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# A Country of Poets

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into wisdom. Knowing oneself comes probably from abandoning oneself into the objective world. The more distant and remote the voices of life become, the more I shall find myself concentrating on this landscape which has fed me for so long. Then, perhaps, there will come a moment of understanding, in the midst of so much light—the hollowness and holiness of things, a moment when I shall touch their center and split the black membrane of death covering it.

But until then, the landscape surrounds us Greeks; it is in us, and keeps its secret. So much pain with every step we take in history, so much helplessness, so much cement blocking the horizon and endless barbed-wire around the magic sites of the gods. But still we feel somewhere this exchange of glances between it and us, glances constantly welcoming and saying goodbye at the same time.

Because the pines will go, and the mirrored mountains  
And the chirping of birds.  
The sea will empty, shattered glass, from north and south.  
Your eyes will be emptied of the light of the day  
As suddenly, of one accord, all the cicadas cease.

*George Seferis, "The Thrush"*

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ALEJANDRO GONZALEZ / COLOMBIA

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## A Country of Poets

Colombia is a country of poets.

In one form or another the whole world is related by marriage to poetry.

The best part of that poetry is taken directly from life.

A country with 23,000,000 poets.

To try to make a selection would be a task like the pyramids of Egypt and it would take centuries. A task for a "colossus," which is not one of my natural attributes.

Many things influence the soul of our people (and as there are people who sweat oil; ours sweat poetry), in order that the miracle of the multiplication of bread and fish in the Gospel be repeated through the miracle of converting words into verses. Many magical things are mixed up there.

Life is like a state of being, an entrance way, and death; first as a theory, next reluctantly and finally, because we want to die and nothing more. The countryside is like a coloring book for children, and although the subjects are the same, it amuses us to color them in all possible ways.

Latin America

List of Occupations

The Catholic religion is adapted to our affairs:

(God, if this little affair succeeds, you can count on my giving money to finish the church.)

To drink:

“Drink the last glass my friend . . . To forget your sorrows . . .”

To talk:

Even though I wasn't prepared for the occasion, since . . .

Family:

Sons in the kitchen, on the patio, in the street and in the cemetery.

Deeds:

(Ay, compadre, what a good man the deceased was, a saint, yes sir, give me another drink.)

Courtesy:

(Ladies first.)

Sermons:

(Not to covet your neighbor's wife . . .) ???

To drink coffee:

(I tell you that guy doesn't know anything about politics and he's there because his father, who, by the way, was one-eyed . . . with the money he made . . .)

Time:

there's no time.

It is a part of the world where the clock seems ridiculous and inefficient. I'll go at six . . . One of these days I'll come . . .

The list is interminable.

I will add that the number of poetic births is uncontrollable and the pill that would limit them has not yet been produced.

But there are two regions.

The coast and the plain on one side and on the other the mountains.

Something so difficult to interpret like “three separate beings in a single true God.”

Those who live next to the condor's nests are nostalgic, spiritual, deep and at times even weepy. The Andes have their secrets, enchantments and convulsions.

On the other hand those who nudge the sea spend life dancing to their own voices, performing without a diploma in hedonist philosophy.

This is not very much but it serves as a warning to those who believe in

the century of computers. There is a peculiar mark which distinguishes us before the owl's astonished eyes.

The tropics are rewarded with the lack of seasons.

The land is so rich and productive that it grows dictators of an unimaginable variety and so grateful after a concession for eternity to the "United Fruit Company," which squeezed out the last banana tree, that even then there was something left to give to the peasants. Although to survive is a miracle. It's not that way anymore.

They keep insisting that it is a magical region.

All the lands, the people, the situations look alike.

But it is a trick of the desert sun. Between one place and another, from inhabitant to inhabitant, there are profound differences.

Those who put Latin America in a book are completely wrong.

Colombia alone would be a jigsaw puzzle of a million pieces.

They say "so-called developing." Can anyone define what "developing" is?

The logical is illogical.

It's not so strange that this appears in a book like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

But beware!

With all its marvels it is not Latin America, it is not Colombia, it cannot be identified. "Easier to thread a camel through the eye of a needle" . . . than to fit *One Hundred Years of Solitude* within an explanation.

The Castilian language or the Spanish, according to the bills, is the payment the Spaniards and their emissaries gave us in exchange for the gold they transported to maintain the monks of Felipe II, his convents and his nuns.

