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D.P. Gallagher

Modern Latin American Literature

César Vallejo, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz

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Preface

I HAVE not attempted, in this book, to compete with the considerable number of histories of Latin American literature now available. I have not therefore aimed to be encyclopedic, and have chosen rather to concentrate on the few writers that seem to me exceptionally important. Many will quarrel with my choices. Needless to say, I am guilty of many no doubt regrettable omissions.

With the exception of translations from Borges in chapter 8, from García Márquez in chapter 10, and from Cabrera Infante in chapter 11, for which sources are given in the footnotes, all the translations are mine. I have deliberately made them literal, in order that they serve efficiently to illustrate my discussions of the various writers concerned.

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Introduction: The Nineteenth Century

NINETEENTH-CENTURY Latin American literature has certain fundamental limitations. With the exception of the Brazilian novelist Machado de Assis (1839–1908), Latin American writers in the nineteenth century were usually too immature and too derivative to merit the serious consideration of anyone not specifically interested in the Latin American context as such. There was no lack of Romantics, Realists, Naturalists, Parnassians, or Symbolists but the European model was always more impressive and anyway the Great Movement tended to arrive too late, when its original inspirational impetus had long been jaded. There were some splendid failures—but failures they were simply because their authors lacked the technique, the application, and the language to make them otherwise.

Language indeed was one of the central shortcomings of Latin American writing in the nineteenth century. The language had been inherited from a rejected colonial power. Like the English of Irish literature, it had to find itself and liberate itself in order to carry conviction—and it did not. Many writers in the nineteenth century attempted to grope their way to an authentic language in which to write—a language they could feel was their own—but they never really managed to. The most conspicuous attempts were perhaps those of such Argentinian *gauchesco* poets as Hilario Ascasubi (1807–75) and José Hernández (1834–86). They endeavoured to appropriate the language of the *gauchos* in an effort to lay the foundations of an authentically national literature. Their poems were a spectacular improvement on the neoclassical odes they inherited but their endeavour was too

self-conscious: they aimed too strenuously to *imitate* a language which they did not speak themselves, and consequently their poetry was too much of a charade, too little an expression of their own identity.

However, the fine literature that has emerged from Latin America in the twentieth century owes a great deal to its nineteenth-century antecedents. Many contemporary obsessions can be traced to them and it must not be forgotten that even contemporary Latin American writers were brought up at school on nineteenth-century texts, with the result that they are deeply embedded in their consciousness. Moreover, the fact that so many of the central topics of Latin American literature have not significantly altered—they have merely come to be investigated with greater skill and with greater attention to their complexity—suggests that there are certain deeply rooted habits of thought which are specific to the continent. An understanding of Latin American literature in the twentieth century cannot be complete therefore without at any rate a cursory glance at the century that preceded it.

To begin with, one can discern in the literature of the nineteenth century the same perplexity with regard to the continent's heritage and identity that, we shall see, is to be so basic to the work of Pablo Neruda (1904–), Octavio Paz (1914–), or Miguel Angel Asturias (1899–) say. Where is the writer to look in order to discover his real identity? Where is the continent to find an acceptable heritage? Few Spanish American nineteenth-century writers do not adopt as a starting-point in their answer to these questions an *a priori* rejection of Spain. For the poets of independence Spain is of course primarily the enemy in battle, but already it is something worse: it is the country that has deployed a Dark Age over a whole continent, an age of 'Blood, swift lead, and chains' for the Ecuadorian poet José Joaquín de Olmedo (1780–1847)—all in the guise of 'Holy Sacraments'. The first Spanish American novel moreover, *El Periquillo Sarniento* (1816), by Fernández de Lizardi (1776–1827), turns out to be a ferocious indictment of Spanish administration in Mexico: ignorance, superstition, and corruption are seen to be its most notable characteristics.

Yet if three hundred years of Spanish heritage are to be rejected, what is to replace them? Sometimes, writers turn to Enlightened

France for help. French models prevail in many Argentinian Romantic novels for instance, and they are central to the work of Esteban Echeverría (1805–51) and José Mármol (1817–71) there. Yet France, too, frequently disappoints, as does Europe in general. For the influential Venezuelan poet of the independence, Andrés Bello (1781–1865), Europe very quickly becomes the scene of mere fashionable affectation and unconstructive frivolity.

