

The Epic
of
Latin American
Literature

Arturo
Torres-Rioseco

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LITERATURE

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PREFACE



THE FIRST EDITION OF THIS BOOK, published sixteen years ago, is now out of print. The author, therefore, believes that a new printing is called for. He has received many letters from colleagues and students requesting him to reissue the book, and if possible, bring it up to date. However, editorial circumstances make it impossible to supplement the first edition, with, for example, a chapter on the literary essay covering the work of José Enrique Varona, Baldomero Sanín Cano, Carlos Vaz Ferreira, Alfonso Reyes, Francisco Romero, José Carlos Mariátegui, and others; or a chapter on contemporary writers. In the past twenty years there has been an upsurge in literary production in all the countries of Latin America. Many new names have appeared: distinguished poets such as José Gorostiza, Carlos Pellicer, Octavio Paz, León de Greiff, Ricardo Molinari, Vicente Barbieri, Herib Campos Cervera, Augusto Roa Bastos; outstanding novelists such as Agustín Yáñez, José Revueltas, Juan Rulfo, Miguel Angel Asturias, "Salarrué," Alejo Carpentier, Lino Novás Calvo, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Ernesto Sábato; gifted essayists such as Jorge Mañach, Mariano Picón Salas, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, Victoria Ocampo, Germán Arciniegas, Leopoldo Zea. Their work is so important that the author feels they deserve a book to themselves, and he promises one in the near future.

In the 1942 edition the author wrote, and he still holds it to be true, that

The literature of Latin America is entering its Golden Era. The days of simple imitation are over; Spanish American and Brazilian writers have realized that only an earth-born conscience could save them from superficial and artificial thinking. They have discovered their true continent in the realm of the spirit, and they are creating new values

in this realm. Yet they have not forgotten their European ancestry, their classic tradition. For this reason the literature of Spanish America possesses the stark realism of Spanish literature without being Spanish; it has the elegance of French models, but is not French; it has a cosmopolitan horizon, but retains the flavor of its own earth. It is time, then, to attempt the definition and study of this vast literary production, which has been hitherto neglected or ignored even among critics of the Spanish language. That essential element of artistic creation known as form is what gives the literature of Spanish America its cosmopolitan contour. It is through form that our writers break through their geographical limitations and acquire universal meaning: thus Gabriela Mistral wins the Nobel Prize, Pablo Neruda, the Stalin Prize; Alfonso Reyes becomes a symbol of Hispanic culture; Alejo Carpentier and Jorge Luis Borges are translated into many foreign languages. Yet each remains authentically Spanish American.

The author wrote in the Foreword to the first edition—and reiterates today—that

This book, written from a literary point of view, acquires at present a truly political significance. Once the people of the United States understand the intensity of Latin American ideals, they will be prouder of their southern neighbors.

In the interim the author has become aware of the North American students' interest in the literature of Latin America. It is his hope that this interest will deepen, and that it will extend to leaders of thought and culture of the North, for the peoples of both Americas, although of different race and language, face a common future.

The purpose of this book is to allow Latin American idealism to speak for itself through its masterworks of literature.

The author wishes to express his thanks to Professor Joseph Gillet of Bryn Mawr—to whom this book is cordially dedicated—for his interest in Latin American culture which made possible the conception and development of this work; to

President Marion Park of the same institution, for her inspiring interest; to Helen Rand Parish, for assistance in rounding out the manuscript; to the translators whose names appear in the notes; to Mr. A. Rodríguez Ramón, for preparing the index, and to the many friends and colleagues who generously gave of their time and advice.

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A. TORRES-RÍOSEO

Berkeley, California
May, 1958

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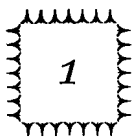
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THE EPIC OF LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE



The Colonial Centuries

THE HEROIC SIXTEENTH CENTURY

FOR Spain, the sixteenth century was the age of conquistadors. When Columbus discovered America in 1492—eight years before the beginning of the new century—the unification of Spain had at last been achieved, largely through the efforts of Ferdinand and Isabella. The power of the barons had been destroyed. The same year that saw the boats of Columbus sail the rough waters of the Atlantic saw too, in the fall of Granada, the close of the long struggle to reconquer Spain from the Moors. A great country had been created, perhaps the greatest since the Roman Empire, a nation of conquerors and heroes.

