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SOME REFLECTIONS ON SOUTH AMERICAN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE*

Hans Otto Storm

THERE ARE SEVERAL perfectly good living South American languages—the Kechua, for instance. During the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries the highly organized society headed by Peruvian Incas conquered the land from Ecuador to the middle of Modern Chile. In this region the Kechua, or Keshua, became the universal language, and in the backwoods it still flourishes vigorously to this day. The Kechua has features which remind one of the Latin. For most of its speakers it is not a home-grown language but an imposed one, having been brought to them by conquerors now conquered. It is highly inflected, extremely regular in its forms, and therefore in sound monotonous—its place names delight in strings of four identical a-sounds: Cajamarca, Pachacamac, Carabaya, Tarapacá. Its accent is slight, causing an ambiguity when taken over into the highly accented Spanish. On the other hand its mathematically organized grammar has moods and tenses not known to the European—the word love can be rendered in a superlative tense which means I love you very much. The Kechua has no literature of its own for the good reason that the Incas did not know how to write. The only books in it I have seen are religious volumes translated by indefatigable missionaries. Where sounds occurred in the Kechua that were not represented in the Latin, the printer met the difficulty by the ingenious and economical device of turning some of the letters upside down.

* Taken from a speech, which began: “The title of these remarks, which appears bold, pompous, and perhaps forbidding, is still the most accurate one that I could think of. It may be contended that first, there is no South American language; second, if there were, at least it has no literature; and third, that not being in any sense a scholar, I have no right to discuss either feature. All of which, in the higher sense, I am first to admit—so I can only offer the apology that the things I want to talk about are of a very homely category, hardly worthy of being presented in this market of sophisticated letters.”
Not to slight in any way the Portuguese spoken in Brazil, the great language common to most of South America is of course the Spanish. Now the first and most vehement thing I would like to say about the American Spanish is that it is not a barbarous dialect of the Castilian, and that, contrary to a very common report, there is no particular difficulty in using it from one end of Latin America to the other. Strangely, the true dialects exist in Spain itself, and the language carried to America was and remains, with few exceptions, fairly uniform. Although there are accents, they introduce probably less difficulty than those in English, and a Mexican can understand an Argentinian with perhaps less difficulty than a Californian experiences when traveling in the deep South or listening on the radio to an Englishman.

This is true because the variations in the Spanish concern consonants which play only a minor role in the word, while the variations in English largely have to do with vowels changed or left out altogether, or with the important item of accentuation, about which the Spaniard, whatever his dialect or nationality, is most conscientious.

Yet the casual travelers who bring back reports of barbarism are not altogether liars. They are rather victims of the distortion of emphasis. Often they make straight for the back country where they meet people who are most at home in native languages and really know less Spanish than the travelers themselves. Then there are certain words which for good reason vary from place to place, and although these words are relatively few, they happen to be the most common: the vegetables, the kitchen utensils, water, the sun, the earth, the sky. South America was conquered, not settled, by the Spaniards, and the hewers of wood and drawers of water remained who they were before, so that in the particular items over which these unfortunates were consulted, the Spanish made a few adaptations. So it may easily be that if you travel swiftly and find out that a tortilla becomes an omelet in Peru and water is called topo in Sinaloa and that legumbres for vegetables and judias for beans are here and there unknown, you would come back and say, that the Latin Americans speak a barbarous dialect, just as if you went to Boston and found that "tonic" means soda pop and "spa" means a fruit store you would come back and say that the Bostonians speak a barbarous dialect. But if in either region you stopped to discuss Kant or dialectic materialism you would find that the jargon was very much the same.

Allowing then that something approaching the Castilian is spoken
on this side of the water, what are its ambitious claims? They call their language *la idioma hermosa* and celebrate it with a holiday on which they close the stores and even go so far as to sweep the streets. Is there anything to this? I think I can show you that there is.