The preachers who came with the conquistadores boasted erudite sermons which, for the Indians, went "in one ear and out the other." But the native cunning succeeded and the Indians kept the words. In the long run the exchange was convenient for us.

The language was enriched and worked side by side with the land. The language is rich, alive, musical, spicy, flexible, and sensual because it is not only spoken, it is also felt. One can add that it is obedient and does not belong to death, it is living, latent, ready to repulse aggression.

The native legends, the songs and the poems have been almost entirely lost and what was saved from the destruction and oblivion was due to those who resented the destiny which also existed then. The adventurers who had no racial traces knew from their grass bed mythological secrets that were passed from fathers to sons.

The offspring of these unions, "little green-eyed Indians," were informed about everything, because it was told to them in darkness in front of the mother's heart and was confirmed to them by her milk.

But a phenomenon appeared.

Confusion.

It's a world of dreams, without dates or names.

Folklore about the conquests, penalties, gold, ladies who kept waiting for the man who would marry them and cover them with jewels.

There they remained with their dreams full of cobwebs.

Most of these men fell under the native women's spell.

Religious texts abound. And settlements are inundated with churches. It is the navel of the village. The dignity of the town is measured by the size and wealth of its church (the architecture).

The settlements became towns and the towns became cities.

There is a new man on the earth.

The king and Spain are old-fashioned like hats.

This sun no longer shines.

The people are busy building in order to destroy and build again.

Free time is used to meet, to tell stories, to make chronicles, proclaim ideas of independence and revolution and conclude with poems. The reciter. He was starving, but he imposed his dignity. Ragged but clean, black clothes, and his silhouette was confused with the lamp's shadows until the moment when he began to recite. Then he was another. Lord of his domains, warrior in battle, passionate lover and a thousand other faces. That was the end of day-to-day life.

The matron's breasts heaved rapidly and elastically.

The maidens sighed while with a white handkerchief they feigned a tear.

The gentlemen identified with the heroes.

The patriarchs had to feign sensitivity with a muffled cough.

The poet cried like a child. Not so much because of the end of the poem as because of hunger, and once spiritual hunger was satisfied, they ran to the kitchen to stuff themselves with chocolate and hot doughnuts.

What times those were, my friend! A romantic would say.

A dreamer.

In the capricious steam of the chocolate, between verses and romances, revolutionary ideas begin to appear and then to consolidate. The influence of French politics and literature dominated the inhabitants of the new world. This influence was definitive almost to our times.

A Colombian critic, Javier Arango Ferrer, in his book *Two Hours of Colombian Literature* says: We are sons of Spain by blood and French in spirit. True!

Since then, there has been an illegal union between poetry and politics. A stain that is not cleaned with any detergent. Although the symptoms are different. Many of our poets have been politicians and many more politicians have tried to succeed in poetry.

In a country of 23,000,000 it is easier to be a president than a poet; do you know what I mean?

Extraordinary and privileged country.

We do not tell lies to each other.

With the nicest, most peaceful, enterprising and hardworking people in the world.

Of course this is not an obstacle to a violent conquest followed by a war of independence, then the civil wars of consolidation, those which split the consolidation and finally, at the mouth, a factional war that left a total of five hundred thousand dead by 1953 (the mouth only).

The church was in everything.

It was a reign of darkness, with the throne in the confessional.

From there she dominated, beds and cities.

The church was involved with the conquest, with independence, with the factions, with the abundant reproduction of the race, and even with the literature. Jesus' heart and the Virgin Mary were a pretext and a form of submission.

In literature she was the judge. Books were forbidden, they burned them and the disobedient were punished with severe penances. One of the most well-known novels of Colombian literature, *Maria*, was banned by some priests from the pulpit because the hero deposited roses in the water before his loved one went to bathe in the river. In no part of the novel was it explicitly stated that the lover was spying, but it was assumed that he did, therefore it was sinful.

Politics engendered brilliant oratory.

The same happens with sermons from the pulpit.

There is poetry in this also. Images, metaphors, music.

Although Colombia's problems have been related to "skirts" these have also included "cassocks." I want to make clear that I have nothing against the church. Destructions and constructions are balanced in their hands. (It's a fact.)

I would tie the knot with an observation of one of our language academicians (Jesuit of course): "All of us in our youthful times have written poems, with venial and mortal verses."

All of this can seem a little sportive. But it's true.

