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Colonial Poetry

The development of colonial poetry in the territories that today belong to Spanish America and Brazil was quite different in each area. This was directly related to the policies applied by the two metropolises, Spain and Portugal, to the colonization of the New World. Since the early years of the sixteenth century Spain deployed an increasing contingent of settlers, both lay and religious, who brought with them institutions, policies, weapons, and cultural traditions. The empire was to take root in these new lands with the double intention of evangelizing its native inhabitants and exploiting its natural resources, especially precious metals. For all intents and purposes the viceroyalties of Mexico and Peru, into which the administration of the Spanish territories was divided, were part of the crown of Castile and enjoyed the same basic laws as the other Spanish kingdoms such as Leon or Navarre; in other words, America *was* Spain. Portugal, on the other hand, at first did not consider its New World enterprise as a political priority, preferring to concentrate its efforts in Africa and Asia. The American territories under Portuguese jurisdiction, as stipulated by the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), lacked the mineral resources found in Mexico and Peru (the gold mines of Minas Gerais would not be discovered until the end of the seventeenth century), and this is why a major imperial effort akin to that of their Iberian counterpart was neither immediately sustainable nor advantageous.

The colonization of modern-day Brazil was thus slow and intermittent, and initially there were only a few isolated fortified mercantile platforms rather than fully developed cities. Olinda and Salvador were no match for impressive urban centers such as Mexico City and Lima. Major Spanish American cities soon developed a strong autonomous identity, both intellectually and economically, supported by the foundation of universities across the continent, first in Santo Domingo (1538) and a few years later in Lima and Mexico City (1551). The first printing press was established in the capital of New Spain in 1539, followed by Lima in 1584. This was not the case for

Brazil; its cities, concentrated mostly on the coast, were kept by Portugal on a tight leash, controlling and somewhat delaying their cultural growth. No printing press was allowed to operate in Brazil until the court of João VI fled Lisbon and was established in Rio de Janeiro in 1808. Students who wanted to obtain an academic degree had to travel to Portugal, since no university was founded in Brazil until 1909.

Although poetry circulated mainly via manuscript copies in Europe as well as in America, the Hispanic presses in the New World also contributed to the dissemination of local authors, fostering the rise of a new poetic identity over the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with seminal works such as *Arauco domado* (Arauco Tamed, 1596, published in Lima) by Pedro de Oña and *Grandeza mexicana* (Mexican Greatness, 1604, published in Mexico City) by Bernardo de Balbuena. Brazilian poets had no other choice than to print their works in Portugal, whereas the interface between Spanish America and the metropolis was more fluid. The publication of works in Spain was likely to obtain a wider readership, but, despite their technical limitations, American presses were often preferred. For instance, Eugenio de Salazar (1530–1602), born in Madrid but who resided in various American cities fulfilling administrative roles, prepared a manuscript collection of his poems before his death, *Silva de poesía*. In the opening letter addressed to his sons, he suggests Mexico City as a possible venue for its publication, "there you will be able to print it [the *Silva*], since there is a printing press, though it does not use good quality types."[1]

Mexican and Peruvian presses, however, produced only a limited number of literary texts. Most printed works were related to the administration of colonial power overseas: edicts and legal documents, university textbooks, catechisms, grammars and dictionaries of Nahuatl, Quechua, Aymara, and other indigenous languages. Spaniards imposed their language and way of life on the New World's native peoples, but they were also influenced by them. Friars and missionaries were particularly interested in native history, language and customs, firstly because this facilitated evangelization, and also because of the genuine fascination that many members of the Church felt towards pre-Columbian civilizations. Few of these groups possessed a writing system, such as Maya glyphs or Mexica pictographs, and only a handful of pre-Hispanic American codices have survived. Some were copied under Spanish supervision during the postconquest period, but the majority of the original documents were destroyed in order to eradicate indigenous religious cults, as reported by Fray Diego de Landa in sixteenth-century Yucatan

[1] Eugenio de Salazar, *Silva de poesía*, ed. Jaime J. Martínez Martín (Rome: Bulzoni, 2004), 25.