First of all, Spanish has the poetic requisite of definite and well-accepted vowels. Syllables without vowels, as the English “were,” “heard,” or slurred syllables, as in the Anglo-English “‘xtr’ord’n’ry,” are absolutely not permitted; and the most scathing indictment of English pronunciation is found in Appleton’s dictionary, where it is gravely stated that in English the vowels a, e, i, o, and u are all pronounced “uh.” This seriousness about sounds is carried right into the grammar, and when the poetic value of the words would conflict with the grammar, then the grammar simply has to go. An *ama,* that is, a lady who takes care of small children while their mothers go to bookstore lectures, takes the masculine article and is called *el ama,* because *la ama* would have two identical sounds following each other and no civilized person, that is to say no poet, would be caught talking that way. And this principle of euphony goes, in general, right through.

There is more to it than that, though. Somewhere in the Koran it is said that there is a particular angel in heaven appointed to sing continually the praises of God for giving a beard to men and long hair to women. That is to say, discounting the religious jargon, that the continual awareness of sex in all relationships makes life in all those relationships richer and more satisfying and significant. The Spanish recognize this by using genders which are true sex-genders and not, like the German, genders rather of social position (der Mann, die Frau, das Madchen). And the Spanish genders carry through into the strong adjectives, so that a statement such as “I am content, proud, or disgusted,” spoken by a man, has a form and flavor distinct from what it would have if spoken by a woman. True again, they give masculine and feminine genders to inanimate things, but these sometimes change from one to the other most significantly: the sea is *la mar* when you are looking at it in the sunset and *el mar* when you are sizing up whether your boat can take it. And neuters are not given to the mere leftovers of unimportance; they are reserved for generalities: *lo bueno,* *lo verdadero,* y *lo bello.* Close to this principle is the use of a living distinction between the familiar and the formal address. The use of *tu* within certain categories of friendship and familiarity gives a delightful feeling of recognition; its beginning between men and women is an accurate
Further, wherever there is doubt, the language has a way of relating itself straight to the phenomenon rather than to the train of logic that led up to its discussion. This appears in the case of redundant negatives. In English there is the story of the witness who replied to some question “I ain’t saying I ain’t.” The judge called him on a point of order with the words: “I ain’t asking you is you ain’t, I’m asking you ain’t you is!” That point of order is continually called in Spanish to give the pertinent fact right-of-way over the circumlocutions of grammatical logic. Negatives piled on negatives only make a more emphatic negative. In the same way the person of the verb depends not on the abstract logic of the sentence but on who is personally most concerned. Los obreros somos desamparados, the workers are desperate, a Spanish speaker would say, using, if he includes himself among the workers, the form we are. In the logic of English grammar it is a point of finesse that when stating a general proposition it makes no difference whose ox is gored. In Spanish it makes all the difference in the world.

This directness and scorn of generalities has its distinct limitations. A South American engineer said to me once, “Spanish has a thousand ways of calling a girl Sweetheart but not one good way of asking for a monkey wrench.” (He got his training in Paris, so he wasn’t bluffing.) Yet he did not quite put his finger on the trouble. There is no particular problem around asking for a monkey wrench, but if you want to say in Spanish that the torque exerted by the wrench is equal to its length multiplied by the tangential force on the end of the handle, then you are likely to find yourself in heavy difficulties.

Another limitation of Spanish produces a peculiar effect. In English we have for a vast number of things parallel words, one for funeral orations and the other for everyday speech. First, the Norman-Saxon fusion produced the schoolbook dual forms of pig-pork, ox-beef, and so on; but that was only the beginning. After our language was well set we kept on finding complicated words for great occasions and demanding simple ones for every day. So that to call a spade an agricultural implement is considered pomposity and cant. Yet if you spoke Spanish with an Indian gardener and had forgotten the word for spade and asked him for it; he would be likely to reply an agricultural implement, just that. There simply is not that ambivalence of language which employs different words for formal and for plain occasions; and per-
haps this monism goes even deeper than the matter of language. In any case the familiar Latin derivatives, and with them a grave and sedate diction generally, appear in Spanish in places that strike us as a little comical. Here are some samples from signs, billboards, etc., appearing in public places:

Children who molest trees in the park should be admonished by their protectors, and if not susceptible to admonishment should be restrained by force.

Legitimate parts Ford.

Cultivated persons do not urinate in the public streets.

Enter if thou art honorable and a workman.
Pay what thou owest and nothing more.

What a felicity it is to wash with Blanco's sanitary soap.

Los vendedores
de fruta y flores
no se permiten
en el tren.

