

Returning to Form: New Poetry from Argentina

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In Arturo Carrera's 2001 anthology of contemporary poetry, *Monstruos*, the influential Argentine writer Alejandro Rubio stated that, "Lyric poetry is dead. Who has the time, with cable TV and FM radio, to listen to a love-sick youth playing the lute?"

For several years now in Latin American poetry, traditional models have been out of favour. In Gustavo Guerrero's 600-plus-page anthology, *Cuerpo plural* (2010), only a tiny percentage of poems conform to standard lyric forms, favouring instead conversational language and objectivist poetry. Something similar might be said of González and Araya's collection, *ZurDos* (2005), in which even prose poems outnumber traditional verse forms, and the majority of the material included is in free verse.

In the case of Argentina, this tendency towards free and non-traditional verse also dominates, as the selection in *Mario Campaña's 2010 anthology* testifies. A survey of *Diario de Poesía*, a reference point for the resurgence of poetry in Argentina in the late 1980s and 1990s, suggests that free verse and innovative or imported forms, like the haiku, prevailed. The same might be said for a magazine of the *neobarroco* or neo-baroque, *Plebella*. In their "critical anthology" of Argentine poetry of the 1990s and 2000s, Violeta Kesselman *et al* talk of the emergence of a "materialist tendency." If the *neobarroco* was interested in the sensual pleasures of language, the writers included in *La tendencia materialista* focus on the colloquial and the quotidian. Fernanda Laguna, Juan Desiderio and others use the language and characters of everyday conversation, often humorous and expletive-laden, and form follows as if naturally from speech.

Whence does this resistance to traditional forms stem? There is no obvious answer, but it is a tendency with long roots in Argentina, going back at least to the social poets of the 1950s. It also covers the experimental and existential poets of the 1960s, including Alejandra Pizarnik and Olga Orozco. This is not to say that no writers employed metre and rhyme. Much of Julio Cortázar's verse is in traditional forms. He, though, is almost universally read as a prose writer. Jorge Luis Borges wrote much of his middle and later work following established prosodic models. But as *Néstor Perlongher argued in 1992*, many poets would go on to write not just post-Borges, but also "anti-Borges." Perhaps one might look back to Leopoldo Lugones (1874-1938), with his rigid structures and apparent exhaustion of the eccentricities of rhyme in Spanish, as the moment at which Argentine poetry would begin to shun traditional form.

But a shift can be observed in recent poetry from Argentina, namely a return to metrically careful, first-person poetic forms, even with additional levels of difficulty (for example, hiding sonnets within free verse). Within these constraints, the thematic ambition on display can be breathtaking. Ezequiel Zaidenweg (b. 1981) belongs to an emerging group of poets, including Alejandro Crotto (b. 1978) and Walter Cassara (b. 1971), who make traditional aesthetics central to their work.

From its title onwards, Zaidenweg's second collection, *La lírica está muerta (Lyric Poetry Is Dead)*, 2011), offers an *ars poetica* for a new poetry: formally rigorous, steeped in literary and classical references, and with strong first-person voices. *The Song of Songs*, Ovid, San Juan de la Cruz, the Romantics, and the *modernista* Rubén Darío are all cited. References to C.P. Kavafis and T.S. Eliot appear. Yet, at the same time, the collection deals with a host of Argentine cultural and political events and figures, including the Rosas dictatorship, the death of Che Guevara, the theft of Evita Perón's corpse, and corruption under President Menem in the 1990s.

In each case, the famous name is replaced by “*La lírica*,” the protagonist of a series of poems that play with Rubio’s obituary for the form, in wilfully perverse fashion. Zaidenwerg stages a dialogue between the constraints of traditional prosody and the panoply of themes available to the contemporary poet. *La lírica está muerta* takes two elements of the traditional lyric – the first-person voice and the musicality of fixed line lengths and regular rhythms – and marries them to topics more commonly associated with colloquial poetry and free verse.

Zaidenwerg is asking us to rethink the lyric for today’s world. Each of the deaths is recounted by a different speaker. Each is a fragment of a bigger story: the history of Argentina; the romantic tradition; the classical epic, to name just three.

Rubio continued his manifesto with a less frequently quoted phrase, saying that he was seeking “a reading that highlights [...] the new, even if the ‘new’ might at times just be a perverse look at tradition. The corpse of the lyric, in effect, can fertilise a wasteland.” In using this corpse for a series of resuscitations, in a collection that is multi-vocal, rich in literary intertexts, fragmentary yet formally precise, and highly politically aware, Zaidenwerg creates something else: the lyric turns into a contemporary and partial epic. It functions as a space to rethink the relationship between literature and politics in Argentina. In the introduction to his own anthology, *Penúltimos* (2014), Zaidenwerg reflected that if *Kirchnerismo* offered one thing, it was the hope of changing reality through politics: “to banish the idea that history was dead.”

If the lyric places the poet closer to the gods, and the epic tells of characters near to them, then Zaidenwerg proposes a form that uses all the resources of the lyric, as inherited from *modernismo* and beyond, to translate the heroic into the quotidian and vice versa. As we know from Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and others, the lyric does no political work in itself; at most it can function as analogy. But it is a form of refusal, an act of non-complicity, one that seeks autonomy aware that this is in all likelihood impossible. Zaidenwerg’s poems constantly refuse demands for a specific ethics. Against the “[absolute reification](#)” that Adorno described, the poet works alone. In an [interview with Saldaña París](#), Zaidenwerg stated: “The solitude of the poet is total. There is no stimulus, poets have to work in other areas [...]. [T]he situation of being in permanent crisis is productive for writing in some ways.” By developing a form that is at once anachronistic and utopian, he creates a fleeting democratic and resistant space.

Ben Bollig teaches Spanish at Oxford. This is a revised and edited section from his forthcoming book, *Politics and Public Space in Contemporary Argentine Poetry. The Lyric and the State*. His translation of Cristian Aliaga’s [The Foreign Passion](#) will be published by Influx this spring.