In Mexico, where the Indian past had been a grand one and where, unlike Argentina or Chile, for example, the population remained predominantly Indian, writers sought to revamp history with the aim of reinstating the country's *indigenous* heritage. An indigenous national consciousness burgeoned most conspicuously there after the liberal revolution of 1854. Under the aegis of the novelist Ignacio Altamirano (1834–93) a spate of historical novels were written in Mexico that asserted the conquered Indian to be idyllically wise and noble, the colonizing Spaniard being presented in contrast as a voracious savage. If Mexico had an identity and a heritage, they were to be found therefore not only in the rejection of the Spanish colony but also in the rediscovery of a pre-Columbine past.

In general, the urge to discover and assert a national identity necessitated a great deal of uncompromising aggression on the part of Latin American writers. Unfortunately, such aggression precludes many of the qualities that we normally take for granted in the more lasting monuments of literature. For most nineteenth-century Latin American writers the issues are so urgent that there is no room for instance for detachment in their treatment of them and there is no room for attention to their potential complexity. Most of the writers are politicians, generals, or lawyers, and their novels or poems are merely useful means for divulging a point of view. Their aim is didactic; there is no room for argument. The characters are either good or bad—unremittingly so. No opportunity is lost to spell the issues out. A novel like *Amalia* (1851–5) by José Mármol is written with the sole intention of overthrowing a dictator, Rosas. The more it can damage him, the better it is; there is no other criterion to judge it from. This, for contemporary Latin American Maoists, was no doubt the Golden Age!

Occasionally, writers unwittingly escape their rigid dichotomies and their black-and-white vision is undermined by a genuine,

unconscious artistic impulse. Thus for Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811–88), Rosas is a *barbarian* who has savaged all that is *civilized* in Argentina. The dichotomy is rigid, and Sarmiento allows himself no opportunity to examine its respective categories analytically, no time to ask himself for instance if civilization, epitomized by 'elegant manners, European clothes, tails, and frock-coats', is necessarily so universal a panacea as he takes it to be. Yet now and then, in describing the savagery of Rosas's *gauchos*, he is so overwhelmed by it that he becomes a *gaucho* himself. His language becomes so gloriously 'barbaric' that it unexpectedly undermines its 'civilizing' purpose. In initiating a dichotomy that is to remain a central topic of Latin American writing up until now, that of 'civilization' and 'barbarism', Sarmiento becomes in spite of himself, one of the continent's first literary barbarians. He becomes one of the first Redskins in a continent which, like the United States, is to have its own long line of literary Redskins and Palefaces.

There is, maybe, no nineteenth-century writer more widely disseminated in schools than Andrés Bello, and one can surmise that his influence has been felt, consciously or unconsciously, by a vast majority of Latin American writers up until now. Certainly, one can find in his work many of the most reiterated concerns of Latin American writing. Thus in 'Alocución a la poesía' (1823) he urges that poetry abandon 'cultured Europe' and turn instead for inspiration to 'the vast scene of Columbus's world'. And he recognizes a task that many Latin American writers are subsequently to consider central to their endeavour: the basic one of describing a continent and landscape that have *never* before been described. The task is not to be an easy one. One hundred and forty-four years later, in *Quarup* (1966), a novel by the Brazilian writer Antonio Callado, a group of characters are to be confronted by a jungle full of hundreds of different species of orchids, not one of which they can name!

In Bello too one gets a sense, typical of subsequent Latin American writing—and typical of Whitman in the North—of the grandeur of the continent, of the urgent necessity to show it forth on a vast, epic scale. His 'Alocución a la poesía' foreshadows many subsequent epics of the continent and most notably it foreshadows Pablo Neruda's *Canto general* (1950).

Yet if the continent is a grand, promised land, it is also one

whose promise has turned sour. Bello is the first of many Latin American writers significantly to express the feeling that the auspicious promise of their continent has been frustrated. He could not help doing so, for he was able to witness the euphoric promise of independence very soon degenerating into fratricidal Civil War. Many nineteenth-century Latin American novels, and most expertly those of Machado de Assis, are, indeed, like their counterparts in the twentieth century, to be imbued with a tragic sense of *waste.*

Society—what is given, what the hero of the novel or the poet is confronted with—is rotten. Either they rot too in the confrontation or they rise in rebellion. One of the most successful works of literature written in Spanish America in the nineteenth century, José Hernández's vast poem on the gauchos, *Martín Fierro* (1872–9), is a violent aggression on society, a desperate attempt at rebellion. It was intended as an attack on a specific society, on the presidency of Sarmiento in fact and on its exploitation of the *gaucho* as cannon fodder in the wars against the Indians. But it deploys a more generally anarchic spirit which is perhaps best exemplified in one splendid scene. Martín Fierro is guilty of murder and desertion and one day the rural militia surround him. He fights with exemplary courage. Then, suddenly, the man in charge of the militia, Sergeant Cruz, cannot stand it any longer. He shouts that 'Cruz will not permit the crime of killing a brave man', and joins sides with Fierro.