This tendency to what we call ponderous phrasing goes decidedly into the newspapers, and the smaller the town the more noticeable it becomes, automobile wrecks and city council meetings being written up in a style generally remindful of Mark Antony at Caesar's coffin. And that tendency is not entirely a matter of language. South America is a colonial country with its tendrils of contact to the large world pitifully limited, and no one is more aware of the fact than the journalist. So the reporter on a daily paper thinks of himself as a literary man, struggling, more or less, for recognition with Dumas and Stevenson and all the great ones of the previous century. Besides this he is conscious of himself as a social figure, an aspirant to the polite society of his town—as such, also struggling for recognition and determined to make literacy and sophistication take the place of wealth and family. From this, the thing that corresponds to our "columnism" takes a particular form—a racy dialogue usually in the familiar discourse, between two dashing and rather blasé young men who meet on the street corner to discuss the affairs of the day in a sardonic mood. The pen-and-ink artist often
adds their pictures, slim, fashionable, with flower in buttonhole and cane in hand and tongue in cheek. And if the puns in these columns are often quite unmentionable, then on the other hand allusions to Cervantes and the classics will not be neglected.

But the high point in South American journalism is the sob story. You may imagine that among the miserable folk who crowd the doors of a South American newspaper office, sob stories are not hard to find. And yet they are written up with a classical abandonment to the demands of tragedy. Here is one that came to me in the wrapping paper from a hardware store:

An Indian girl was sent by her father to the streets to beg, but her brother had the best route and she the worst, so that she always came home with the least money. For this her father continually beat her. So at the earliest opportunity she ran away and went to live with a white man. But her new protector only beat her the worse, while he tried to graduate her from the trade of begging into prostitution. Thereupon she left him and took up with a Chinaman. All went well until they had a child, but when the father saw that the child's eyes were not slanted in the Oriental fashion he threw both child and mother into the street. Reduced to beggary once more she at last met a Negro who was a good man and kind, and although very poor offered to shelter both her and the Chinese-Indian child. But her happiness was not to last. When the inevitable next child came it was a helpless monster without any neck and with one eye in the middle of its forehead. At sight of it the Negro husband committed suicide. So, on the streets again, the poor girl endeavored to beg to support this monstrosity, when she was run over by a bus and had both her legs broken.

The same tone is used to write up what they call a "crime of passion"—meaning by passion the property-complex that we call sex jealousy, which is considered both highly respectable and altogether irresistible in its attacks. Murders of this sort are in fact written up not as crimes but as tragedies with a strong note of the inevitable, the murderer and his victim coming in for equal shares of sympathy. If John Jones is shot by an inmate of his house in San Francisco, the newspaper will be very explicit about the appearance of the body, the names of the policemen, undertakers and so forth, but it will close: "Mrs. Jones, on being questioned, said she had no idea of who might be his enemies." Or if the salacious offers opportunities without the fear of libel, the paper may nevertheless list the sexual elements involved with a bald mechanical obtuseness that suggests an ill-digested course in plane
geometry. If Alberto Rodriguez is shot in Santiago the story will run something like this:

All was sweetness and light in the Rodriguez family. Every morning when don Alberto left for work the pretty little Carmelita would wave to him from the window and every evening when he returned she would be there in her pink dress to meet him. So that old neighbors would see them and look at each other with tears in their eyes and say, "What charming children!". And then one evil day the Rodriguez family took a boarder. And ah, Carmelita was lovely and ah, the boarder was a dashing young fellow, and youth is youth and love and the winds blow where they choose. And so—

Then there will be a row of passionate looking dots, which the South Americans haven't yet learned to think are funny—

—And Don Alberto returned. He looked in her eyes. He saw. He knew. He understood— There was but one answer. He went to the pawnshop and bought him a revolver—

Another row of dots.

And now on the clear, sad autumn afternoons the poor Carmelita, no longer bright and smiling, but attired in widow's weeds, may sometimes be seen on the bus that runs from the graveyard to the penitentiary.