(c. 1566): "We found a large number of books written using their own characters, and since they were filled with diabolic superstitions and lies they were all burnt."[2]

The majority of texts that contain what we could consider to be indigenous American poetry were copied in the Latin alphabet by native scribes instructed by members of the Church. These were individuals such as the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún (1499–1590), who alongside his team of native students and collaborators educated at the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco collected a vast array of information regarding ancient Mesoamerican religion and culture, as well as old hymns. The sacred Maya book, *Popol Vuh* (Book of the Council), was copied and translated into Spanish by the Dominican Francisco Ximénez during the early years of the eighteenth century. Oral tradition offered the richest source of songs and hymns, and this was particularly relevant in the Inca civilization, which did not possess writing. Peruvian authors, such as the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega in his *Comentarios reales de los incas* (Royal Commentaries of the Incas, 1609), collected Quechua songs, recalling that "Inca poets were called *harauec*, which in their language means *inventor*."[3] The label is more fitting, however, to Europeans and Hispanized Indians and *mestizos* who partly erased, partly rescued, and mainly reinvented these traditional songs in the way in which they have been brought down to us.

In spite of the great racial and cultural hybridization experienced in the postconquest era, indigenous languages were seldom used by Spanish American and Brazilian poets. Traditional native songs survived in the oral tradition, but Nahuatl, Quechua, and Tupi found little space in the written text; and when they did appear these were mostly used in a religious context. For instance, Nahuatl devotional songs were performed in Mexico City during the celebrations that welcomed the arrival of relics sent by Pope Gregory XIII, as recorded by Father Pedro de Morales in his *Carta* (Letter, 1579); and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–1695) incorporated Nahuatl in her *autos sacramentales* and *villancicos*. In Peru, Christian hymns were composed in Quechua by Fray Luis Jerónimo de Oré and included in his *Símbolo católico indiano* (Catholic Indian Symbol, 1598), followed by Juan Pérez Bocanegra's *Ritual formulario e institución de curas* (Ritual Formulary and Priestly Induction, 1631), which comprises three Quechua Marian hymns. Lastly, Father José de Anchieta (1534–1597), born in Tenerife and educated at Coimbra, was a missionary in Brazil where he learned Tupi and

[2] Diego de Landa, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, ed. Miguel Rivera Dorado (Madrid: Dastin, 2002), 160.

[3] El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, *Comentarios reales; La Florida del Inca*, ed. Mercedes López-Baralt (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 2003), 155.

composed several religious songs in that language using Portuguese metrics, a simple style and naïve imagery, as illustrated in the following excerpt devoted to baby Jesus:

> Pitangĩ porangeté
> oroguerobiá' katú!
> Xe jarĩ, paí Jesú,
> xe moingó katú jepé:
> nde añó toroausú![4]
>
> (Very handsome little child,/ in him we firmly trust!/ Good Jesus, my little Lord,/ you show me the right path:/ that I shall love only you!)

Anchieta is an obvious example of the difficulties that we encounter when trying to fit early modern culture within the boundaries of a post-Romantic understanding of the history of literature, which is very dependent on concepts such as language and nationality. This Canary-born Jesuit was educated in Portugal and spent most of his adult life in Brazil. He wrote in Spanish, Portuguese, Tupi, and was also an accomplished neo-Latin poet, composing an ambitious epic poem dedicated to Mem de Sá, third governor of Brazil, *De gestis Mendi de Saa* (On the Deeds of Mem de Sá). Three countries could legitimately claim Anchieta as one of their *national* authors, though such labels would seem unfitting and limiting. He was Spanish, Portuguese, and Brazilian at the same time. Political and intellectual hybridization became even more apparent between 1580 and 1640 when Portugal was united to the crown of Castile after King Sebastian died without heirs and his uncle, Philip II of Spain, successfully imposed his dynastic claim. Then, more than ever before, the fortunes of Portugal, Spain, and America were closely interlinked; as a result, the history of colonial poetry could best be described as a constant negotiation between different languages, cultures, and traditions.

