a series of modern responses to those recurrent problems of origin and identity.

In sum, much of the emphasis of this book is on historical definition. It starts and ends by asking: what is 'Latin American' poetry anyway? In the space available clearly not every relevant poem could be mentioned (I should have enjoyed, for example, talking about the work of such writers as Jaime Sabines, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Antonio Cisneros, Enrique Lihn, to mention only a few). At the same time I hope that the poems which are discussed (in most cases at some length) appear to be respected as such, as intricate accomplishments in their own right, which we should be the poorer for ignoring.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2. Vernacular American

In Latin American poetry, the metropolitan, or inherited European, tradition has persistently found itself in conflict with others distinct from it. First among these is the Indian tradition. For the vast oral and written literatures of the original Americans were far from totally extinguished by the European conquest, and 'classical' literature from the Pre-Columbian period has increasingly made its presence felt. Second, there is the native-born or creole (*criollo*) tradition, based on local dialects within Spanish and Portuguese that have often been considered languages in themselves, especially around the time of Independence. Third, the speech peculiar to the descendants of millions of African slaves in the Caribbean and Brazil has nurtured a poetic idiom of its own. None of these other traditions can be said to have posed a serious threat to Latin hegemony, at least for very long (though the desire in certain poets to preserve that hegemony at all costs could itself be thought paradoxically American). But to the degree that the very question of identity (poetic or other) has become unsurer, the force of 'marginal' traditions of this kind has been stronger, and any account of the poetry of Latin America does well to start by reckoning with them. What is at stake is not writing which depicts or is simply *about* Indians, creoles or Negroes, like the Uruguayan José Zorrilla de San Martín's famous epic *Tabaré* (1888), for example. Our concern is the more radical impingement of what those people had and have to say poetically, of their different poetic languages, on that of Latin America.

I

The first book known to have been printed in America was bilingual: a work of Christian doctrine of 1539 composed in Spanish and Aztec (or Nahuatl). Like many other such works which circulated in what are now Mexico, Guatemala, Peru and Brazil, this manual had an immediate missionary purpose. But the fact that bilingual or wholly Indian texts were published at all, into the late seventeenth century and even longer, on a large scale indicates the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

strength of Pre-Columbian linguistic survival, and a certain European respect for it. Indeed, Spaniards and Portuguese were prepared to learn native languages not just functionally but, precisely, for literary ends. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–95), the ‘tenth muse’ of colonial Mexico,¹ and José de Anchieta (1530–97), the ‘father’ of Brazilian poetry, turned to the Indian languages of their adopted countries as easily as they did to Latin when composing poems of their own. This for example is Anchieta’s recasting of a traditional Tupi–Guarani chant:

Come great chiefs
 stir from afar
 I too bring
 my people to dance
 I surrender them into your hands

Ou tubixa katu/mamo sui nde reka/Xe abe xe anameta/aroporasei seru/nde pope imeengatu.²

Quechua, the language of the Incas, became the vehicle of a full-length verse drama, *Ollantay*,³ composed in colonial Peru by an anonymous writer who was clearly familiar with both the native heritage and the conventions of Spanish Golden Age literature. Others, with or without native help, went so far as to translate important works of European literature into American languages (Calderón’s plays, Aesop’s *Fables*, Racine’s *Phèdre*), contributing to their literary strength and status.

Over the centuries the principal Indian languages (Nahuatl, Maya, Quechua, Tupi–Guarani) have undoubtedly declined. But they have far from disappeared from oral and written literature, and have continued to fascinate and ‘win over’ poets in Latin America. Like a considerable number of Andean writers, the Peruvian José María Arguedas reserved for Quechua his most deeply-felt rhetoric, in his hymn to Tupac Amaru, for example, which closely echoes Inca prayers:

Come down to earth, Serpent God, breathe into me;
 put your hands on the tenuous web that covers my heart;
 give me your strength.

Uraykamuy Amary, samayniykita urpuchiway; sonqoypa llikanpi makikta churaykuy; kallpachaway.⁴

In the realm of folk song, artists like the Chiriguanos in Paraguay (still a bi-lingual state),⁵ and the Chilean Violeta Parra (sister to

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Gordon Brotherston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

VERNACULAR AMERICAN

9

Nicanor, see p. 182) in her Araucanian lyrics, have helped to keep traditional literature alive in their original tongues. However a full account of compositions of this order, as of compositions by the prolific native Indian writers who after the conquest used transcriptions of their languages and old scripts into the Roman alphabet, belongs to the history not of Latin but of Indian American literature. Here, our interest is how these unextinguished native modes have affected Spanish and Portuguese poetry written in America.

