GORDON BROTHERSTON & LÚCIA SÁ

Poetry, oppression and censorship in Latin America

EVEN before Columbus set sail in 1492, oppression was denounced by poets in the part of the world now known as Latin America, as records in Nahuatl (Aztec), Maya, Quechua and other languages testify. Since that date, poets have continued to denounce while sometimes being silenced by the colonial regimes set up there by Spain and Portugal, and, from the nineteenth century onwards, by certain of the nation states which succeeded them. Salient cases are the military dictatorships which ravaged Brazil and the Southern Cone (Chile, Argentina, Uruguay) in the 1970s and 1980s, and which carried forward the spirit of the no less notorious yet cruder dictatorial regimes which had afflicted the Caribbean and Central America in earlier decades.

All along, the strong survival of indigenous cultures in the Andes and Mexico has complicated the usual modes of oppression and censorship. Indians in Mexico today talk of their languages as a means of articulating the world, concisely and poetically, according to pre- or non-western norms, and note the ever-larger threats posed to them by education in Spanish, political propaganda and the new commercialism. As the Nahuatl poet Luis Reyes says, referring to the constant threat posed by the *coyotes* or non-Indians in Mexico: 'Four hundred years have taught us/ what *coyote* wants' (see *Index* 1/1996). In the Quechua-speaking Andes, similar processes are lamented, and resisted, in the same terms, as is evident in sardonic native-language accounts of 'conversion' to Spanish in Ecuador. In Peru, Quechua has been the vehicle of songs and poems which contrive to incorporate Spanish words and habits of thought, in order to neutralise them politically.

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At the same time, Mexico and the Andean republics have been chary of outright censorship. In Mexico, even the 1968 massacre of unarmed students in Tlatelolco has been written about in accusatory detail. José Emilio Pacheco's poem on the subject draws on Nahuatl accounts of Cortes's massacre of the local population in the same square in 1521.

In his great epic of the continent, *Canto general*, published half a century ago, the Chilean Pablo Neruda poured especial scorn on the dictators of the Caribbean and Central America, the 'traitors' who effectively sold their countries to US capitalists, silencing any objection in the most brutal and sadistic fashion. The Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén said the same thing in the collection he eloquently entitled, in English, *West Indies Ltd*. Exiled from his native Nicaragua, Ernesto Cardenal captured the absolute evil and absurdity of these regimes in his pithy 'Somoza unveils a statue to Somoza in the Somoza stadium':

> It's not that I believe the people erected this statue for me
> since I know better than you do that I commissioned it myself.
> Nor do I imagine it will ensure my posterity
> since I know the people will tear it down one day.
> Nor did I want to erect it while still alive
> as the monument that you will not erect to me once I'm dead:
> I erected it simply because I know your loathing of it.

In other poems, Cardenal draws directly on indigenous texts in the Nahuatl and Maya languages in order to place the plague of Central American dictatorships in the larger story of the oppression and homicidal silencing of voices that began with Columbus. In 'Katun 11 Ahau' he appeals to the rhetoric of the *katun* calendar cycle and the Maya books which had been destroyed in quantities by the European invaders: 'In this *katun*/ we weep for the burnt books/ for those exiled from the kingdom. The loss/ of the maize/ and our teachings of the universe.' Similar techniques have been used by the Salvadorean Manlio Argueta, author of censored novels and poems, who has had to spend most of his life in exile (see page 145).

As Neruda's epic again tells us, political resistance to the 'traitors' has often taken the very Latin American form of guerrilla warfare, which was born with Tupac Amaru and the Independence movements themselves. Guerrilla fighters, like Mao in China, were often poets, whose work

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necessarily reached the reading public by the most indirect routes. In cases like that of the Peruvian Javier Heraud, who was killed in action in 1963 at the age of 21, the poetry was very good indeed, beyond any question of political message (see page 152).

In both Cuba and Nicaragua, guerrilla resistance led to the triumph of a new social order, in which Guillén and Cardenal respectively played major offical roles, and where poetry was to be disseminated through state publishing houses.

As everyone knows, Fidel Castro's Cuba and Sandinista Nicaragua have been vehemently denounced in their turn as dictatorial and totalitarian. The true test case for Cuba was that of Heberto Padilla, who having lived abroad to escape the Batista dictatorship returned to collaborate with Castro in 1959, and spent several years as an official in Eastern Europe. Critics suggest that it was his experience of state socialism there, and the example of poets who had resisted it, which tipped the scales and led him to abjure the 'inspectors of heresies' at home. The shift was clear in *Fuera del juego* (1968; Offside), published by the state yet with a corrective preface by the Writers' Union; 'Poetica' sets the tone:

Tell the truth.
At least, tell your own truth.
And afterwards
accept whatever comes:
they may tear your favourite page,
they may shatter your door with stones,
or people
may crowd around your living body
as if you were
a prodigy or a corpse *(Translation J M Cohen)*

Padilla was harried and imprisoned and later left for the US, not before becoming a cause célèbre for Cuba's many enemies. There's no defending the treatment given to him, yet in the 'free world' its political significance has tended to be exaggerated, if only because Castro has been far less guilty of censorship and murder than many regimes over the globe openly supported by the US.

Under constant military attack from the US and its mercenaries, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua scarcely had the time or opportunity, during their

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term of power (1979-1989), to start discriminating systematically against poets they deemed politically incorrect. Their enemies chose rather to focus on their supposed hostility towards the culture and language of the Miskito Indians on the Atlantic coast. For the US in particular this represents quite remarkable hypocrisy, given that power's unswerving and massive support, at exactly the same period, for such genocidal regimes as that of Lucas García and Rios Montt in nearby Guatemala (under whom town after town of Maya speakers was obliterated), and given the Sandinistas' actually quite mild record in the matter.

