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Antonio Cussen

Excerpt

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PART I

Caracas (1781–1810)

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Augustan Caracas

Oh Happy Age! Oh times like those alone
 By fate reserv'd for Great *Augustus*' Throne!
 John Dryden

Andrés Bello was born in 1781 to a family of modest means. All eight of his great-grandparents had emigrated from the Canary Islands at the beginning of the eighteenth century. They had left behind a life of poverty and had advanced considerably in the social echelon since their arrival in Venezuela. Some of Bello's ancestors were construction workers, and his paternal grandfather was a shoemaker; but his mother's father – Juan Pedro López – was a painter of distinction in colonial Caracas. Bello's father, Bartolomé Bello, was both a lawyer and a musician. He married Ana López in 1781 and Andrés was the first of eight children. The poet grew up in the house of his grandfather López, who had at his death in 1787 a mortgaged house and three slaves.¹

Bello was fortunate to have as his tutor the Mercedarian friar Cristóbal Quesada, who was well versed in the Roman and Spanish classics and sensitive to the beauties of poetry. When he was fifteen, Bello worked on a translation, which has not survived, of book 5 of the *Aeneid*. In 1797 he entered into the last year of the preparatory course at the Royal and Pontifical University of Caracas, where he was perfecting his already proficient Latin. The course was devoted entirely to Christian doctrine and to oral and written fluency in the language of Rome. From seven until nine-thirty each morning, and in the afternoons from two to four, the presbyter José Antonio Montenegro examined the works of Virgil and Cicero and the Council of Trent. In addition, he urged his students to go to confession, and on Saturdays he explained Christian doctrine.²

At sixteen Bello had already achieved a certain notoriety as an extremely diligent student, and he was asked to become the tutor of Simón Bolívar, a descendant of Simón de Bolívar, one of the earliest conquistadors of Venezuela. Bolívar's parents had accumulated an immense fortune, including several ranches of cacao and indigo, cattle, four houses in Caracas – fully furnished and with slaves – nine houses in La Guaira, the whole valley of Aroa, and the mines of Cocorote. Bello gave lessons in geography and belles lettres to Bolívar, who was twenty months his junior, but these lessons did not last long since his student embarked for Europe to spend time at the court of Charles IV. Bello later reported that Bolívar was restless and not a conscientious student, but that these faults were offset by extraordinary talents. Restless he was; at age twelve, already an orphan, Bolívar had gone to court to defend his rights to change his residence from that of his uncle to that of his sister.³

In 1797 the British took possession of the island of Trinidad, only a few miles off the mainland, and the Spaniards were in constant fear of renewed threats of British or French expansion. Of greater concern, however, was the revolutionary plot led by Manuel Gual and José María España in the same year. Under the influence of a Spanish radical, these men had organized a conspiracy in La Guaira, the main port of Venezuela, with the ultimate objective of establishing republican institutions. In vain Spain had tried to establish a *cordon sanitaire* that would effectively isolate the peninsula and its colonies from revolutionary France. Despite the careful watch of the Crown and the Inquisition, printed material proclaiming the rights of man crossed the Pyrenees and the Atlantic Ocean and led to several unsuccessful conspiracies, La Guaira's probably being the most serious.⁴

The new intellectual currents had also reached Caracas. Some of Bello's professors at the University of Caracas were praising the new science and the benefits of trade and agriculture; some were introducing the principles of mechanics and mathematics by way of François Jaquier, an eighteenth-century French philosopher and mathematician who tried to simplify scholastic jargon and to accommodate ideas of the Enlightenment. Thus, one of Bello's professors, Rafael Escalona,

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could freely lecture on Newton, Locke, and Condillac. But this was the voice of the minority; most of the faculty of the University of Caracas held to orthodox Thomism and only grudgingly allowed some mention of the new science. So when Bello took his final exams, in May 1800, he had to put his syllogisms to use and prove in Latin several Aristotelian axioms. An applicant for a degree had to swear to maintain the Immaculate Conception and neither to teach nor to practice regicide or tyrannicide. Bello was also required to present documents proving that he was of the white race.⁵

As the eighteenth century came to an end, the rate of change began to increase in colonial Caracas. Perhaps nothing symbolizes better the clash between old and new ideas than the sojourn of Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland in Caracas from November 1799 to January 1800. Years later, Humboldt published his impressions of Venezuela in *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent* (Paris, 1814). He divided the territory of the country into three zones, which paralleled the three stages of human society: the life of the wild hunter in the forests of the Orinoco, the pastoral life in the savannas, or *llanos*, and the agricultural life in the high valleys and at the foot of the coastal mountains. The coast of Venezuela, and its proximity to Europe, had encouraged Humboldt to envisage the growth of trade, and the islands in the mouth of the Orinoco were transformed in his vision to enclaves of high agricultural productivity and constant domestic and international commerce.