What greater rejection of society could there be than this blatantly *approved* spectacle of a policeman joining a bandit and murderer in mid-battle?

Now if the given society is to be rejected, what is to be put in its place? Something somewhat airy, usually. It is a curious fact that whereas in the nineteenth century many writers, such as Ascasubi, Echeverría, or Mármol were capable of the most aggressive naturalism in their depiction of what they rejected, they all tended to adopt a somewhat ethereal spectral language when depicting anything they approved of. Thus in Echeverría's *El matadero,* or Mármol's *Amalia,* Rosas and his supporters are described with an almost grotesque—or Goyesque—realism. Yet any mention of the liberal cause that Rosas has supplanted precipitates a language that is in contrast idyllically Romantic. The liberal heroine Amalia is thus not a *woman* ('Amalia no era una

mujer'), but rather 'a goddess'. In general the adjectives and metaphors used by these writers would seem to be unwittingly asserting that the ideal was impossible, because it had no real or human basis.

Having set out, at the beginning of the century, to celebrate the happy reality of independence, and the magnificent reality of the continent's landscape, Latin American poets indeed finish the century celebrating goddesses and marble statues. There is a brief discussion of this culminating movement—*modernismo*—in the next chapter.

2
Poetry, 1880–1925

THE *modernista* movement that burgeoned in the 1880s, and whose most notable exponent was the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío (1867–1916), derived its inspiration mainly from French Parnassian and French Symbolist poetry. There is not a great deal in its imagery and in the topics it seeks to express that cannot be found in some French poet or other, or in Poe or the English Pre-Raphaelites.

Modernista poetry is frequently populated, at any rate in its early stages, with ethereal *princesas* or *marquesas* lasciviously reclining upon velvet divans. The setting if often enough an eighteenth-century palace. 'Sweet violins of Hungary' play 'galant *pavanes*, fleeting *gavottes*'. Champagne flows, and outside the palace, there is an impeccable French garden. Metaphors and similes refer anything at hand to an ideal realm of regal splendour. Even the water of a fountain (a marble one of course) is 'like a girl scattering her pearl necklaces in a regal palace'.[1] Roses are like 'Persian shawls of bejewelled silk'.[2] April is 'prince April'[3] and rhymes are so rich that they are made of 'silver and crystal'.[4]

The *modernistas* may not have invented many of these images, but the fact that they chose to imitate them and not others is symptomatic of an escalation of that cult of an ethereal ideal we

[1] Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, 'Ondas muertas', in *Spanish American Modernista Poets*, ed. G. Brotherston, Oxford, 1966, p. 42.
[2] Gutiérrez Nájera, 'A la Corregidora', ibid., p. 46.
[3] Ibid.
[4] José Asunción Silva, 'Un poema', ibid., p. 60.

discerned in writers of a previous generation. In referring the already idyllic subjects of their poems to a realm of mystical splendour the *modernistas* may of course have been implicitly protesting against the grim realities of their respective countries, protest taking the form of escape into idyll. Yet in a way they were also echoing current aspirations. Several countries were beginning to enjoy a considerable export boom in raw materials in the 1880s, and the new élites that were benefiting from it were beginning to spend their newly acquired sterling on imported luxuries. The velvet furniture, the silky and embroidered clothes, and the snow-white princesses of *modernista* poetry thus maybe echo the dreams of a new élite that longed to be the equal of the European aristocracy.

A fundamental unauthenticity belies *modernista* poetry. There is something strange and sad about a humble Nicaraguan like Rubén Darío yearning for 'diamonds upon white necks',[5] or about a Bolivian like Ricardo Jaimes Freyre (1868–1933) blindly immersing himself in Nordic mythology. Also, one rarely gets the feeling reading a *modernista* poem that the poet *had* to write it. There is no sense of urgency, no tension. Occasionally *modernista* poets—and notably the Colombian poet José Asunción Silva (1865–96)—actually write about their own experiences, and then we get a sense of what they really might have achieved had they not clung so strenuously to foreign models.