The Spanish and Portuguese conquests led to the establishment of European genres and conventions in the New World. Among these, epic and religious poetry represent the double colonial intervention of the empire and the Church in America. Inspired by Virgil and other Italian models, epic was one of the most popular poetic genres in early modern Spain, comprising a political message that usually had a propagandistic bias in favor of the Habsburg monarchy. Alonso de Ercilla, the most influential author in this mode, was also the first to publish an entire heroic poem in Spanish devoted to the New World. *La Araucana* (The Araucaniad) was issued in three parts

[4] José de Anchieta, *Obras completas, 5.1. Lírica portuguesa e tupi*, ed. Pe. Armando Cardoso, SJ (São Paulo: Loyola, 1984), 153.

(1569, 1578, 1589) and describes the Spanish campaigns against the Araucanians (Mapuche Indians) in Chile in which Ercilla took part as a soldier between 1557 and 1559. In the prologue he claims that he composed this "truthful history" while he was on the battlefield, and praises the Araucanians for their bravery regardless of their "barbaric" condition.[5]

La Araucana is a complex work and each of its parts shows variations in tone, plot, and ideological content, which granted its imitators a model that could be approached with great flexibility. The American epic became a genre in its own right, and enjoyed continuity and success between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Ercilla employed a pseudo-historical discourse, praising a variety of heroes on both sides of the conflict rather than a single leader, thus depicting the conquest as a collective enterprise coordinated by the Spanish monarchy. Yet his most significant contribution to the genre was perhaps the openness and ambiguity of its ideological message since both Spaniards and Araucanians are conceived as brave, as well as inherently vulnerable, and flawed. Galvarino's speech following his capture, when his hands are cut off by the Spaniards, is one of the most compelling examples of the atrocities of war, where the rise of violence questions the boundaries between victors and vanquished, generating only more violence like an invincible Hydra:

> diciendo así: "Segad esa garganta
> siempre sedienta de la sangre vuestra,
> que no temo la muerte ni me espanta
> vuestra amenaza y rigurosa muestra,
> y la importancia y pérdida no es tanta
> que haga falta mi cortada diestra,
> pues quedan otras muchas esforzadas
> que saben gobernar bien las espadas."[6]
>
> (and he said: "Cut this throat of mine/ always thirsty for your blood,/ since I do not fear death nor I am scared of/ your threats and your severe punishment,/ and my loss is not so important since/ there is no need for my severed right hand;/ there are many more brave hands left/ that know how to handle a sword with skill.")

Despite that its action is set in America, *La Araucana* was conceived in Spain within a European context. Pedro de Oña, one of its earlier imitators, adopts instead the role of the American-born poet engaging with a subject that he knows intimately well. *Arauco domado* (1596) is the first poem published by an author born in the New World (in Angol, Chile); Oña sets himself the task

[5] Alonso de Ercilla, *La Araucana*, ed. Isaías Lerner (Madrid: Cátedra, 2002), 69–70.
[6] Ercilla, *La Araucana*, XXII, 47.

of revising and completing Ercilla's work in order to "pay tribute to my homeland."[7] *Arauco domado* was commissioned by the outgoing viceroy of Peru, García Hurtado de Mendoza, who is praised throughout. Oña follows the pseudo-historical narrative set out by Ercilla, as did other epic authors who wrote numerous poems about Hernán Cortés. Francisco de Terrazas (died c. 1580), son of a *conquistador*, was born in Mexico and authored the epic poem *Nuevo mundo y conquista* (The New World and Conquest), only a few fragments of which are extant. What is left of his work suggests that Cortés is praised for his heroic deeds, but is also blamed for not having kept his word of rewarding his soldiers. Terrazas voices the frustration of the *conquistadors*' descendants who found that their privileges had not been granted in perpetuity. A similar message can be found in the work of another Mexican-born author who wrote an epic poem on Hernán Cortés, *El peregrino indiano* (The Indian Pilgrim, 1599) by Antonio de Saavedra Guzmán, the first American-born poet who published in Spain.

