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978-0-521-62327-8 - A Cultural History of Latin America: Literature, Music and the  
Visual Arts in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Edited by Leslie Bethell

Excerpt

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*Part One*

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## 1

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LITERATURE, MUSIC AND THE  
VISUAL ARTS, *c.* 1820–1870

It is difficult to make sense of the cultural history of Latin America in the nineteenth century without an understanding of the age of revolutionary struggle and independence with which it begins. This would be true even if the Latin American experience at the time had not itself been so firmly inserted within the context of international events following the revolutions of 1776 and 1789, the incipient industrial revolution in Europe and the spread of liberalism following the century of enlightenment. The historical transition from European colony to independent republic (or, in the case of Brazil, from colony to independent empire), corresponds broadly to the beginning of a transition from neo-classicism, which itself had only recently replaced the baroque, to romanticism in the arts. Triumphant romanticism is the characteristic mode of the new era, particularly in literature – though the continuing influence of neo-classicism in the other arts, especially painting and architecture, is much more persistent than is generally appreciated. Hugo's equation of liberalism in politics with romanticism in literature applies more forcefully, though even more contradictorily, in Latin America than in Europe, where much of the romantic impulse was in reality an aristocratic nostalgia for the pre-scientific, pre-industrial world. This brings the historian, at the outset, up against an enduring problem in using labels for the arts in Latin American cultural history. Terms such as neo-classicism and romanticism are often inaccurate approximations even in Europe where they originated, yet critics frequently assume that they designate entire historical periods of artistic development, rather than denote the formal and conceptual contradictions of historical processes as these are reproduced in art. In Latin America these same labels can at times appear to become completely disembodied, losing all direct concrete relation to historical determinants, giving rise to a persistent perception among

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Americanist artists of a conflict in which America's 'natural' and spontaneous realities are repeatedly constrained and oppressed by Europe's coldly rational 'cultural' forms.

Spain was the nation which had given Europe the picaresque novel and Don Quijote, but was also the colonial power whose Holy Inquisition had prohibited the writing and diffusion of prose fiction in its American territories and, especially, of all works about the native Americans, the Indians. It was therefore both appropriate and profoundly ironic that the first outstanding literary work of the independence period in Spanish America should have been a picaresque novel, *El periquillo sarniento* (1816), by the Mexican José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi (1776–1827), a satirical survey of opportunism and corruption which looked for the first time at the structure and values of contemporary Mexican society, using the themes and expression of popular culture in a clear emancipatory gesture characteristic of the novel's generic function at that time. Lizardi, self-styled *El Pensador Mexicano* (the title of his first newspaper, 1812), was a journalist, politician, bureaucrat and man of letters, and the close relationship between journalism and literature forged by his generation continues in the continent to this day. In addition to his newspaper articles, he published innumerable satirical pamphlets and broadsheets demanding freedom of expression and claiming for the still adolescent press the role of orientating public opinion and taste: 'Public opinion and the freedom of the press are the muzzle and leash for restraining tyrants, criminals and fools.'<sup>1</sup> Ironically enough, Lizardi appears to have wrapped his ideas in fictional guise not out of an artistic vocation but in order to avoid censorship and imprisonment or worse, but his characteristically heterogeneous works give us our most complete picture of those turbulent and ambiguous times. It is tempting to link him with the Argentine Bartolomé Hidalgo (1788–1823), whose *cielitos* and gaucho dialogues on contemporary politics during the revolutionary period convey vividly the language and mentality of the age. Lizardi's educated wit and Hidalgo's popular humour were, however, the exception. The staple fare of the neo-classic period was a diet of heroic hymns, patriotic odes, elegies, madrigals, epigrams, fables, and comedies and tragedies framed by the poetics of Horace, Boileau and

<sup>1</sup> From his last newspaper, the *Correo Semanario de México* (1826), quoted by Carlos Monsiváis, *A ustedes les consta. Antología de la crónica en México* (Mexico, 1980), 19. All translations in the text are the author's.