Only with the movement towards Independence, and as the cultural relativism expounded by Vico and his disciple Boturini⁶ filtered into Latin America, did the syntax and prosody characteristic of Indian verse begin to be much respected for themselves. For all their Indian interest, colonial poets like Sor Juana, Anchieta and the anonymous author of *Ollantay*, sensed no professional reason why native verse should not be made to conform to Latinate conventions. By them, Nahuatl, Tupi and Quechua are made to rhyme, something they had never done before, and to scan (though two ancient songs, recently echoed in Shaffer's *Royal Hunt of the Sun*, do survive unscathed in *Ollantay*). So it is hardly surprising to find that, when they 'imitated' native poetry in Spanish and Portuguese, these writers moved formally a long way from their sources. Towards the end of the eighteenth century however a new sensitivity emerged. Arguably the first piece of 'free verse' in Spanish is a poem published in 1778 by Granados y Gálvez as an example of the artistic genius of ancient Mexico (said by Boturini to equal that of the Greeks). He presented the piece (as did W. H. Prescott after him) as a lyric by Nezahualcoyotl, the poet king of fifteenth-century Texcoco.⁷ It cannot be claimed to be that unequivocally; but the presence of native thought and form in the poem is unquestionable. A better-known example from this historical period would be the 'hymn', ostensibly modelled on Inca originals, which crowns the celebration of the victory of Junín in 1824 by the Independence poet José Joaquín Olmedo.⁸ And at this same time at a humbler level, the *yaravi*, a traditional Quechua verse-form often accompanied by the *quena* (flute) and strangely forlorn in tone, began to emerge in Spanish in the work of Mariano Melgar. Once established, this and other forms of Quechua poetry flourished in the last century and still to some extent in this, and appeared, for example, in the

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Gordon Brotherston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

IO

LATIN AMERICAN POETRY

work of Gabriela Mistral, the Peruvian Juan Gonzalo Rose⁹ and others.

Independence in Brazil resulted in nothing less than a school of 'Americanists',¹⁰ who were influenced in turn by Herder's enthusiasm for a literature of the people deriving from the unlettered and more 'primitive' elements of the nation ('Die Wilden'). The local force of this movement caught even the cosmopolitan Machado de Assis. His *Poesias Americanas* (1875) came as a tribute to the poems published under that same title thirty years previously by Antonio Gonçalves Dias. Indeed, Machado's praise of the novel *Iracema* by José de Alencar (1829–77), as the tale of a native bard in a style like the speech of those peoples accords so ill with his customary urbanity that it would seem ironic, were it not for the history of his own affection for literary tenets most uncompromisingly expressed by Alencar:

Knowledge of the native language is the best criterion for the nationality of the literature. It gives us not just the true style but the poetic images of the savage, the modes of his thought, the tendencies of his spirit, and even the smallest particularities of his life. It is at this source that the Brazilian poet must drink; it is from it that the true national poem, such as I imagine it, will emerge.¹¹

It was Alencar who took the literary consequences of this programme furthest. He started by wanting to write a verse epic, *Os filhos de Tupã* (Tupã being a major deity of the Tupi–Guarani who once dominated large areas between the Amazon and the River Plate). Gonçalves Dias had had similar ambitions for his unfinished 'Os timbiras. Poema americano' (1848), but had come no nearer to fulfilling them; lines from the 'Introdução' effectively form its epitaph ('Oh that I could, o warrior, repeat for a single moment the voice of your songs'). But while Gonçalves Dias's despair of ever finding that voice led him to scientific research (in 1857 he published a *Dicionário da língua tupi*), Alencar stayed with literature and looked for other forms of expression. Rejecting as too civilized the 'linguagem clássica' of 'Os timbiras', and the Indian style of poets like Gonçalves de Magalhães and Araújo Pôrto Alegre, he ended up writing three novels or *lendas* in poetic prose: *O Guarani* (1857), *Iracema* (1866, an anagram of America) and *Ubirajara* (1874).

The grander hopes of the Americanists were disappointed