‘Every man a King!’ seems to have been the motto of the Spaniards of that time. There was no limit to imagination, adventure, or ambition. The Spaniard conquered in the realm of the spirit as well as in the physical world. While Cortés, Pizarro, and Balboa discovered and claimed new lands for the crown of Castile, San Ignacio de Loyola organized his order of Jesuits, the soldiers of Christ; Santa Teresa explored the mystic world; and Don Quixote (springing into symbolic life before the next century was fairly started) travelled the dusty roads of La Mancha in search of wrongs to redress and injustices to right. This, the sixteenth century, was the beginning of Spain’s Golden Age. Painters, musicians, novelists, poets,

playwrights, scholars, historians, and scientists contributed to the intellectual brilliancy of the Empire. It was a great moment in history: Spain was creating a new type of culture, and at the same time she was changing the face of the known world.

Truly, at the start of the sixteenth century the Spaniards had the spiritual make-up of conquerors: The Iberian Peninsula was just arriving at the period of the greatest literary splendor that any country has ever known. The Italian school of poetry in Spain, with Boscán and Garcilaso, was preparing the way for great lyric writers like Fray Luis de León and San Juan de la Cruz; the Spanish theatre had been founded with Juan del Encina and Torres Naharro, worthy precursors of Lope de Vega; the romances of chivalry were in vogue, and the picaresque novel was about to dominate the entire field of fiction. Under the influence of humanism, a generation of Neoplatonic philosophers sprang up; the new conception of documented history made its way with Florián de Ocampo and Gerónimo Zurita; and modern theories of international law were being developed. All this was conquest in the spiritual field and it was the revelation of the Spanish individuality. Outlets for the enormous energy of the race were needed. Thought, on the one hand, and the New World, on the other, were the proper channels for the welling forth Spanish genius.

For just this auspicious moment came the miracle of discovery, conquest, and settlement—events which partake of the dramatic, the epic, and the lyric. Spain poured her very life blood into the new lands. She gave freely of herself, of her greatness and her weakness. The heroic navigators went forth, on the pretext that they were searching for a new way to the Indies, but there was a vision of fantastic discovery in the air; cartographers, cosmographers, shipbuilders, students, sailors, and adventurers entrusted their fate to the unknown and mysterious ocean. Destiny challenged, and the conqueror of the seas took up the gauntlet. He defeated ignorance, doubt, opposition, and hatred; he mastered the waves; he discovered a

New World. After him followed the conqueror of the land: daring explorers and captains, bearded and mail-clad, forging nails from their sword-hilts and making their own gunpowder; plunging into the conquest of native empires, the dominating of millions of men, the opening of uncharted continents.

The material conquest of Spanish America had started, and the spiritual conquest followed almost immediately. Padres came in the footsteps of the soldiers, and sometimes outstripped them, seeking to convert the multitudes of Indians 'sunk in gentilism.' Scholars, scientists, philologists, descended upon the colonies and began their works of erudition. Printing presses were set up in rapid succession after new conquests—18 years after Cortés, fifty years after Pizarro. Great universities opened their doors, the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico in 1553, the University of San Marcos de Lima around 1576. The Viceregal palaces became centers of purely artistic activities, and poetry contests were held on every occasion. The conquest was underway in earnest, for professors, clerics, and artisans were conquerors no less than their companions with cross-bow and harquebus who continued to plunge through the tangled jungles and the steaming swamps. Spanish culture, as well as the Spanish conquistador, was marching across the New World.

This vast Spanish conquest, on a truly heroic scale, called forth a literature that is peculiarly heroic in character. Living history had to be written down; it became the chronicle. Mighty deeds had to be sung; they produced the epic. These two genres, chronicle and epic, were thus the beginning of Spanish American literature. Usually they were composed in a Spanish style by Spaniards, who came to participate in the great new adventure. Yet by this token, they may be considered truly American, for they were written by men who were Americans (like so many who came after them) not because they were born in a New World, but because they migrated to one.