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Luzán. Divorced from the emotions and conventions which created and conditioned such works, it is difficult for the modern reader to identify with them; yet most of the literary expression of the revolutionary period is clothed in such forms. Among writers neo-classicism gradually came to be associated with the more conservative versions of Enlightenment doctrine and with the authoritarian outcome of the French Revolution, in view of its association with the contemporary cultural policies of the Portuguese and Spanish empires. Little wonder, then, that writers were searching for something new. What they found was a European romantic movement at first sight tailor-made for them, whose combination of political passion and private sentimentality would make a particularly lasting impact on Latin American literature and art generally precisely because it corresponded to the early decades in the history of the new republics. Germán Arciniegas has gone so far as to assert: ‘The republics that were born romantically in the New World constitute the greatest achievement, the masterwork of the Romantic spirit.’<sup>2</sup> And another modern critic, Luis Alberto Sánchez, individualized the idea by declaring that Simón Bolívar himself was an intrinsically romantic spirit who became the focal point of Spanish American artistic expression: ‘How long might it have taken for our romanticism to emerge without the stimulus of a man and a writer like Bolívar? And to what extent would Bolívar have been able to realise himself without the literary and romantic aura which surrounded him?’<sup>3</sup>

The pre-independence and independence period in Spanish America was an age of travellers, intellectuals, journalists, poets and revolutionaries. Many men were all these things by turns or at one and the same time, and they embodied the Americanist concept by living, learning, working and fighting in other men’s countries, like Byron, who called his yacht *Bolívar* and longed to go to America, and Garibaldi, who did go, and who wore an American poncho as a mark of rebellion to the end of his days. The interwoven lives of men like the Mexican Father Servando Teresa de Mier (1765–1827), the Venezuelans, Francisco de Miranda (1750–1816), Simón Rodríguez (1771–1854), Bolívar (1783–1830) and Andrés Bello (1781–1865), or the Guatemalan, Antonio José de Irisarri (1786–1868), are as remarkable in their peripatetic majesty as anything the Enlightenment or revolutionary periods in Europe have to show. The Ecuadorean José Joaquín Olmedo (1780–1847) expressed the Bolivarian dream in

<sup>2</sup> Germán Arciniegas, *El continente de siete colores* (Buenos Aires, 1965), 391.

<sup>3</sup> Luis Alberto Sánchez, *Historia comparada de las literaturas americanas* (Buenos Aires, 1974), II, 230.

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verse: 'Unite, oh peoples,/ to be free and never more defeated,/ and may the great chain of the Andes make fast/ this union, this potent bond.' The dream dissolved, as is known ('we have ploughed the sea'), but its memory echoes still both in contemporary politics and literature. In those early days, before even the provisional boundaries of the new republics had been finally determined, many writers anticipating the new order – which would be *criollo* and bourgeois in intention, if not yet in reality – would have approved the 1822 declaration by José Cecilio del Valle (1780–1834), a Honduran who was also an ardent Central-Americanist: 'From this day forth America shall be my exclusive occupation. America by day, whilst I write; America by night, whilst I think. The proper object of study for every American is America.' After the revolutionary period the Americanist theme lived on, but circumscribed and directed now by nationalism, as men and republics came down, albeit reluctantly, to earth.

In the meantime, however, a number of writers were already seeking a new expression to communicate their new perspective on American reality. A writer like Lizardi, for example, although undoubtedly more innovative than most, still really belonged to the Enlightenment and appeared to see his immediate task, not unreasonably, as that of helping his countrymen to catch up by filling in the gaps in their knowledge and correcting the errors of the past and present rather than constructing the new republican culture that was on the horizon. Had everyone attended to the foundations as he did, more castles – or, rather, government palaces – might have been built on the ground instead of in the air. The theatre was vigorous for a time in many regions, with a predominance of dramas in which morality and patriotism fused almost to the point of synonymity, but none of the plays of that period are ever performed today. Only lyric poetry managed to effect tolerable adaptations to the changing circumstances, so that a small number of poems by Olmedo, Bello or the young Cuban, José María Heredia (1803–39), are as close to the hearts of educated Latin Americans today as are a few well-known paintings of Bolívar, Sucre and San Martín and the scenes of their triumphs in battle. These, however, are no more than isolated landmarks in a vast and mainly uninhabited landscape.