The uses of epic varied depending on the topic chosen. Certain authors focused their attention on fringe areas charting unmapped territories in the colonial imagination of the time. Juan de Castellanos wrote an ambitious poem devoted to the Caribbean, Venezuela, and New Granada, although he only managed to publish the first of four parts of his monumental *Elegías de varones ilustres de Indias* (Elegies of Illustrious Men of the Indies, 1589). The same holds true for Martín del Barco Centenera, who in *Argentina y conquista del Río de la Plata* (Argentina and the Conquest of the River Plate, 1602) describes the clashes between Spaniards and the local indigenous population of one of the largest marginal areas of Spanish America. Other authors chose to take a radically different approach, leaving aside the epic of the conquest and looking instead to medieval Spanish history and legends; for instance, we can cite Rodrigo de Carvajal y Robles's *Poema del asalto y conquista de Antequera* (Poem on the Attack and Conquest of Antequera, 1627) and Bernardo de Balbuena's *El Bernardo o victoria de Roncesvalles* (Bernardo, or the Victory of Roncesvalles, 1624). *El Bernardo* is a polemical response to the pseudo-historical epic model inspired in *La Araucana*. Balbuena holds onto Aristotelian principles and declares that "poetry ought to be an imitation of truth but not in itself truthful, describing events not as they happened but as they could have happened."[8]

A further strand of epic poetry engages with the supernatural and the divine, focusing on Jesus Christ and the lives of the saints. One early example

[7] Pedro de Oña, *Arauco domado*, ed. Ornella Gianesin (Como/Pavia: Ibis, 2014), 549.
[8] Bernardo de Balbuena, *El Bernardo o victoria de Roncesvalles, poema heroico* (Madrid: Diego Flamenco, 1624), ¶6.

written in Peru is Diego de Hojeda's *La Christiada* (The Chistiad, 1611), which describes Christ's passion in imitation of the neo-Latin poem by Marco Girolamo Vida, *Christias* (1535). After the arrival of the Jesuits to America and their growing importance in various aspects of the social sphere, the figure of Saint Ignatius became the subject of several religious epics. One of the earliest examples is Luis de Belmonte Bermúdez's *Vida del padre maestro Ignacio de Loyola* (Life of Father Ignacio de Loyola, 1609), followed by Pedro de Oña's *El Ignacio de Cantabria* (Ignacio of Cantabria, 1639) and Hernando Domínguez Camargo's *San Ignacio de Loyola, fundador de la Compañía de Jesús, poema heroico* (Heroic Poem on St Ignatius of Loyola, Founder of the Jesuits, 1666). Born in Bogotá in 1606, Camargo was strongly influenced by Luis de Góngora, a key figure in Spanish American and Brazilian poetry in the second half of the seventeenth century. The *Poema heroico* is one of the most complex and finest expressions of Gongorism in America, being a perfect example of what has been called the *Barroco de Indias*.

Religious poetry was present in America through a variety of genres and metrical forms. Early examples of its dissemination can be found in 1577 Mexico, when an unknown collector assembled the poetic anthology, *Flores de varia poesía* (Flowers of Various Poems). The manuscript, originally divided in five books, contains works by peninsular authors as well as others who were born or who settled in America, including Martín Cortés (son of Hernán Cortés), Fernán González de Eslava, and Francisco de Terrazas. Unfortunately, only the first book (religious poetry) and part of the second (love poetry) are extant, but this is enough to establish the literary exchange between Mexico and the metropolis. The cultural dialogue between the two continents explains also the works of the most successful early religious poet of Mexico; Eslava, who moved to the New World when he was twenty-five (1558) and there took vows, was renowned for his short plays published posthumously alongside his religious poems: *Coloquios espirituales y sacramentales y canciones divinas* (Spiritual and Sacramental Colloquia, and Divine Songs, 1610). His devotional works combine traditional Spanish motives and metrics with local themes, such as portraying Christ as a *gachopín* (i.e. a Spaniard who has just arrived from Europe):