In Caracas Humboldt also saw a lively interest in learning, including a knowledge of French and Italian literature, as well as a predilection for music. He was surprised, however, not to find a printing press. Nor did he find much curiosity among the *caraqueños* about the natural landscape. Of the forty thousand people who lived in Caracas in 1799, Humboldt and Bonpland could not find anyone who had reached the summit of La Silla: "Accustomed to a uniform and domestic life, they dread fatigue, and sudden changes of climate. It would seem as if they live not to enjoy life, but only to prolong its duration."⁶ Bello was one of the few *caraqueños* who accompanied Humboldt and Bonpland on their expedition to La Silla in the first days of 1800, though he did not reach the summit. Humboldt

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took an interest in the young man and considered his devotion to learning excessive, given his frail disposition.

The German naturalist noticed the characteristic Hispanic passion for genealogy, yet also observed that this passion did not transform the Creole aristocracy into a group that insulted and offended, which was the case – he said – of most European aristocracies. He also distinguished two species of noble Creoles: those descended from Spaniards who had recently held positions of high distinction in the imperial bureaucracy and those descended from the conquistadors. Yet, as Humboldt observed, all whites, noble or not, enjoyed a certain equality following the axiom that “*todo blanco es caballero*.”⁷

It was this equality among whites that allowed Bello to develop close friendships with the *mantuanos*, the name given to members of the highest aristocracy in Caracas. Bello was particularly fond of the *mantuano* José Ignacio Ustáriz, a fellow student of philosophy who along with his brothers liked to play the role of patron of the arts. At the Ustáriz house, Bello found a library of Roman and Spanish classics and also a selection of modern European books. The study of modern foreign languages was not generally encouraged in Caracas: Bello would later recall that on one occasion a priest had seen him reading a tragedy of Racine’s and had observed that it was a pity that he had learned French. Soon afterward Bello began to study English by translating Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.⁸

In 1800 Bello graduated with a bachelor’s degree from the University of Caracas. He enrolled in the School of Medicine and the School of Law, hoping to obtain higher degrees. But after one year he had to abandon his studies, probably for financial reasons, and decided to apply for the vacant position of second officer of the captaincy general’s secretariat, a high position in the imperial bureaucracy, especially considering that the young applicant had been born on American soil – a Creole. The man who recommended Bello, Pedro González Ortega, wrote about him: “I have seen several of his works, both translations of classical authors and his original writings, though of less importance, in which one can recognize an uncommon talent and ideas that combine an extensive knowledge and valuable discernment.” Bello was given the post and be-

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came a close assistant to the captain general, Manuel de Guevara y Vasconcelos. He was extremely diligent in his tasks, writing official documents and translating articles from English and French journals.⁹

Vasconcelos had arrived in Caracas in April 1799. A man of solid administrative and military credentials, he was determined to rule the vast provinces of Venezuela with a firm hand and wasted no time in venting his full force on those daring to proclaim republican ideals, the rights of man, or any such French ideas. Scarcely a month after his arrival he had ordered the execution of José María España, which was carried out with fanfare and exemplary cruelty: España was hanged in Caracas's Plaza Mayor, and for a long time inbound travelers disembarking at the port of La Guaira could see his head in an iron cage. The remaining parts of José María España's body were divided and placed in Macuto, El Vigía, Quita-Calzón, and La Cumbre.¹⁰

This kind of display was far from customary in the colonies; the extreme punishment corresponded to the extreme rarity of the crime. Day-to-day life in colonial Caracas, at least among the elite, was marked, rather, by an almost placid and pastoral pace. Vasconcelos had an interest in the arts and frequently invited *caraqueños* to his home for Sunday gatherings, adorned by poetry and dance. These events were attended by local dignitaries, and they became for the captain general a source of secret intelligence that expedited his duties.

