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Rethinking Tenderness in the Early Poetry of Juan Gelman

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The poetry of Juan Gelman (Buenos Aires, 1930–Mexico City, 2014) is eminently suited to an edition of the *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* that simultaneously celebrates a century of Hispanist research in the United Kingdom and attempts to survey the current state of the field. Gelman was a poet, journalist and political activist, with an *oeuvre* that emerges from the socially engaged verse of the 1950s, and, by way of engagements with Anglophone poetry, pseudonymous translations, the poetics of exile and various forms of mysticism, culminated in the award of the Cervantes Prize in 2007. A focus on his early work, and in particular the presence of *ternura* or tenderness therein, draws on recent and influential work in affect theory while also speaking to signal figures and moments in the history of British Hispanic Studies.

Tenderness—*ternura*, the breaking down of interpersonal boundaries, the mutual overcoming of the perceived or felt limits of the self, and a shared awareness of human vulnerability—is ever-present in critical responses to the poetry of Juan Gelman. These, however, have tended to focus on his later work.¹ Rather less has been said about tenderness in his early poetry—that is to say, before his experiments with (apocryphal) translation in *Traducciones III. Los poemas de Sidney West* (1969)—and in what might be regarded, at least initially, as his more traditional lyric

1 See, for example, Hugo Achugar, 'La poesía de Juan Gelman o la ternura desatada', *Hispanamérica*, 14:41 (1985), 95–102; and Joan Lindgren, 'Editor's Preface', in Juan Gelman, *Unthinkable Tenderness. Selected Poems*, ed. & trans. Joan Lindgren, with a foreword by Eduardo Galeano (Berkeley/London: Univ. of California Press, 1997), xiii–xix.

verse. The aim here is to look at the early poems of Gelman, less favoured by critics, from the 1950s to the late 1960s and the collections from *Violín y otras cuestiones* (1956) through to *Cólera buey* (the complete edition, published in Buenos Aires, 1971). Of interest is the presence of *ternura* in the poems published under Gelman's own name and before the tragic losses—political and personal—with which that name and his poetry have become so closely linked. More specifically, I am interested in poems *signed* by Gelman, in which the lyric voice is yet to be overtaken by the emergence of Gelman's other names—his (pseudo-)translated poets or his heteronyms. The word *ternura* is a frequent presence in the early poems, yet appears rather less in the pseudonymous/heteronymous poetry of the late 1960s and 1970s, before reappearing with greater frequency in the poetry of exile and loss from the 1980s and beyond.

Why this focus on Gelman's early poetry? First, *ternura* is almost *too* present, *too* obvious in the later work, especially after the disappearance of his relatives and murder of many of his *compañeros* at the hands of the civic-military dictatorship and its paramilitary death squads. Second, *ternura* offers a way into the politics of the early Gelman—before his membership of the Peronist armed-Left group Montoneros in the 1970s. Although he was a member of the Argentine Communist Party in his youth and early adulthood, Gelman was politically heterodox; indeed, a feature of his life and work that makes them particularly fascinating is his tendency *not* to fit into the groups of which he was member. One must recall, for example, his departure from and critique of the Montoneros in 1979 and also his subsequent refusal to disavow, unlike many former comrades-in-arms, his politics and militancy of this period. Gelman's early years are marked by explorations of the role of literary creativity in political activism, and the linking of local concerns to internationalism, particularly anti-colonial struggles around the world. Gelman wrote of Algeria, Bolivia, Cuba and Vietnam and dedicated poems to the Chinese people and army. He also penned a long poem to Ernesto 'Che' Guevara after his compatriot's death in Bolivia in 1967. Third, critics have not fully unpicked the key role *ternura* plays in early works, which themselves look ahead to the politics and aesthetics of the later poetry. The argument of this article is that tenderness is what links these not necessarily compatible positions. In Gelman's early poems, tenderness is already a basis for political action, and the role of poetry therein. By tracing the movement from tenderness in the home against a backdrop of social deprivation and working-class struggle, through Gelman's sympathy for Maoism, to a Guevarist politics of revolutionary love, we see how *ternura* connects a shifting series of positions in Gelman's early work, thus giving context for his post-Montonero, post-*dictadura* tenderness and the very particular poetics of memory and activism that marks his best-known, critically favoured, later collections.