In all of this of course the hand of Euripides is very evident. In the diffusion of cultures we northerners, along with a lot of other things, have accepted tragedy in much the same spirit as the South Sea islanders accepted shoes—something to be worn at solemn ceremonies and then quickly to be put aside because it pinches. To the Mediterranean this same tragedy, that is, the thought of the annihilation of the individual and the revelation thereby of the cosmic or the inevitable—is thoroughly indigenous and welcome on the lowliest occasions. It doesn't have to be twisted to a happy ending or even to point a moral—it is just beautiful in its own right. And with such a background, for four hundred years South America has had to satisfy itself with the dignity of its decline and fall while our own minds have been occupied mostly with expansion. And in a barbershop I heard somebody sing

Las campanas dicen dan, dan
pero un dia, cairán—

I have no idea whether this was meant as anticlerical propaganda or just a simple comment on the inevitable ending of all things, but it
is very different from anything one would hear in a barbershop in the United States.

Even outside of barbershops, the influence of classic tragedy works very hard on South American literature, especially on poetry, and much of the time greatly to its disadvantage. What I dislike most about South American poetry is the everlasting welter of tears, flowers, sighs, broken toys of childhood, and similar stage properties floating around in a puddle of sweet despondency. These messes play a particularly dirty trick on the foreigner who reads uncritically and without background and, the first time at least, thinks that the mood and treatment are quite exquisite until suddenly, having gone a good way past his stop, he wakes up sharp and thinks, o-oh, this fellow's brakes need tightening. Sweetness and sadness, he finds out much later, play in South American, perhaps in all Spanish poetry, the exact counterpart in vulgarity to what optimism and cheer represent in the doggerel of our own language.

What I like best in South American verse is something altogether different: an occasional brilliance of short and variegated meter that is only possible in a highly accented language, rhyme schemes of complicated accuracy, feminine rhymes that are preposterous and comical. As in any other place there is a vast amount of trash published. But it is not the trash that one regrets so much as the amount of heavy earnestness which goes to waste in the bog of colonialism, with ponderous attempts that simply don't come off. It is a little hard for persons from a major country to realize just what colonialism means in art—to understand why, with the world's background after all available, it is not possible to sit down in Chanchamayo and write contemporary literature, just as well as one could in London or Paris. Well, put it the other way around. Sophisticated comment, sophisticated fiction at least, requires something like this: the writer has to have enough associations, either direct or by the printed word, with his fellows in the center of affairs to feel more or less at one with them, and to speak the same intellectual language and to have the same preoccupations—and then he must be able quite without embarrassment to refer to the things with which he is thoroughly familiar and to raise his voice and state how these bear on the questions raised. If he can't do that he gets lost in self-conscious regionalism, or in a retreat to the classics, or in imitation. And that is what happens altogether too often in South America. The South American is painfully conscious at all times that when London or New York or Moscow pound the table the forks rattle, and when
Chanchamayo pounds the table they don't. Or if they do you may be quite assured that some condescending critic is shaking the table. And so strange things happen.

I remember, for example, a little story reprinted in a Peruvian anthology. The scene is located in, we will say, the little town of Huacho. The story begins with a description of the town as known in childhood. The description isn't at all bad—you can see the baked adobe houses and hear the barnyard animals and feel the summer heat and smell the lush vegetation by the irrigating ditch. It is perhaps a little too heavily underscored. It is trenchant or pregnant or whatever the word is. One begins to see that the author has been reading Josef Conrad. Java had an atmosphere; well, Huacho can have an atmosphere too. All well and good. But wait a minute. In Conrad all this heavy-smelling stuff was prelude simply to the thesis: now ladies and gentlemen, here is the setting; here is the story, further, of a simple person, confronted by the ultimate realities. The realities of our little Peruvian story go on as follows. In the aforedescribed town of Huacho where I spent my underscored childhood there lived a rooster. And the rooster was a great pet of the family. And so there was great consternation when my father matched the rooster in a fight against the champion rooster from the nearby town. And the fight took place and the plot became more and more tense until finally our rooster won.

The trouble with this story is not at all that the description is bad or that cockfighting in Huacho is not in its place important. The trouble is that the author cannot distinguish between rooster fights in Huacho and the Trojan War, and that he thinks his roosters crowing in their pens of a Peruvian morning are the contemporaries of Homer's horses champing their oats in the light of a thousand fires. The distinction, which is the essence of colonialism, is a very cruel one—and unjust; it is not that the Trojans suffered more than the Peruvians, it is simply that they have left their mark. Ignore the distinction and you become ridiculous; recognize it and you become exotic, condescending, regional. You may be absolutely genuine, but you can't sit down with the great ones.