Vasconcelos enjoyed a moment of great triumph in the spring of 1804 when he hosted the arrival of an expedition led by Francisco Balmis and financed by the Spanish Crown, the purpose of which was to distribute an antivariolic vaccine to all corners of the Spanish Empire. In the colonies, as well as in the Spanish metropolis, there was still much resistance to new ideas and new practices, and the success of the vaccine expedition depended on the attention it elicited from the notables of Caracas. Vasconcelos therefore celebrated the arrival of Balmis with serenades, parties, and ecclesiastical acts; and in one of the festivities Andrés Bello, the captain general's secretary, delivered a poem entitled "Oda a la vacuna."¹¹

The great Charles, Bello said, has distributed the vaccine throughout the empire, reenacting the efforts of the Crown

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since the Indies were first discovered. The navigator had then learned of new routes and brought to America the skills and arts of the Old World. A thousand riches were distributed throughout both hemispheres with the advent of trade, and the Christian gospel put an end to the sanguinary rites that offended the Supreme Being. The great work of royal tenderness seemed complete, but a plague brought desolation to the new colonies. The palace and the hut were in mourning; the old perished with the young. The most indissoluble ties were broken: the wife fled the husband, and the slave his master. But through the intervention of Providence, and in a pastoral setting, Jenner discovered the vaccine. King Charles gave to the earth the gifts of heaven, agriculture started feeling the salutary effects of science, and the poet and his audience were transported to the beautiful days of the golden age.

In the “Oda” Bello drew heavily on Virgil’s *Georgics*, especially in his attempt to blend poetry with science and politics. Like its model, the “Oda” begins with a long proem, a dedication addressed to the poet’s patron:

Vasconcelos ilustre, en cuyas manos
el gran monarca del imperio ibero
las peligrosas riendas deposita
de una parte preciosa de sus pueblos;
tú que, de la corona asegurando
en tus vastas provincias los derechos,
nuestra paz estableces, nuestra dicha
sobre inmuebles y sólidos cimientos;
iris afortunado que las negras
nubes que oscurecían nuestro cielo
con sabias providencias ahuyentaste,
el orden, la quietud restituyendo.¹²

(Illustrious Vasconcelos, in whose hands the great monarch of the Spanish Empire has placed the dangerous reins of a precious part of his lands; you who, after ensuring the rights of the Crown in your vast provinces, establish our peace and our happiness on solid, unmovable foundations; fortunate rainbow who dispelled the black clouds that darkened our skies with wise measures, restoring order and tranquility.)

Again following the example of Virgil, Bello closes the proem to his ode by describing the superhuman aura that sur-

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rounds the leader. Though the poem is dedicated to Vasconcelos, the ultimate-beneficiary is not the intermediary of the king but the king himself. The poet tells his Maecenas:

digno representante del gran Carlos,
 recibe en nombre suyo el justo incienso
 de gratitud, que a su persona augusta,
 tributa la ternura de los pueblos;
 y pueda por tu medio levantarse
 nuestra unánime voz al trono excelso,
 donde, cual numen bienhechor, derrama
 toda especie de bien sobre su imperio;
 sí, Venezuela exenta del horrible
 azote destructor, que, en otro tiempo
 sus hijos devoraba, es quien te envía
 por mi tímido labio sus acentos. (ll. 17–28)

(worthy representative of the great Charles, receive in his name the just incense of gratitude, which is a tribute of tenderness from these lands to his august person; and may our unanimous voice be raised through you to the lofty throne which, as a benign divine power, pours all forms of goodness upon the empire. Yes, Venezuela free from the destructive scourge, which formerly devoured her children, sends you her songs through my timid lips.)

In referring to the “*persona augusta*” of the monarch, Bello was following the standard practice of using the epithet *augusto* in a royal setting. Elsewhere in the “Oda a la vacuna” the Spanish queen is addressed as “*augusta Luisa*,” and in Bello’s dramatic poem “Venezuela consolada,” also written to celebrate the vaccine expedition, we find King Charles invoked as “*augusto Carlos*.” The epithet had been used for centuries among European monarchs, an echo of the man who had changed the course of Western politics by cloaking his power in a religious, superhuman aura. Poets were especially fond of making the connection between the epithet and its eponym. As we shall see, in his old age Bello referred explicitly to this connection.

