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A Postnational Critique of Language

The Baroque Algorithm

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Why, in order to write, a poet writing in Spanish has to start by banishing his own language? Only in appearance paradoxical or ironic, the question I propose to explore in this chapter serves to sustain the hypothesis that there is a transatlantic poetic tradition unwilling to resign itself to a representation configured by *natural language*, and which makes its expulsion a poetic act par excellence.

Today we can safely assume, without raising any red flags, that Latin America is home to more than twenty national literatures, and that the Spanish-speaking world produces Latin American and Iberian literatures written in various “original languages.” Furthermore, we come to acknowledge more and more the importance of their transatlantic exchanges, where communication on one hand, and textuality on the other, alternate or succeed one another. These exchanges and points of contact create new interactive spaces, which, in turn, generate new modes of communication, all in an inclusive and compartmental manner. Through transatlantic exchanges, the critical and the creative potential of our multilingualism is continuously reconfigured in accordance with its capacity to critique the power configuration of dialogue. The inherent plurality of our language, one that mediates between indigenous, Iberian, and American languages, is the foundation under construction for a transatlantic culture in which we as readers and critics are being formed.

This mixture, or *mestizaje*, is the mode of producing modernity that Latin America introduces into language. Rather than determined by orthodoxy, monologue, and authoritarianism, it relies on tolerance, openness, and the newness of a principle of articulation that reconfigures the spatial organization of the world through a postnational language. This paradigm of mixture is transformed into a cultural model, since its inherent heterogeneity is seen as the product of a system of exchange that democratizes the public sphere. *Mestizaje* is not only ethnic, but also—and above all—cultural *ex-change*. It is also a system of information that articulates a new reading of the past, that disarticulates the violence of the present, and that vies for a future that is more open and more inclusive. Cervantes, who already recognized the potential of this new modernity, tried twice to go to the Indies, because he realized that the American languages would be free of the prohibition and censorship imposed by his Spain. If new is equivalent to clean, fresh, then the “New World” would bring forth a language freed of old constraints, a language of a new freshness, and a new poetic, communicative, potential language.

Transatlantic literature is written in the present, in the uncertain borders of language itself; but, more importantly, it is read in the future, as it projects spaces beyond the present or past. If we consider literature as the enactment of the crises that plague our societies today, then its appeal to “futuridad” (futuraity)—a word that finally has entered the dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy—could also help us to appease the present. Every writer who sets out to renovate poetic space, every crossroad decided in favor of a postnational poetic language, are radical appeals to keep alive the debates that inform transatlantic dialogue.

Within these in-between places, the poetic processes unleash a type of literary language that overcomes the limits of the *habitus* of a critique in transit. To dwell, according to Heidegger, means not just to inhabit a place, but also to build this place of dwelling. Poetic language is therefore not just a question of being, but rather one of being in transit; and it is not as much a question of origin, but rather a process of belonging directed toward the future. I believe that this is the function of poetry and its vocation: to build new places. And the process of building begins by mapping out the horizon of a new plurilingual certainty. The Quechua language of the Andean culture has a syntax that, as it unfolds, opens up an epistemological space that incorporates and articulates associations

and correlations. I propose to call this type of all-encompassing syntax a Baroque algorithm. Baroque algorithms function on a principle of appropriation and displacement that does not diminish any of its constitutive parts; rather, it negotiates a place for each one of them, within the dynamics of their occurrence. It unfolds toward the future.

Our new writers build upon the work of established authors versed in the renovation of form. Neither does the fear of influences suffocate them, nor do they invent their precursors; they engage in an open process through which they invent their readers. In that regard, our great poets were the most inventive. Thus, our poetic traditions are far from being a museum or an archive; they are a place of dwelling, a place in a continuous state of construction. In this place, one space is created within another; one enclosed figure is conceived by another, yet what remains outside is still chartered.

César Vallejo's poetry forces us to refocus on language in order to return to its space of reinscription. As a consequence, the reader renegotiates the distance that lies between the function of referential language and the function of a language reshaped by poetry. From this, one might conclude that Vallejo's poetry challenges the concept of natural language or even dismisses it as common idiom. Through this radical form of writing, one that feeds upon the emotive substance of poetic diction, common language is not a map of the world, not as a communicative system. Here it is worth remembering that, according to Andean mentality, a space ("cancha") postulates another space, one that is alternate and complementary ("cancha-cancha"). It is unfolded as its own conceptualization. High and low, internal and external, serial and differential, this model—as explored and postulated by the Quechua-Spanish of the work of José María Arguedas—brings together, unties, and redistributes the functions and meanings of poetic language through a dialogic process of articulation.

Not too long ago in Madrid, one politician called another "Galician in the worst sense of the word Galician." This statement drew my attention, not because of the way it berates Galician people, whom we owe a good part of the intimacy of modern Spanish, but rather because of the negativity associated with the stereotyping that divides Spain, and that tends to reduce the perceived *other* to a caricature. This statement is proof of an

antimodern typology, probably characteristic of the eighteenth century. The writer Javier Marías, in response to this much-debated statement, recalled in his column “Zona del fantasma,” published in the Spanish newspaper *El país*, that in Spain it is common to hear expressions describing someone as “very Catalan” (cheap) or “very Andalusian” (a partier and a cheat), “very Aragonese” (pig-headed) or “very Castilian” (cocky and standoffish), and concluded that this is a reflection of a special kind of Spanish humor ingrained in Spanish tradition (Marías).