The most characteristic poet of the era is José Joaquín Olmedo, whose lasting fame was secured by his celebratory *La victoria de Junín. Canto a Bolívar* (1825). It is one of the very few serious works which deals with the independence struggles as such. Olmedo was quite unable to find a

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suitable form for his romantic subject, but perhaps this is appropriate. At any rate, the famous cannon thunder of the opening verses is memorable, though it provides the first of many examples of Latin American literary works which have no lived experience of the reality they are attempting to communicate. In that opening salvo we have Olmedo, who was not present at the battle, purporting to recreate it by ‘firing away’, as Bolívar himself felt obliged to point out, ‘where not a shot was heard’. Sarmiento would later write romantic – and enduringly influential – evocations of the Argentine pampa without ever having seen it, and his twentieth-century apostle, Rómulo Gallegos, would emulate him by writing *Doña Bárbara* (1929) having spent a total of five days on the Venezuelan llanos where his apparently authoritative novel was to be set. In this respect, however, the classic predecessor of them all was Chateaubriand, who set *Atala* (1801) on the banks of the Mississippi, although – or perhaps because – he had never travelled that far. No wonder some critics say, not altogether fancifully, to judge by the writings of artists and intellectuals, that America has been more dreamed about than lived.

Neither Olmedo nor his more important contemporary, the Venezuelan Andrés Bello, introduced any innovations in versification or style and their poetry remained essentially neo-classical: measured, harmonious, exemplary and impersonal. What had changed were the themes or, more precisely, the attitude towards them. Those new themes were American nature, virginal again as the Spaniards had conceived it at the time of the conquest (for now it belonged to new masters); the Indian, viewed for the moment not as a barbarian or forced labourer, but as a noble savage ripe for redemption; and political and cultural liberation inaugurating a new social order. Bello would have been one of Latin America’s great men had he never written a word of poetry (in this regard he is similar to José Bonifácio de Andrada e Silva in Brazil), but he did. His *Alocución a la poesía* (1823) correctly assumed the eventual triumph of the revolutionary forces and effectively inaugurated nineteenth-century literary independence in Spanish America. It was later used by the Argentine writer, Juan María Gutiérrez, as the introductory work in his *América poética* (Valparaíso, 1846), the first important anthology of Latin American poetry. The *Alocución* was in some respects closer to Virgil or to Horace than to Victor Hugo, but it clearly perceived the great themes of the American future, calling on poetry to ‘direct its flight/ to the grandiose scenarios of Columbus’ realm/ where the earth is clothed still in its most primitive garb’. Nevertheless, Bello’s own rather ponderous

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verse (more eloquent than poetic, in Pedro Henríquez Ureña's phrase) was itself an indication that this world of nature, mother of poetry, would remain largely unexplored during the nineteenth century, a 'poetry without poets', to plagiarize Luis Alberto Sánchez's verdict on the state of the Latin American novel a century later. What Bello was effectively demanding, of course, was what would later be called *nativismo* or *criollismo*, both forms of literary Americanism which would indeed gradually emerge from the later romantic movement. In his second major poem, *La agricultura de la zona tórrida* (1826), the descriptions of the American landscape and its vegetation recall the Guatemalan priest Rafael Landívar's earlier evocation (*Rusticatio Mexicana*, 1781) or the Brazilian José Basílio da Gama's *O Uruguai* (1769), and anticipate the equally admirable *Memoria sobre el cultivo del maíz en Antioquia* (1868) by the Colombian Gregorio Gutiérrez González (1826–72) towards the end of the romantic era. For a long time, however, despite Bello's passionate plea, and despite innumerable beautiful anthology pieces now largely forgotten by criticism, Latin America's natural regional landscapes would be merely 'backcloths', 'settings', not truly inhabited by the characters of literature. There was to be little internalization of landscape, except in Brazil, where both social and literary conditions were different and where Portuguese traditions obtained. At the same time it must be said that much dismissive criticism of nineteenth-century Spanish American poetry and prose as descriptive or one-dimensional is itself unthinking and superficial. Peninsular Spanish literature had little or no tradition of natural observation, and the European travellers to the New World at this time were only more successful in evoking its landscapes and inhabitants because their works implicitly communicated the necessarily limited view of the outsider. Latin Americans themselves were secretly searching not for reality but for emblematic images – the Indian, the gaucho, the Andes, the tropical forests – in literature and painting, just as they had to search for them as themes for their national anthems, flags or shields.