In Spain the epithet *augusto* often had the meaning of “venerable” or “majestic.” In the eighteenth century it still preserved these meanings, but it was most commonly used in two very specific ways: to refer to the Eucharist (*el Augusto Sacramento*, sometimes used in the superlative) and, by extension, to the

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Church or to the emperor. The *Diccionario de la lengua castellana*, published by the Real Academia Española in honor of the first Bourbon monarch, supported its definition of the epithet with the following example: “Si no se conserva lo augusto de la majestad, no habrá diferencia entre el Príncipe y el vasallo” (If the august traits of majesty are not preserved, there will be no difference between the Prince and his subject).¹³ In Bello’s Caracas days the epithet was found mainly in association with the Crown and the Church. *Augusto* designated the dividing line between the powerful and the powerless, the rulers and the ruled.

In the “Oda a la vacuna” the religious aura of *augusto* is enhanced by expressions that emphasize the divine origin of the monarch, who appears closer to God than to mortals: “incense,” “divine power,” “lofty throne.” The spiritual and secular unity of the empire is embodied in a Crown that is sanctioned by God – its subjects can only thank with a “unanimous voice” the munificence of the king. The tone is the established form of adulation, the expected declaration of allegiance to the ruler. It is the kind of verse written by all young, aspiring courtiers who expect to receive the benefits of patronage.¹⁴

Promonarchic sentiments were strong in the Spanish world at the end of the eighteenth century, and both conservative and reformist forces vied to link the Spanish Crown with the principate. After the rebellion of Gual and España, for example, the bishop of Caracas, Juan Antonio de la Virgen María y Viana, delivered a homily whose epigraph was a line of Saint Peter (1.2.v.17): “Deum timete; Regem honorificate” (Fear God; honor the King). Characterizing the search for freedom as a snare of the Prince of Darkness, similar to Adam’s notion of primitive freedom and to the temptation of the serpent, Bishop Viana told the *caraqueños* that they should record the maxim of the Prince of the Apostles, which is the fear of God, and honor, reverence, total submission, and obedience to sovereigns and to the sacrosanct laws they establish. Viana was convinced of the superior power of kings, next to God, and said that even Christ respected Pilate as a superior power consecrated by God. The traditional Christian support for monarchy should be the model of behavior for those who, finding nothing but joy, peace, and quiet, wish to snatch from the sacred temples of

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their monarchs the Crown that God himself has given them. Republicanism, as the bishop reminded the most distinguished members of the Caracas nobility, is the voice of the devil, and a devouring fire will consume the land if such evil is not restrained.¹⁵

The Church was not always ready to extol the Crown in these terms, but in times of crisis, when republican ideals threatened the integrity of the empire, variations of Bishop Viana's homily were often delivered. The principate, with more specific references to the court of Augustus, was also a favorite allusion of the new generation of poets and politicians who had come to power in Madrid in the last decade of the eighteenth century. The young men who gathered around the illustrious humanist Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos, named secretary of state and justice in 1795, were eager to exalt a model of power in which the monarch, with the aid of a wise minister, brings wealth to the empire, peace to the people, and emoluments to the poets. In the first of his epistles, addressed to Manuel Godoy, Charles IV's right-hand man, the poet Juan Meléndez Valdés invokes the Muses, who once ensured the immortality of Augustus and his prime minister: "Así dura inmortal, de olvido ajena, / La memoria de Augusto y su valido" (Thus lasts forever, beyond oblivion, the memory of Augustus and his minister).¹⁶ Meléndez Valdés goes on to evoke Augustan Rome, when the arts and sciences were cultivated, and then contrasts that time with Spain's present circumstances:

Mas hoy mísero yace [el ingenio], y oprimido
Del error gime y tiembla, que orgulloso
Mofándose camina el cuello erguido.
No lo sufráis, señor; mas, poderoso,
El monstruo derroca que guerra impía
A la santa verdad mueve envidioso. (*BAE*, 63: 200)
(But now genius lies in misery, and moans and trembles oppressed by error, who walks proudly with his head held high and mocks him. Do not bear it, sir; instead, overthrow with your power the jealous monster who wages an impious war against holy truth.)

Here Meléndez Valdés is calling for the overthrow of the Spanish Inquisition, the bastion of the traditionalists.¹⁷ The Spanish poet presents the Augustan principate as an ideal moment of