Yet the *modernista* movement did a great deal for poetry in Spanish, not only in Spanish America but also in Spain. The *modernistas*, and Darío in particular, greatly enriched Spanish versification. They learnt a great deal from the French Symbolists about the musical potential of poetry, and consequently wrote verse which, though weak in content, was richly melodious. They wrote erotic poetry, thus removing an unhelpful Hispanic taboo, and they asserted the right of Latin Americans to be cosmopolitan. This may sound paradoxical, in view of my criticism of their very cosmopolitanism in the preceding paragraph. But the problem is not that Latin American poets have no right to immerse themselves, for example, in Nordic mythology. They have as much right to do so as D. H. Lawrence did to depict Mexican mythology. What is important is that they should do it with assurance. The fact that the *modernistas* lacked the assurance and maturity to be

[5] Rubén Darío, 'Epístola', ibid., p. 93.

cosmopolitan convincingly does not mean that they did not pave the way for their successors to be so. Poets like César Vallejo (1892–1938) and Neruda, who could put the trials and shortcomings of the *modernistas* behind them, were able, when they started writing in the 1920s, to write poetry that for the first time in Latin America was triumphantly not at all circumscribed by the limitations of a local context, although—and this is perhaps where the lesson lies—it was deeply rooted in one too.

As will become evident when we discuss them in detail, Vallejo and Neruda served their literary apprenticeship in the context of *modernismo*. Vallejo was particularly influenced by Leopoldo Lugones (Argentina, 1874–1938) and Julio Herrera y Reissig (Uruguay, 1875–1910), two late *modernistas* whose poetry successfully revitalized the clichés of their predecessors, and who deployed a new intensity of expression in their work. They were both masters of the violently surprising image, and their poetry is free of the jaded air of fatigued mimicry that many *modernista* poems had come to display. Yet it must be admitted that neither Lugones nor Herrera y Reissig had a great deal to say. There is no urgency underlying their poetry either.

After the First World War the ideas and habits of the contemporary European *avant-garde* began to be transmitted to Latin America. In February 1922 a Week of Modern Art was celebrated in São Paolo, thus heralding the burgeoning of Brazilian *modernismo,* a movement that had little in common with the Spanish American one of the same name. Brazilian *modernismo* was in fact a calculated reaction against the work of such Parnassian or Symbolist Brazilian poets as Raimundo Correia (1869–1911) and João Cruz e Sousa (1861–98). Its early manifestos were influenced by Italian Futurism. They urged that poets be hectically contemporary, that they abandon the decadence of Parnassus, and be sensitive to the conditions of modern life. Some Brazilian *modernistas* were often blatantly nationalist, and they enthused about the future greatness of Brazil. Others, such as Oswald de Andrade (1890–1954) and Mário de Andrade (1893–1945), believed that Brazilian poetry had to find its way back to the origins of Brazilian culture in order to rediscover an authentic national identity which Portuguese domination had uprooted. Such a concern we saw was present in nineteenth-century writing in Spanish America. We shall see, moreover, that it foreshadowed the deter-

mination of Pablo Neruda and Octavio Paz to recover a supposedly edenic past.

The Brazilian *modernistas* proclaimed the gospel of free verse, and sought to find their way to a specifically Brazilian language. They preferred to write badly than to write like the Portuguese, or than to ape the stilted literariness of the Parnassians. Their quest was for a colloquial, spoken language. Their manifestos and discussions crystallize the principle worries and hopes of twentieth-century Latin American literature in general. Their influence outside Brazil was admittedly not great—there has never been a great deal of cultural contact between Brazil and the rest of the continent—but the ferment of ideas that burgeoned during the Week of Modern Art in São Paolo in 1922 produced some of the finest poets in the Portuguese language—the most impressive of all being perhaps that sardonically wise observer of human folly, Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1902–).