THE CHRONICLE

THE conqueror, whether soldier, priest, or navigator, was the representative of the culture he had brought with him to America. His role demanded that he subdue and civilize—and interpret in words. Columbus, naturally, was the first to describe this contact with a new world. While Hernán Cortés (1485-1547), in his famous *Five Letters* * (1519-26), was the first to send his monarch detailed historical accounts of his work, later conquerors and historians continued the record, and their writings form the first great type of colonial literature: the *crónica*—the chronicle, whose subject matter is American. Perhaps the greatest chronicler of them all (from a literary standpoint) was Bernal Díaz de Castillo, of whose book a contemporary American poet has said, expressing the spirit of the whole genre:

Some twelve years ago in a Paris library I came upon a copy of Bernal Díaz *True History of the Conquest of New Spain*. There, in that still living, still human, still sharply breathing and believable history of Mexico, it seemed to me that I understood for the first time the central American experience—the experience which is American because it can be nothing else—the experience of all those who, of whatever tongue, are truly American—the experience of the journey westward from the sea into the unknown and dangerous country beyond which lies the rich and lovely city for which men hope.¹

Nowadays, the great mass of chronicles is more interesting to the historian than to the student of literature. But there are some names with which everyone should be familiar: López de Gómara (1510-60), official historian of the crown, set down his not always accurate *General History of the Indies* (1553); and José de Acosta (?-1599) wrote his *Natural and Moral History of the Indies* (1590), a book still cherished by the anthropologist and the man-of-letters. Alvar Núñez Cabeza de

* Cortés, *Cartas Relaciones*.

Vaca (1490?-1564?) recorded his ill-fated adventures in North America in the exciting *Shipwrecks* (1542); Gaspar de Carvajal (1504-84) penned his dramatic tale of one of the most sensational explorations ever made by man, the *Discovery of the River of the Amazons* (Pub. 1894); Cieza de León (1519-60), a soldier of Pizarro's fantastic conquest, compiled his *History of Peru* (1553). Bartolomé de las Casas (1475?-1566) won renown for his *Destruction of the Indies* (1552), with its impassioned but exaggerated descriptions of Spanish mistreatment of natives. Cristóbal de Molina (?-1578), a friar in the retinue of Almagro, recorded in his *Conquest and Settlement of Peru* (1552) the episodes of the hazardous exploration of the Andes; and Alonso de Góngora Marmolejo (?-1576), who came to Chile under the orders of Valdivia and who later was appointed 'witch hunter' (*juéz pesquisidor de hechiceros indígenas!*), has given a true picture of men and events in his *History of Chile* (1575).*

There were many others, of course, but one historian is really outstanding among all the *cronistas*: Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1478-1557), who was inspired by the amazing spectacle of a grandiose and virgin continent to write his extraordinary work, *Of the Natural History of the Indies* † (1535-57). A conquistador himself—his stormy career as Royal Officer and Governor took him back and forth from Spain to Castilla del Oro and Cartagena, until he finally became *alcaide de la fortaleza* of Santo Domingo—Oviedo found time to write works on heraldry, court life, and genealogy. His masterpiece, however, is his monumental work on the Indies, the first and the most curious history of Spanish America. To this day,

* López de Gomara, *Historia General de las Indias*; Acosta, *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias*; Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *Naufragios y Comentarios*; Carvajal, *Descubrimiento del Río de las Amazonas*; Cieza de León, *Historia del Perú*; Las Casas, *Brevísima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias*; Molina, *Relación de la Conquista y Población del Perú*; Góngora Marmolejo, *Historia de Chile*.

† Oviedo, *De la Historia General y Natural de las Indias, Islas y Tierra-firme del Mar Océano*.

the reader can find delight in his descriptions of New World trees and animals and plants, and even minute insects such as the firefly:

Many flies and beetles there are in all these islands, which flutter about shining at night, like the ones that in Spain are called glow-worms . . . But there is one in particular called the *cocuyo*, that is highly remarkable . . . This insect is . . . as big as the tip of the thumb or a little less. It has two hard wings, beneath which are two thinner ones, which it guards and covers with the top ones whenever it alights; and its eyes shine like candles . . . So that if one be shut in a darkened room, the gleam is sufficient for reading or writing a letter . . . And when there used to be war in this Island of Hispaniola, both Christians and Indians used these lights, so as not to stray from their companions. Especially the Indians, who were more skilled at capturing these creatures, would make collars of them, if they wished to be seen from a league away . . .²