I thought that the attribution of mundane wisdom to popular culture, while dating back to the book of refrains, can also be the consequence of a misunderstanding: Sancho’s folk wisdoms, in their ironic Cervantine rendering, prove that at times what passes for popular worldliness may really just be rooted in stereotypes or, even worse, in prejudices that find their justification in a sort of “black hole” of language. This use of national clichés produces a profuse, tautological, and reified language removed from thought that reveals itself as an ideological ossification. In each one of our nations this serfdom to language has only grown. Even at a time when modern technology has improved communication, has increased the access to education, and has helped promote civil rights, our particular use of language demands a high price, which, although less quantifiable, certainly is not any less costly: the diminishing of the place of the other. We can see daily examples of this type of language in the tabloids, in gossipy talk or radio shows, and in the increasingly violent exchanges on the Internet. Ironically, the lack of responsibility and regulations at the heart of market ideologies increase the violence of these perpetuated power structures and hinders the distribution of real information.

The solution is not to force the Dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy to eliminate the offensive meaning of “Galician.” The dictionary’s online edition lists only one derogatory definition: “*ς*. Adj. *C. Rica*. Stupid (lacking in understanding or reason).” The entry also advises that it has been “amended.” A note further indicates that it is the dictionary’s policy not to endorse discriminatory uses of some terms, but to simply record them. I am afraid that Spanish dictionaries will end up recording a language that we may recognize, but that we do not speak, or one that is spoken by foreigners. Julio Cortázar, who was particularly sensitive to the different connotations of words, called dictionaries “cemeteries,” where each definition of a word is like a tombstone covering a corpse. The issue that

should be taken here, of course, is not with dictionaries per se, but rather with the ideological baggage attached to them. In his type of ideologically tainted dictionary, the definition for “Free man” would be “Citizen who exercises his rights,” but “Free woman” would be “Woman of loose morals.” It might be true that the best dictionary is one that is all-inclusive, but inclusivity does not have to equate the celebration of a crude humor typical of a Camilo José Cela.

Languages reflect the burden of authoritarian traditions and ideological plagues such as sexism, racism and xenophobia. In the daily use of language, we feel exempt from providing sources to verify what we say: the validation of what we articulate relies simply on the *I* as the ultimate source of authority (a “because *I* say so” sealed by the fist on the table). Our daily use of language is grounded in the belief that the *I* is formed in opposition and also at the expense of the other, rather than within and through dialogue. It has been argued that languages are more complex (hermetic) in their area of origin, and more synthetic (communicative) the more they expand. The Spanish language is the product of a magnificent melting pot of Iberian regionalisms (patronyms and toponyms are fascinating manifestations of their imprints), where the Galician, Basque, and Catalan languages all leave their marks; later, we add the Arabic and Hebrew languages, and then the unsettling languages of the Americas, all of which will become the fabric of the language that weaves into the Baroque. The “ultramarine” has always negated the “ultramontane” in our languages—languages so historical, that only in the realm of literature have they been fully ours.

One could add here that this authoritarian lineage could be understood as a consequence of the fact that Spanish is one of the European languages that eluded the Protestant Reformation. Moreover, the Spanish language helped rationalize the Counter Reformation: it justified the expulsion of the Arabs and Jews, and later fell victim to its own modern birth to violence. The recently discovered Trial of Columbus proves it so: violence consumes subjectivity and devours the colonial subject and its enterprise.¹ The Spanish language has lived almost all of its life under absolutist regimes and under the spell of a religion that appeased its conscience. Apart from some illustrious and tragic cases, Spain has been rather impervious to change, even rejecting the modernization of the eighteenth century. And with the exception of brief moments of liberal or

republican governments, it endured the extraordinary arbitrariness of its dictatorships. When faced with the choice between a democratic republic and authoritarianism, Spain ended up with the latter. Let us not forget that the last thirty years have been the longest period of civil liberties that Spain, and therefore its language, has experienced. For that reason, the use of regional stereotypes as a national sport is not just the product of a supposedly national sense of humor, but rather of a language unfamiliar with the habit of self-reflection.

Let us remember that many great Spanish writers have suffered imprisonment or exile for using their language. San Juan de la Cruz and Fray Luis de León were imprisoned for having translated passages of the Bible or for maintaining that the Bible, after all the word written by God, could benefit from an improved translation into the Spanish of the people. In the proceedings of the trial of Fray Luis de León, his accuser, a colleague from Salamanca, calls him “the Hebrew Fray Luis de León.” The history of translation and of translators is a sensitive chapter in the cautious modernity of the Spanish language. The ordinances that regulate the work of the translators in the New World reveal the mistrust in their function, and also reveal the internal problems of a system of validation lacking any kind of methods of verification, other than authority, faith, and censorship. The great Mexican translator of the conquest, Doña Marina, “La Malinche,” instead of being consecrated by history as a heroic fighter for modernity, was cast aside as a traitor. From the nineteenth century onward her name stands for servility to the foreign. And “the children of La Malinche,” in the famous essay of Octavio Paz, are not valued as new bilingual subjects (mediators of the future), but branded as the offspring of violation, condemned since their origin to “hacer violencia sobre otro,” to inflict violence upon the other (Paz 70).

How can we then write today in a language that is rooted in an anti-modern tradition subjected to authoritarian prohibitions? Only by writing better, by folding language over itself, by exploring the materiality of signs and encoding terms with their contradictoriness in new hyperboles. But before this can be achieved, we must free ourselves from the diction and prosody established by protocols. The writer can then rebuild a place with and for a postnational language, an imaginary space that is larger than a referential language and less assertive than national authoritarian discourses.