Bello and Olmedo were both mature men approaching middle age when they wrote their famous poems and were too set in the Enlightenment mould to discard their neo-classical formation. They were both fortunate, however, to witness what Olmedo called the triumph of the Andean condor over the Spanish eagle in the southern continent. Other revolutionaries did not live to see that day. One of the most revered is the young Peruvian Mariano Melgar (1791–1815), a rebel executed by the

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Spaniards. After a classical education, he wrote love poems which are still recited in Peru, including impassioned Inca-style *yaravies* which made him, according to Henríquez Ureña, ‘the first poet to give voice in a consistent fashion to Indian feeling in Spanish poetry’.<sup>4</sup> In his famous ‘Ode to Liberty’, he saw the intellectual and the people united in the romantic new world to come: ‘Cruel despotism,/ horrid centuries, darkest night,/ be gone. Know ye, Indians who weep,/ despised sages, the world entire,/ that evil is no more, and we have taken/ the first step towards our longed for goal . . . / And those who called my land/ an “obscure country”,/ seeing it so fertile in wonders/ now say, “Truly, this is indeed a new world”.’ Melgar did not live to see that world, but his youthful and passionate poetry make him a genuine precursor of it.

Different but also tragic was the poet of frustrated independence, the Cuban José María Heredia, the most authentically lyrical poet of the period and the first great poet of absence and exile (see especially ‘Vuelta al sur’ and ‘Himno del desterrado’, both from 1825). Critics disagree about his literary definition, but many view him as a precursor and some as even the initiator of Latin American romanticism. His precociousness, political failure and tragic destiny have encouraged such a view, which, despite his clearly neo-classical point of departure, is persuasive. *En el teocalli de Cholula* (1820), which he wrote at the age of 17, and *Niágara* (1824), inspired partly by Chateaubriand, have become literary symbols of Latin America’s natural majesty as also of historical imminence. When it became clear that Cuba was not to share in the exhilaration of a triumphant independence struggle, Heredia, moving to the United States, Venezuela and Mexico, gradually gave himself up to despair. In ‘La tempestad’ (1822), he was already lamenting, ‘At last we part, fatal world:/ the hurricane and I now stand alone’; and, in ‘Desengaños’ (1829), he at once reproves his passive compatriots and acknowledges his own surrender to despair and domesticity (‘the novel of my fateful life,/ ends in the arms of my dear wife’). He was not to know that those who did see political liberation would themselves be lamenting its dissipation in many of the new republics until well after mid-century.

Brazil’s evolution was less turbulent, but more productive. As the only Portuguese colony in the New World, Brazil arrived earlier at a distinctively national conception of its literary identity, in a movement which, coinciding with the high-point of neo-classical *arcadismo* or pastoral literature, spread from Minas Gerais to Rio de Janeiro and then

<sup>4</sup> Pedro Henríquez Ureña, *Las corrientes literarias en la América hispánica* (Mexico, 1949), 112.