With regard to the conceptualization of feelings, which is at stake in a political reading of the poetics of tenderness, it is beyond the scope of this article to give a full assessment of what has been called 'the Affective (or

Affect) Turn' in Literary Studies.² Patrick Colm Hogan laments the absence of literary texts in the study of emotions, while Alex Houen assesses the compatibility between affect and 'the linguistic expressions of innovative poetry', eventually concluding that there must be an approach 'that is open to considering literary affect in terms of fusions of content and form'.³ As Eugenie Brinkema puts it, there has been a 'sin of generality' in much work on affect theory, evading 'the slow, hard tussle of reading texts closely' or '[d]ivorcing affect from reading'. This article proposes the opposite approach with regard to Gelman's poetry, insisting on what Brinkema has called 'the formal dimension of affect'.⁴

As in the wider humanities, although with its particular nuances, an 'affective turn' has also occurred within Latin-American Studies.⁵ Where my analysis differs from the turn to affect as documented so widely and criticized by, for example, Todd Cronan, is in its focus on a named and identifiable sensation or emotion: tenderness, that strange feeling that incorporates the mental and the physical, emotional love and bodily vulnerability.⁶ As Joan Corominas reminds us, *ternura* in Spanish has its Latin roots in *tēner* (soft, delicate, tender), and has links to meat and animals—*ternero* (calf, veal);⁷ *ternilla* (cartilage)—as well as human emotions. Many academic papers on tenderness/*ternura* refer to bodily

2 This article forms part of a wider investigation of *ternura* or tenderness in Latin-American culture, particularly poetry. For a useful summary of some of the issues at play, see Geoffrey Kantaris & Rory O'Bryen, 'Introduction: The Fragile Contemporaneity of the Popular', in *Latin American Popular Culture: Politics, Media, Affect*, ed. Geoffrey Kantaris & Rory O'Bryen (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), 1–42. For a dissection of affect theory from a radical left perspective, see Todd Cronan, 'Radically Private and Pretty Uncoded. Review of *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg & Gregory J. Seigworth', *Radical Philosophy*, 172 (2012), 51–53. On the politics of emotion, see Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U. P., 2014), especially Chapter 6 on the politics of love. Many of these works draw on Raymond Williams' now famous notion of 'structures of feeling'. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1977), 128–35.

3 Patrick Colm Hogan, *What Literature Teaches Us about Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2011), 5; Alex Houen, *Affect and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2020), 2 & 5.

4 Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC.: Duke U. P., 2014), xiv & xiii.

5 On affect with regard to gender and politics, and in particular 'the critical role of emotions in building political life' within Latin America, see Cecilia Macón, Mariela Solana & Nayla Luz Vacarezza, 'Introduction: Feeling Our Way through Latin America', in *Affect, Gender and Sexuality in Latin America*, ed. Cecilia Macón, Mariela Solana & Nayla Luz Vacarezza (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 1–18 (p. 2).

6 Cronan, 'Radically Private and Pretty Uncoded'.

7 Joan Corominas, *Breve diccionario etimológico de la lengua castellana* (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1973), 567.

flesh, including that of animals to be served as food.⁸ More broadly, in the theories of emotions and affects that have been so prominent in literary and cultural studies in recent years, tenderness is something of an odd fit, seeming to conform to one strand of affect theory's ideas about non-personal, non-subject-based feelings (which often cannot be defined precisely, or at all, in language) but at the same time being an emotion—in English and in Spanish, as *ternura*—with a name and a person to which it can be ascribed. It is a term simultaneously associated with the individual and that which exceeds her; with the self and its *extension* (with which *tenderness* shares etymological roots).

Few theorists have broached in depth the subject of tenderness in literature.⁹ Jacques Derrida, in his book on touch in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, writes of the 'disarming peace [...] in the tender caress, where the caress would renounce possession'; tenderness, he states, relates to questions of ownership and personal limits; in tender acts, one says, 'take what I do not possess, nor you!': 'This will not be properly our own; of this, we shall never be the masters and owners'.¹⁰ The term *tendre* implies both 'oriented activities' and 'passive vulnerability'.¹¹ Elsewhere, Eric Langley explores 'the vocabulary of tenderness (from Lt. *tendere*, to stretch)' in order to examine Shakespeare's depiction of an 'extended-subject', 'one whose willingness to extend tenderly out towards the other becomes the condition of their generous, piteous, compassionate nature'.¹² Langley's study unpacks the many literary meanings of tenderness:

[...] to be tender towards the other is not only to attend to their needs, to tender oneself to them, or to extend towards them, but also to tenderly flinch (Lt. *tenerum*, delicate), to retract into oneself, refusing the pathetic contacts previously understood as so integral to undividable individual [*sic*] identity.¹³

8 See, for example, K. L. Huffman *et al.*, 'Effect of Beef Tenderness on Consumer Satisfaction with Steaks Consumed in the Home and Restaurant', *Journal of Animal Science*, 74:1 (1996), 91–97; or B. Ablikim *et al.*, 'Effects of Breed, Muscle Type, and Frozen Storage on Physico-chemical Characteristics of Lamb Meat and Its Relationship with Tenderness', *CyTA: Journal of Food*, 14:1 (2016), 109–16.