Another little book that I remember was written by a young Limeño—a person of opportunity, born and raised in Lima with sufficient cash to feel a sense of power. It is a biography, very intimate, very personal, very exact, and of course very regional. Its great scene is where the young man has just recently come of age. He has a car of his
own (just as in the States), he has his arm around his girl (just as in the States), and he is driving home in the twilight and catching the first lights of Lima. Of the City Lima—the incomparable Lima, his Lima. Again he can not see his own situation without slight embarrassment—he must try to bull it through and make believe that his Lima is another Paris. And in case the book might seem a bit naive he added a preface full of what they call *palabras rebuscadas*, researched words, ending with the sophisticated comment that most readers did not favor prefaces, and so if you didn’t like it you could tear it out—for which purpose the preface was printed on perforated paper like a commutation ticket.

Evidently, neither of the authors quoted above thought they had a message or were concerned with doing anything for society. They just Wanted to Write. Perhaps more agreeable than these just mentioned, are the out-and-out potboilers who write simple little stories for the slick magazines and whose charm lies in their own simplicity and flowery phrases, like the description of the poor garbage man: “It was not buoyant, the financial situation of our hero.” There are also the earnest persons who often under terrible persecution, make bold to air the grievances of the underlying population. Needless to say these writers have a rich mine of material, and they produce what seems to us a much more grown-up product. They still, however, have from our point of view a tendency to plug the regional note too heavily. When they do not try to crawl out from under their provincialism then they make much of it, but they make too much of it in places where it does not count.

Perhaps I am too hard on these people, and to clear up my bias I must give you one piece of factual information that may warp my judgment. It is that the concept of attack in modern Spanish prose is completely different from that held in English. We believe that one thing must lead to another; we take great pains with our transitions; our thought moves from one paragraph into the next as smoothly as an avocado in an automatic packing plant. The Spaniard, for all his smoothly flowing language, breaks his ideas into short, choppy paragraphs with a full stop between, and a complete change, here and there, of orientation. Sometimes this becomes so pronounced in fiction that actual subheads are introduced, as in newspaper stories in our own country. A dry humor can be secured by this device, as in Pío Baroja’s subtitle—“Influence of the inclination of the earth’s axis on the phe-
nomenon called love"—but the effect on our senses is more often to make the writing appear scatterbrained.

Of the great highlights of South American fiction I will say little, because the honors have been so definitely assigned to two novels: Guiraldez' Don Segundo Sombra and Rivera's La Vordgine. Both of these are now available in an English translation, and both are infinitely worth reading. Both are, by the way, heavily regional in their different ways. But a few passages in Rivera's work stand unforgettably out from the limitations of the regional, and I speak of those in which with an inhuman penetration he looks into the shortcomings of his own class, the literary intellectuals.

It goes without saying that a country out of which anyone can tell you the two great novels, just like that, doesn't boast of an indigenous literature that is important in the large world. But when it comes to translations, the scale unexpectedly bumps the beam. South America's only linguistic tie with the old world is Spain, and until the recent unfortunate events Spain has been quite to one side of the European circle. So the large world impinges on South America principally through translations. And the quality of the translated titles that one finds in the most humble surroundings is remarkably high. Gogol, Dostoevski, Elias Erenberg, H. G. Wells, Ernst Toller, Remy de Gourmet, and of course Upton Sinclair, I have found in drugstores, newsstands, ash bins, and attics in the most provincial places—and with the exception of the two English-language writers, I contend that it would be unusual to find any of these authors in towns of equal size, like Sayville, Long Island, or Grant's Pass, Oregon. There are evidently people in South America in very humble stations who are not afraid of serious literature when they see it and who want it if they can get it. So one might venture to predict that an important indigenous literature is to be expected in that quarter in the future. If, through one pass or another, large sections of South America come to shake off their colonial status and emerge into some acceptable kind of freedom, one could predict that there will be giants in those days.