The ideas of the European *avant-garde* entered Spanish America through other channels. A notable disseminator was the Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro (1893–1948). Of considerable importance too was the *ultraísta* movement. The *ultraístas* were a Spanish group of poets who eclectically imbibed practically every *-ism* current in Europe at the time—Futurism, Cubism, and Expressionism in particular. Jorge Luis Borges (1899–), who had collaborated with them in Spain, championed the *ultraísta* creed in Argentina on his return from Europe in 1921. But Borges soon discarded *ultraísmo*, and there was no impressive *ultraísta* poet as such. *Ultraísmo* served rather to disseminate current ideas about poetry, and consequently to create a stimulating climate for young poets to operate in. Yet because poetry in Latin America was beginning to achieve an unprecedented maturity and self-assurance, poets felt free at last to use foreign ideas only if they really wanted to, and then discard them at will. It was their own experience, their own sensibility, and their own vision that were ultimately to matter.

Two poets began writing around 1920 who notoriously started to express a sensibility that was very much their own. They are César Vallejo and Pablo Neruda. They each merit detailed and separate treatment.

3
César Vallejo (Peru, 1892–1938)

VALLEJO'S first book of poems, *Los heraldos negros* (1918), is at first sight a derivative work, and one or two poems in it could easily have been written by Rubén Darío, others by Herrera y Reissig or Lugones. Take the opening stanza of 'Nochebuena' ('Christmas Eve'):

> Al callar la orquesta, pasean veladas
> sombras femeninas bajo los ramajes,
> por cuya hojarasca se filtran heladas
> quimeras de luna, pálidos celajes[1]

—a purely decorative description that parades all the portentous hush, the hectically contrived mystery of fleeting feminine presences, the subtly filtered light effects, the delicate pallors of *modernista* rhetoric. Silk appears predictably in the next stanza, deployed for an equally predictable synaesthesic effect:

> Charlas y sonrisas en locas bandadas
> perfuman de seda los rudos boscajes.[2]

In fairness 'Nochebuena' is an exception, the only poem in the book that could have fitted easily in Darío's *Prosas profanas* (1896). More common are the poems that imitate Herrera y Reissig, whom we noted as the exponent of a more intense, more imagistic *modernismo* who was, however, equally affected, equally

[1] César Vallejo, *Los heraldos negros*, Buenos Aires, 1961, p. 16. 'When the orchestra falls silent, veiled / female shadows stride beneath the branches / through whose foliage are filtered / frozen whims of moon, pallid skyscapes.'

[2] 'Chats and smiles in wild flocks / perfume the rugged woods with silk.'

a concocter of literary exercises wholly lacking in emotional urgency. These poems, like Herrera y Reissig's, are almost obligatorily set in a pastoral dusk. Portentous poplars, 'like imprisoned hieratic bards',[3] decorate a landscape charged too conspicuously with idyllic significance. Even the supposedly innovatory poems about the Indians of the Peruvian sierra where Vallejo was born read in parts like mere exercises in exotic decoration, and the fact that the landscape is one Vallejo knew well, unlike the Basque country which was so dear to Herrera y Reissig although he never visited it, seems quite accidental:

> La aldea ... se reviste
> de un rudo gris, en que un mugir de vaca
> se aceita en sueño y emoción de huaca.
> Y en el festín del cielo azul yodado
> gime en el cáliz de la esquila triste
> un viejo coraquenque desterrado.[4]

Dreamy sounds, a melancholy that feels very self-imposed, a contrived wistfulness all add up to a meekly derivative literary exercise, not an authentic description of the sierra and its Indians. The cycle of poems called 'Nostalgias imperiales', from which the above passage is quoted, and another one called 'Terceto autóctono', also about the sierra and the Indians, have, in general, the glossy feel of exotica set up for the tourist, much as do the Indians that Darío occasionally evoked.

The *modernista*—especially the late *modernista*—roots of much of *Los heraldos negros* have been expertly charted by André Coyné in his *César Vallejo y su obra poética*.[5] We should not, of course, be surprised by them. They are present in the first efforts of all the best poets of Vallejo's generation, in Neruda and Borges for instance, who felt the call of duty to describe the dusk as assiduously as Vallejo did. What is remarkable about *Los heraldos negros* is the sense one gets now and then of a personal voice emerging, far more assertively than it does, say, in Neruda's *Crepusculario* (1923). In many of the poems, Vallejo's own ex-

[3] p. 18.

[4] p. 49. 'The village ... is decked / in rugged grey. The bellowing of a cow / is annointed in dreams and the emotion of a *huaca* tomb. / And in a feast of blue, iodic sky / an old exiled *coraquenque* groans from the chalice of a cattle-bell.'

[5] Lima, *c.* 1950.