9 In Hogan, *What Literature Teaches Us about Emotion*, for example, the word appears four times; a mention in *The Tempest* is, frustratingly, not explored (269); in Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, 'tender' refers only to cooked meat; the term does appear some seven times in Houen, *Affect and Literature*, but does not warrant a chapter.

10 Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 2005 [1st French ed. 1992]), 93.

11 Derrida, *On Touching*, trans. Irizarry, 94.

12 Eric Langley, *Shakespeare's Contagious Sympathies: Ill Communications* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2018), 17.

13 Langley, *Shakespeare's Contagious Sympathies*, 17.

Tenderness is foregrounded in the title of one of the best-known anthologies in English of Gelman's work, Joan Lindgren's *Unthinkable Tenderness*; likewise in Hugo Achugar's short essay from 1985, with examples drawn from across the poet's career.¹⁴ Against a general backdrop in poetry that Achugar sees as—*pace* Hugo Friedrich's study of the modern lyric—characterized by irony, sentimentality and the everyday,¹⁵ Gelman's work takes a personal, emotional approach to politics, in particular with the inspiration of, in Gelman's own words, 'dolores ajenos'.¹⁶ In Gelman's collection *Gotán* (1962) we encounter 'afecto exhibido' and, importantly for this essay, 'ternura celebrada sin hipocresías'.¹⁷ Achugar concludes that Gelman's 'lenguaje propone una poesía de la ternura desatada'.¹⁸ This tenderness has connections to the tango, and to the Cuban Revolution. It is, for Achugar, 'un modo de comprender a los otros, de mirar a los otros, de ser en y por los otros'.¹⁹ This essay will explore in further detail—detail not included in Achugar's piece—the ramifications of these assertions.

Space does not permit a complete review of the presence of tenderness in critical readings of Juan Gelman, so readers must permit a synthetic treatment by way of introduction. To date, studies on the poet's work have overlooked tenderness mostly or entirely, even those which are best informed and most useful otherwise.²⁰ Some focus mostly or exclusively on the later works, either addressing heteronymous poetry or the post-dictatorship works, as in the case of Kate Jenckes' insightful study of 'witnessing' in Gelman's work.²¹ Some have been somewhat dismissive of tenderness, seeing it as betokening perceived political naivety or as

14 See Lindgren, 'Editor's Preface', in Gelman, *Unthinkable Tenderness*, ed. Lindgren; Achugar, 'La poesía de Juan Gelman o la ternura desatada'.

15 Achugar, 'La poesía de Juan Gelman o la ternura desatada', 96.

16 Achugar, 'La poesía de Juan Gelman o la ternura desatada', 98 & 99; Juan Gelman, 'Arte poética', in *Poesía reunida* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 2012), 61. Further references to Gelman's poems are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the main text.

17 Achugar, 'La poesía de Juan Gelman o la ternura desatada', 99.

18 Achugar, 'La poesía de Juan Gelman o la ternura desatada', 102.

19 Achugar, 'La poesía de Juan Gelman o la ternura desatada', 102.

20 Jorge Boccanera, 'Encuentros con Juan Gelman', in Juan Gelman, *Los animales del azar*, ed. Jorge Boccanera (Lago Puelo: Espacio Hudson, 2019), 17–21. See also Jorge Boccanera, *Confiar en el misterio: viaje por la poesía de Juan Gelman* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1994).

21 On the heteronymous poetry, see Alicia Genovese, 'Poesía y posición del yo: Juan L. Ortiz, Juan Gelman, Olga Orozco', *Hispanamérica*, 30:89 (2001), 15–28; Sarli E. Mercado, *Cartografías del destierro: en torno a la poesía de Juan Gelman y Luisa Futoransky* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, 2008); and María del Carmen Sillato, *Juan Gelman. Las estrategias de la otredad: heteronimia, intertextualidad, traducción* (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo, 1996). See also Kate Jenckes, *Witnessing beyond the Human: Addressing the Alterity of the Other in Post-Coup Chile and Argentina* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017).

reinforcing certain binary stereotypes around gender.²² Following and developing these and other insights, an assessment of the early poems based on close reading and contextualization will enable a tracing of *ternura* in its various forms and in particular its political connections and consequences in Gelman's writing, thus going beyond early studies which have either overlooked or under-read these works. Tenderness operates at the limits between persons, between the internal and the external; in this reading, it plays a central role in Gelman's perception of poetry as a *political* task in the 1950s and 1960s.