But purely as a work of literature, no chronicle ranks with the *True History of the Conquest of New Spain** (1552) by Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1492-1584). This Bernal Díaz came to the New World as a simple soldier, to seek his fortune. He found it with Cortés in the conquest of Mexico—a fortune that included not only gold, but a number of arrow-wounds (one of which pierced his ribs), a lance-thrust near the windpipe, and a beautiful and noble Indian girl. The story of this conquest, in which a few hundred Spaniards became masters of the Aztec Empire, naturally surpasses any fiction. And Bernal Díaz tells it all, with the flavor of 'I was there!': from the two first attempts to make an expedition into the unknown land; to the armada of Cortés and the burning of the ships; the march inland and the massacre of Cholula; the entry into the great island city of Mexico across the lake-causeway, with

* Bernal Díaz, *Verdadera Historia de la Conquista de la Nueva España*.

cities and towns rising from the land and the water to either side; the capitulation of Montezuma, and his swearing fealty to the King of Spain while weeping like a woman; the sham battle with the other Spaniards who had been sent to punish the rebellion of Cortés; the final bloody march back to Mexico, slaying and branding the aroused inhabitants; and the ultimate surrender of the capital after 85 days of siege. It is hard to imagine a more remarkable story—and no one has ever related it better than Bernal Díaz.

Fully to appreciate the worth of Bernal Díaz, one should judge him not by his own times but by modern standards. Nowadays, criticism esteems the individuality of an author, the democratic criterion in history, and it is precisely in these points that he excels. Compare him, for instance, with Gómara, who was a professor of rhetoric; with Las Casas, who cites Livy and expounds moral consideration; with the later Solís, who writes the conquest of Mexico in the form of lifeless academic history 'as it ought to happen.' Bernal Díaz, luckily, was never a professor of anything; he merely relates events that he saw and in which he himself took part. And he tells them with a freedom from literary formulas, which gives his style its unusual freshness. His descriptions are minute, vivid, concrete; everything comes to life in his pages—an Indian market, for example, and (in this he is almost pathological) even the names and colors of every precious horse on the expedition. Bernal Díaz' pages are crammed with unforgettably lifelike episodes, like this account of a 'squaw man,' one of two captive Spaniards whom Cortés was trying to ransom from the Indians:

In two days the letters were delivered to a Spaniard named Jerónimo de Aguilar, for that we found to be his name. When he had read the letter and received the ransom of beads which we had sent to him he was delighted, and carried the ransom to the Cacique his master and begged leave to depart, and the Cacique at once gave

him leave to go wherever he pleased. Aguilar set out for the place, five leagues distant, where his companion Gonzalo Guerrero was living, but when he read the letter to him he answered: 'Brother Aguilar, I am married and have three children and the Indians look to me as a Cacique and captain in wartime— You go, and God be with you, but I have my face tattooed and my ears pierced, what would the Spaniards say should they see me in this guise? and look how handsome these boys of mine are, for God's sake give me those green beads you have brought, and I will give the beads to them and say that my brothers have sent them from my own country.' And the Indian wife of Gonzalo spoke to Aguilar in her own tongue very angrily and said to him: 'What is this slave coming here for talking to my husband—go off with you, and don't trouble us with any more words.'³

But it is also in his strong personalized point of view that Bernal Díaz' worth stands out. He writes with an undisguised vanity about himself, almost a hatred for the overpraised Cortés, and a passionate conviction that the conquest was achieved not by the commander, but by the four hundred soldiers of the expedition. His battle scenes, in addition to their color and detail, are alive with the doings of the common soldier. Here, as an example, is an account of the unsuccessful storming of an Indian hill-fortress by the infantry, while Cortés and the horsemen kept watch in the plain:

As we began to climb up hill, the Indians who were posted above rolled down so many huge stones and rocks that it was terrifying to see them hurtling and bounding down, and it was a miracle that we were not all of us killed. One soldier named Martínez fell dead at my feet; he had a helmet on his head but he gave no cry and never spoke another word. Still we kept on, but as the great *Galgas*, as we call these big rocks in this country, came rolling and tearing and bounding down and breaking in pieces, they soon killed two more good soldiers, Gaspar Sánchez, nephew of the Treasurer of Cuba, and a man named Bravo, but still we kept on. Then another