Whatever the iniquities of Castro and the Sandinistas, they cannot be compared in any way with those of the dictatorships installed in the Southern Cone and Brazil, largely with the help and even direct participation of the US, in the 1960s and early 1970s. Kissinger's involvement with those determined to overthrow Salvador Allende's democratically elected government in Chile, often ignored in the western press, deserves to be proclaimed no less widely than similar behaviour in Angola, or his mass maiming of children and undermining of society in Cambodia. As Ariel Dorfman says, how can there be talk of reconciliation when the extent of the crime is not even generally known, still less conceded? The agony of millions of lives lost and ruined directly because of Pinochet and his fellow military dictators in Argentina and Uruguay is acutely caught in the poetry of Raúl Zurita, who witnessed some of the atrocity firsthand. From the Dantesque diction of '*Anteparaíso*' (1982), Zurita moved to something far more intense and specific in '*Canto a su amor desaparecido*' (1987; Song for the disappeared love), in what proved to be Pinochet's final days. In many respects an update of Neruda's 'General Song' of the Americas, Zurita's 'Song' manages to articulate the trauma of extreme torture and humiliation only by finding a correlative in the Native America, in the experience of peoples systematically silenced and dispossessed since the days of Columbus. Stanzas take the concrete form of tombs, each of 12 justified lines arranged six per page, which cry with pathos and anguish for the future of America (see page 146).

In the worst moments of the 1964-1978 military dictatorship in Brazil, censorship was vigorously enforced against the press, television, music, theatre and fiction. Not against poetry, however, which interested the censors less. Even so, poets like Ferreira Gullar and Thiago de Mello were driven into exile and their works circulated in Brazil only in small semi-clandestine editions. The economics of publishing poetry also worsened

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under the dictatorship, which led such 'Marginals' as Afonso Henriques Neto and Francisco Alvin to mimeograph their works and sell them in the streets.

By contrast, in the form of popular song, a key element in Latin American culture generally, poetry bore the full brunt of censorship during this period in Brazil. Chico Buarque had several of his songs completely banned while others were severely cut or changed. In '*Cálice*', composed jointly with Gilberto Gil, he addresses the subject directly through a pun between '*cálice*' (chalice or cup) and '*cale-se*' (shut up), in the biblical phrase 'father, take this *calice* from me'. The censors were not deceived however and prohibited the song from being played even without the words. Buarque's work is remarkable for seeking in colloquial speech a means of reflecting extreme forms of humiliation and abuse ('Say yes and you'll get on in life').

With Chico Buarque (see page 148), the censors seized on the subtlest political detail. In '*Tanto Mar*' (So much sea), the refrain '*pa*' — an interjection typical of Portugal — allowed the censors to identify, quite directly, a celebration of the end of the Salazar-Caetano dictatorship in that country, and the song was put on the index. At the same time, moral issues could be a problem so that lesbian references had to be eliminated from 'Bárbara', a song in the play *Calabar* which in its turn was banned at the last minute. Things got so bad for Chico Buarque that at one point any piece with his name on it was automatically banned. He responded by using pseudonyms (Julinho da Adelaide; Leonel Paiva), but these were soon exposed.

Chico Buarque was by no means the only one to suffer under the military censors in Brazil. When recording '*Escravos de Jó*' ('Job's Slaves') and '*Clube da Esquina*' ('Corner Club'), Milton Nascimento was obliged to leave out the words entirely. Geraldo Vandré was tortured so brutally that he could no longer write or perform. His '*Caminhando*', hugely successfully before it was banned, became a kind of touchstone and anthem for all those resisting the dictators. Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil ended up as exiles in London, where the former wrote and performed several songs in English, among them 'London, London' and 'It's a long way'.

All these poet-singers built up great solidarity with their counterparts in Spanish America, particularly the victims of the Southern Cone dictatorships; Violeta Parra who was silenced by Pinochet in Chile, and Victor Jara who was brutally murdered. The Argentinian Mercedes Sosa

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introduced songs by Chico Buarque and Milton Nascimento to Spanish America. A major factor in this alliance were the Nueva Trova musicians in Cuba — Silvio Rodríguez and Paco Milanés among others — who often invited the Brazilians to work with them. In the larger perspective, this indicates how strongly Latin American solidarity could be felt, in the harshest conditions, through shared song and poetry. ❑

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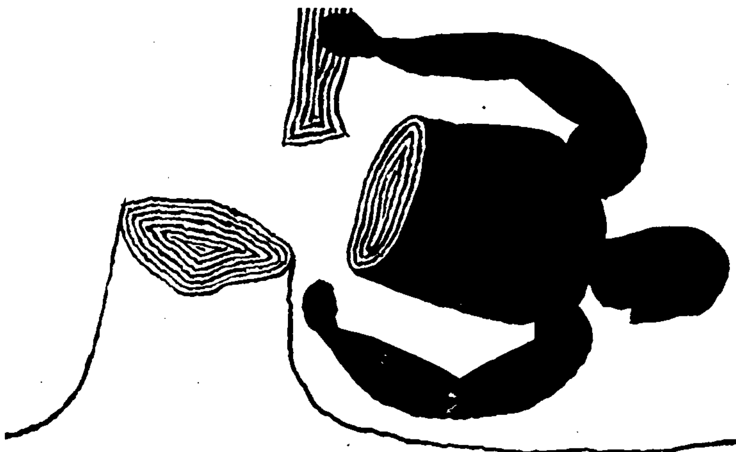

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