Tenderness in the Early Poems

As Hernán Fontanet notes, many of Gelman's early poems were, at least in part, rooted in family life, after his marriage to Berta Shubaroff in 1955.²³ In Gelman's first collection, *Violín y otras cuestiones* (1956) we see an instance of tenderness in the short poem, 'Niño'. The poem, from its opening line (of eight), links tenderness to childhood, language and poetry: 'tus cuatro letras de ternura | viven en mí' (*Poesía reunida*, 14), within a form marked by almost childish simplicity, a kind of lullaby reminiscent of some of Gabriela Mistral's earlier poetry.²⁴ It is marked by a regular rhyme scheme (a final stressed 'i' on every even-numbered line), anaphora of its title (the word 'niño' repeating at the start of lines) and something like a refrain (the repeated phrase 'viven en mí'). The 'cuatro letras', we assume, are those of the word 'niño'. We could conclude from this that tenderness here constitutes language, and so the poem does too. This relationship, between tenderness and language, is foundational in Gelman's early poetry, as we shall see. Implicitly, the poem invokes tango, with an 'alegre violín' (an instrument foregrounded in the collection from its very title); the previous poem in the collection, 'Crepúsculo distinto' (*Poesía reunida*, 13–14) also includes mentions of violins and children. Tenderness is found at the heart of family life and a particular view of language—intimately personal, tied up with popular culture, unafraid of the sentimental and the stuff of poetry as personal, emotional expression.

In 'Porque existen las plazas', the same combination of poetry, family life and emotion appears, here with reference to 'la nena' (the lyric voice's

22 Geneviève Fabry, *Las formas del vacío: la escritura del duelo en la poesía de Juan Gelman* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2008).

23 Hernán Fontanet, *The Reasoning behind the Act of Striking a Spent Match* (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 2019), 23–24.

24 For the avoidance of confusion, in in-line quotations, the vertical bar indicates line breaks in Gelman's poetry, given his use of the backslash (/) as a punctuation mark within the line, especially in later works. Two vertical bars mark a stanza-break in poems not indented here.

daughter). Here we see an early appearance of one of the most distinctive features of Gelman's poetic diction—the use of diminutives, in this case the (Argentine) form 'dientitos' (*Poesía reunida*, 16).²⁵ Diminutives are present throughout the collection, often associated with family life and its attendant emotions. While autobiographical experience is found in the collection, at the same time, it is simplistic to read these poems purely as Gelman's lyric self-expression. 'Oración de un desocupado' features an address to 'Padre' (i.e., God), asking for Him to descend to Earth; the speaker has 'olvidado | las oraciones que me enseñó la abuela | pobrecita' (*Poesía reunida*, 18). The poem is more performative, theatrical even, than autobiographical. The grandmother in question prays 'dulcemente', a term that alternates, with its variants (e.g., *dulzura*), with 'ternura' with some frequency in early Gelman to express gentle feelings. Yet the frustrated, unemployed, hungry speaker turns, by the end of the poem, into 'Un animal furioso | que mastica la piedra de la calle' (*Poesía reunida*, 19). Gelman's poems from this period often tell emotionally engaging stories, mini-dramas, even; political repression and social injustice are felt, rather than argued or articulated.

In 'Mujer encinta' the figure of the child appears again, this time as 'hijo mío' (*Poesía reunida*, 19). Fabry examines this poem, reaching rather binary conclusions about *ternura* and the depiction of gender in Gelman's work, in short that *ternura* is linked to maternity and the domestic sphere.²⁶ The lyric voice here is quite explicitly that of a woman, the 'mujer encinta' of the title, in whom the child grows. What might initially seem an exercise in sentimentalism has a cutting edge, though, with the entry of 'guerra y muerte' into the poem, both threats to the mother's future child (*Poesía reunida*, 20)—politics, to coin a phrase, is what hurts. The mother's response is striking: '¡Me vestiré de puños hasta el alma! | ¡Armaré las espadas de mi leche!' (*Poesía reunida*, 20)—a mix of maternal love and violent resistance.²⁷ The mother's violence or willingness to fight is also all in the service of emotion, '¡Para que tu caricia venga a darse!' (*Poesía reunida*, 20), in a striking combination of maternity, tenderness, politics and violence. Love emerges through struggle (hence the subjunctive), rather than existing *a priori*, and is expressed, indeed comes into existence,

25 Argentinians I have consulted accept 'dientecitos'; according to the Real Academia Española, the latter is more common in Spain. See @RAEinforma, '#RAEconsultas Como dim.[inutivo] de "diente" son válidas DIENTECITO (preferida en España) y DIENTITO (preferida en zonas de Amér.[ica] y Canarias)', Tweet, 12 March 2013, 9:09am, <<https://twitter.com/raeinforma/status/311403441958301696?lang=en>> (accessed 4 July 2023). I am grateful to Alejandra Crosta for sharing this tweet.