> ¡Maravilla, maravilla!
> Dénse a Dios gracias sin fin,
> que ha venido un gachopín
> de la celestial Castilla.[9]

[9] Fernán González de Eslava, *Villancicos, romances, ensaladas y otras canciones devotas*, ed. by Margit Frenk (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1989), 246.

> (Such wonder, such wonder!/ Thanked be the Lord/ since a *gachopín* has come/ from celestial Castile.)

Eslava wrote also a number of compositions praising Mexican girls who were taking vows to become nuns, thus offering a glance into the public role of religious poetry. Devotional poetry, often accompanied by music, was very present both in the liturgy of the time and in large-scale celebrations associated with religious festivities or political events, such as the funeral of a member of the royal family. As a matter of fact, religious compositions often went hand in hand with panegyric and occasional poetry in Mexico City and Lima, as shown by various early modern accounts or *relaciones*: Cervantes de Salazar, *Túmulo imperial a las exequias de Carlos V* (Imperial Burial Mound at Charles V's Funeral, 1560); Martín de León, *Relación de las exequias en la muerte de la reina nuestra señora doña Margarita* (Account of the Funeral on the Death of Our Lady Queen Margarita, 1613); Diego Cano Gutiérrez, *Relación de las fiestas triunfales que la insigne Universidad de Lima hizo a la Inmaculada Concepción de Nuestra Señora* (Account of the Triumphal Festivities Led by the Illustrious University of Lima for the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady, 1619); Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, *Teatro de virtudes políticas* (Theatre of Political Virtues, 1680); and Francisco Javier Carranza, *Llanto de las piedras en la sentida muerte de la más generosa Peña* (The Weeping of the Stones at the Much Lamented Death of the Most Generous Peña, 1739).

The viceroy, the Church, the Inquisition, and the University fostered these public displays of symbolic power in which literature played a central role. Two occasional poems written in Mexico and Pernambuco, *Grandeza mexicana* and *Prosopopéia* (Prosopopoeia), are some of the best accounts of early development of Spanish American and Brazilian poetic identity. Bernardo de Balbuena was born in Spain but studied at the University of Mexico, later becoming bishop of Puerto Rico. His first published work, *Grandeza mexicana* (1604), is a collection of occasional texts: one of Spanish America's first poetic manifestos, *Compendio apologético en alabanza de la poesía* [Apologetic Compendium in Praise of Poetry]; a series of poems that earned him prizes in literary contests; a *canción* in honor of the arrival of the new Archbishop of Mexico; and, in a second issue of the book, there is also a poem for the Count of Lemos. The main piece is however an extensive poetic epistle dedicated to a lady who is about to take vows in Mexico City, and offers a sophisticated description of the beauties and riches of the city. Balbuena portrays the capital of New Spain as a space of wonder, abundance, and cultural supremacy capable of overshadowing Europe:

aquí hallará más hombres eminentes
en toda ciencia y todas facultades
que arenas lleva el Ganges en sus corrientes:
monstruos en perfección de habilidades,
y en las letras humanas y divinas
eternos rastreadores de verdades.[10]

(here you will find more eminent men/ in all subjects and disciplines/ than sands carried in the currents of the Ganges:/ prodigies of accomplished talents,/ and eternal pursuers of truths/ in human and sacred letters.)