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to Pernambuco from about 1770 to 1820. Brazil, moreover, had been the theatre of one of the earliest responses to advanced European and North American thought in the shape of the *Inconfidência Mineira* (1788–9). By far the greatest writer of the period, however, was José Bonifácio de Andrada e Silva (1763–1838), tireless promoter of Brazil's literary independence and patriarch of its relatively peaceful political independence in 1822. He was an Enlightenment figure who distinguished himself in scholarship and scientific research, whilst occupying a number of important administrative posts in Portugal and Brazil. His literary career followed a path from Virgilian classicism to an almost Byronic romanticism, though possibly his most representative works are his patriotic verses. A man with some of the qualities of both a Miranda and a Bello, he was perhaps the most widely read and productive man of letters of the era in Latin America.

The period from the 1820s to the 1870s saw a violent and often incoherent struggle to restructure the Latin American societies. The interests of the rural sector, its regional caciques and oligarchs predominated, but the project of the era was clearly urban and bourgeois. Liberalism was espoused, slavery abolished everywhere but Brazil and Cuba, education was revolutionized and culture gradually refurbished on national lines. All the arts except literature languished or declined at first in most regions, because they required a level of wealth, investment and stability lacking in Spanish America generally – the Brazilian case was very different – until the 1870s or later. Relatively few important buildings were erected and few paintings or musical compositions were officially commissioned before mid-century, other than the traditional religious works for churches. The academies founded in some large cities in the last years of the colonial period remained immersed in the most unimaginative versions of classical doctrine and style. The political functions of art were not immediately perceived, except in Brazil, where continuity of monarchical and aristocratic perspective allowed the reconstruction of Rio de Janeiro to be undertaken, mainly in French neo-classical style. Literature, however, retained all its traditional social functions and acquired new ones. Most of the best-known writers of the nineteenth century would be men of action. Yet when these patriots and revolutionaries found time to look around them, they found themselves in a vast, barbarous continent which was less welcoming than Bello, for example, had remembered when he dreamed about it through the mists

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of his London exile. It was an empty, overwhelmingly rural and agricultural continent, whose only significant industry was mining. In 1850 the total population was only 30 million scattered among twenty countries. Most cities remained in appearance much as they had in colonial times; apart from Rio de Janeiro, which had almost 200,000 inhabitants, only Mexico City, Havana and Salvador (Bahia) had populations of more than 100,000.

Since the project of the era was to build new republics with new cultures, it is appropriate to begin with architecture. The end of the eighteenth century had seen the triumph of neo-classical architecture throughout the western world. It was to be particularly welcome in Latin America in the early nineteenth century because of its misleading identification with the French Revolution (its identification with Napoleon's empire received less emphasis, at least from liberals), whilst the baroque became identified with Spain and Portugal, perhaps unreasonably since the discord between structure and ornamentation which characterizes its Latin American versions may itself be interpreted as a sign of rebellion. The baroque style, at any rate, had unified Latin American art. As the continent became more accessible – perhaps vulnerable would be a better word – to contemporary European influences other than those of Spain and Portugal, neo-classicism in architecture and painting, and later romanticism in other fields, gave art a secular function, and reinforced this unity.

In a few Spanish American cities, particularly those like Buenos Aires which had little distinguished colonial architecture, the independence struggle gave an impetus to architectural innovation which would symbolize the rejection of Spanish colonialism. Many buildings in Buenos Aires were constructed according to non-Hispanic principles, and French, Italian and British architects were frequently employed. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that this process was already under way at the end of the colonial period. Neo-classicism's cooler, more rational lines were already visible in, for example, the Palacio de Minería in Mexico City built by the Spaniard Manuel Tolsá (1757–1816), also known as the sculptor of the equestrian statue of Carlos IV on the Paseo de la Reforma, in the churches and great houses constructed in the Bajío region of Mexico by Tolsá's pupil, Francisco Eduardo Tresguerras (1759–1833), in the dome and towers designed for the metropolitan cathedral in Mexico City by Damián Ortiz de Castro (1750–1793) and in Santiago's Moneda Palace built in the last years of the eighteenth