The results are enviable, although it seems an exaggeration. The language retains its freshness and evolution enriches it. The contribution of Colombia and Latin America to universal literature is very valuable.

Poetic generations have been born everywhere and by accident and are strengthened by strange cycles of the sun, the moon, the sea and the rains. We are musical people.

Music accompanies us everywhere.

We are made for the open spaces.

For the most absurd ideas and ideals.

Musical people, but with a very bad ear.

What difference does it make? Beethoven wrote his best symphony when he was deaf. We have created poetry everywhere, even in cemeteries, and a witness to that was a feverish and nostalgic poet called Julio Flores. We have created poetry in the ports through the "sensual and sad" Porfirio Barabajacob's hand who with Manuel Arras Trujillo sang to the adolescents in Whitman's style. An interminable story of poets who, if they were compared with the European decadents, would be considered as saints next to them.

Poetry in the schools, the universities, the beds, the barracks, the country, in the public baths, in the restaurants, in the churches, in the elections for president of the Republic, as happened to the poet Guillermo Valencia, and as can be supposed, he lost. Poetry in the streets, in the clinics, in the chicken coops. Poetry! Poetry! In spite of the cracks, of the humidity, of the dust and of the cobwebs, its integrity is preserved.

In order not to go too far I will enumerate some names of movements and people. Romanticism, modernism, stone and sky, post-modernism, the vanguard, Nadaists (who broke off from everything about 1960), and there are some who say the rosary every day, while contemplating how through the opening breach a multitude comes forth leaving them no room. As an example, Jaime Jaramillo: X504, with his crossed eyes, one on the ground and one on the sky. (This one of course does not say the rosary.) Names, interminable lists. Guillermo Valencia, Rafael Pombo, José Asunción Silva, Porfirio Barbajacob, Epifanio, Mejía, Gregorio Gutiérrez González, Rafael Maya, Luis Carlos López, Eduardo Carranza, Carlos Castro Saavedra y León de Greiff, nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature, whose wonderful world of imagination and language frustrated the design. Poetry, as the devil, takes several forms. The popular form, natural sister of the tango. Despised by the critics, but coddled by the people. It is that in which knives flash in fights. It appears in bohemian nights, when the tables angrily protest from the weight of so many bottles, and the alcohol has broken the thermometer of sanity. When passions rise, rivals for a woman, the one who left the shack for the city, three minutes of silence in memory of . . . take a deep breath in order to more forcefully attack the liquor and beat oneself without pity against the night. The literary strength of this type of poetry is null, useless, like a counterfeit bill, but with all of these negatives notes, it has a reality that cannot be ignored or overlooked, within our literature. Because it's there (latent). Many have gone that way, and as the verse says, they have left "strips of skin, dead things." It has been a generation called "nameless," the title has a mathematical exactness. In Colombia and in Latin America (surely everywhere), there are literary

“mafias.” They are in everything. Privileged ones who have a “free pass” to Culture. They are represented in anthologies, in publications, in jobs created to help artists. They reproduce and cling like ivy. Today they are contest judges and they acquire friends; tomorrow they will be the contestants and their friends the jury and, thus, an eternal cycle forever and ever.

Finally, ourselves. Half “errant Jews.” Searching here and there. An enormous silent multitude. In a country of 23,000,000 poets.

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ATSUMI IKUKO / JAPAN

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## Modern Japanese Women Poets: After the Meiji Restoration

There is no doubt about the prominence of women poets in contemporary Japanese literature. This, however, should not be allowed to obscure the fact that there were two periods in the long history of Japanese literature in which women poets really bloomed: one was in the *Manyō-shū* period (A Collected Million Leaves) in the seventh and eighth centuries, and the other was in the Heian court period from the ninth to the twelfth century.

In *Manyō-shū*, the first national anthology including the works of emperors and beggars alike, Princess Nukada freely recited her longing for the Emperor Omi:

While with longing  
I waited for you  
Swaying the bamboo blinds of my house  
The autumn wind blew.

And Lady Kasa wrote on a majestic scale:

I love and fear him  
Steadily as the surf  
Roars on the coast at Ise.<sup>1</sup>

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Author's note: All unnoted translations are mine. All the names in this article are written with the family name first according to the Oriental custom.

<sup>1</sup> These *waka* were taken from Kenneth Rexroth's *One Hundred Poems from the Japanese*, New Directions, New York, 1964.