Bento Teixeira's career was not as successful as Balbuena's. Son of New Christians (i.e. descendants from converted Jews), he was born in Porto in 1561 and moved to Brazil with his family when he was young. He studied in the College of the Society of Jesus in Bahia, and later became a teacher of Latin, arithmetic, and writing in Pernambuco. In 1593 he was denounced to the Inquisition as a Judaizer, and he was later brought to Lisbon where he was imprisoned and eventually died in 1600. In 1601 his poem *Prosopopéia* was published posthumously in Lisbon as an appendix to *O Naufrágio que passou Jorge d'Albuquerque* (The Shipwreck Suffered by Jorge d'Albuquerque). *Prosopopéia* is a panegyric work in praise of Jorge de Albuquerque, captain and governor of Pernambuco. The text is best described as an *epyllion*, or epic poem in miniature, in which history and mythology are merged following the example of Luís de Camões's *Os Lusíadas* (The Lusiads, 1572). The poem takes its name from the rhetorical device known as *prosopopoeia*, which consists in attributing human qualities and speech to inanimate objects or imaginary characters; in this case, the sea god Proteus narrates Albuquerque's deeds. In Stanza X Teixeira directly engages with his main source, claiming that the marine creature Triton is not wearing a lobster shell on his head, as "described by Camões" (in *Os Lusíadas*, VI, 17), but a rather more sophisticated sea shell, which appears in Stanza XI:

mas ũa concha lisa e bem lavrada
de rica madrepérola trazia,
de fino coral crespo marchetada,
cujo lavor o natural vencia.
Estava nela ao vivo debuxada
a cruel e espantosa bataria

[10] Bernardo de Balbuena, *Grandeza mexicana*, ed. Luis Íñigo-Madrigal (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2013), 84.

que deu a temerária e cega gente
aos deoses do ceo puro e reluzente.[11]

(he was wearing a smooth and well crafted/ precious nacre sea shell instead,/ carved with delicate curly coral/ whose craft exceeded nature./ There was vividly drawn/ the cruel and formidable battle/ that the reckless and blind people fought/ against the gods of the pure and bright heavens.)

Epic deeds and action are turned into speech, *prosopopéia*; art becomes an artifice that outdoes nature. Camões's almost comical lobster beret has been transformed into a complex sea shell that conjures up the Gigantomachy. Words are compared to precious material (nacre, coral), and language is twisted and enriched in this miniature heroic poem carved within a shell, which mirrors the miniature heroic style of Teixeira's work while challenging the epic tradition. *Prosopopéia* announces the artistic shift between the Renaissance and the Baroque. It also produces one of the first known poetic descriptions of the Brazilian landscape in which Stanzas XVII–XXI focus on Pernambuco's reef, frequently the victim of pirate incursions, whose etymology is said to derive from the native language *para'na* (sea) and *puca* (cave). Teixeira contributes thus to shape the Brazilian literary imagination as a hybrid space populated by Indian echoes, pirates, and mythological creatures imported from Europe.

Despite their importance and dissemination, occasional works are only one facet of colonial poetry. Other genres also circulated that had a more intimate tone, dealing particularly with love. Petrarchism was one of the most internationally successful early modern poetic trends, and its presence in America can be documented as early as 1577 in the Mexican anthology *Flores de varia poesía* mentioned above. What is left of this volume is enough to establish the predominance of love poetry above other lyric genres; the first book, devoted to religious poetry, contains sixty-one poems whereas the second, which includes the love poems, has two hundred and ninety-eight. Francisco Terrazas was one of the most talented and famous sixteenth-century Mexican poets, with sonnets that challenge the chaste love usually associated with Petrarchism:

¡Ay, basas de marfil, vivo edificio
obrado del artífice del cielo!
Colunas de alabastro que en el suelo
nos dais del bien supremo claro indicio.
Hermosos chapiteles y artificio
del arco que aun de mí me pone celo;

[11] Bento Teixeira, *Prosopopéia*, ed. Celso Cunha and Carlos Durval (São Paulo: Melhoramentos, 1977), 40.