26 Fabry, *Las formas del vacío*, 110–14.

27 Similar sentiments can be found, for example, in recent poems from Marina Yuszczuk in her collection, dealing in part with parturition and child-rearing, *Madre soltera* (Buenos Aires: Mansalva, 2014).

in a tender touch ('caricia'). This linkage can also be found in a later poem in the series, 'Hoy que estoy tan alegre': 'busco en l mis ojazos de pibe entre cuadernos, l violetas tiernas y una madre y qué l me pasa, estoy alegre' (*Poesía reunida*, 29). Strong emotions, intense parent-child relationships found in the imagined address of one to the other and tenderness all conjoin in the poem.

From the same collection, 'Tal vez bajo del pelo' continues this exploration of tenderness, set between the grind of everyday life and the possibilities of escape through dream and fantasy. These are hinted at in the mix of the concrete and abstract in the poem's opening stanza: 'ternura', in a list that combines the realistic and the strange, is found under hair, eyelids, Saturdays, walls and suits; and in the neologisms, 'aymeduelen', 'hastaluegos' (*Poesía reunida*, 25).²⁸ As people let their 'ternura' out, it changes their world-view: 'desteje su cansancio l suelta un pájaro y sueña hasta mañana' (*Poesía reunida*, 26). Birds and dreams are recurring, emotionally charged, elements in Gelman's early work. The penultimate poem of the collection, 'Un hombre', goes further: *ternura* becomes something like an ontological condition of humanity: '¡Cómo decir un hombre claramente! l Algo que fue creciendo bajo el aire, l una ternura, sí, con apellido' (*Poesía reunida*, 33): we are tenderness, and a name ('un apellido'; 'un nombre', which sounds almost identical to 'un hombre'), and nothing more. In the second stanza, 'un hombre' is defined as 'tierra conmovida', again linking the physical and the emotional, and making *ternura* an ontological condition of our existence: we are constituted, like these poems, by tenderness.

In 'Un viejo asunto', which sketches a short history of social injustice in Argentina, again the diminutive appears linked to the workers' struggles and the abuses committed by bosses: 'el amo alcorta o anchorena', the names of two patrician families in Argentina, 'aquí empezó a dolerles el huesito' (*Poesía reunida*, 22). With its reference to the 'Ley de residencia' of 1902, and the discrimination against foreign-born political activists, particularly Italian anarchists, the poem places unionists and syndicalists in a struggle 'por parte del dolor, de la pelea' (*Poesía reunida*, 22). Physical struggle and pain are again represented as central to political action. In other early poems, Gelman looks beyond Argentina; *ternura* figures within his politics of international solidarity—what one might call his proto-tricontinentalism.²⁹ 'Niños: Corea 1952' links childhood—both that of the speaker and the children of Korea—through political struggle and

28 Neologisms feature almost from the start Gelman's writing and in later work are even more present; the influence of *avant-garde* poets such as Oliverio Girondo or César Vallejo can be detected, as well as a link to later writers such as Susana Thénon.

29 For a synoptic treatment of tricontinentalism, see Thea Pitman, 'Tricontinentalism in Cyberspace? Or, Latin American's Contribution to Network Society', in *Resistance and*

tenderness: ‘Esto que tengo de niño fundamental | se me rebela’ (*Poesía reunida*, 23). As the speaker thinks of his ‘hermanitos’ he remembers a notebook ‘donde dice | mamá con letras tiernas’, and a ‘dulce vaca’ appears. Normal childhood activities—learning to count, looking at a blackboard, drinking milk—are inflected by war, hunger and the other effects of the struggle against ‘los yanquis de odio puro’ (*Poesía reunida*, 24). The poem calls for ‘PAZ [sic]’, ‘Paz para tu cuaderno’ (*Poesía reunida*, 24), and for the young Korean to be able to experience the same childhood that the speaker did, to write ‘mamá con letras tiernas | bajo una dulce vaca de tres patas’ (*Poesía reunida*, 24). In these early poems, we see tenderness as constituting the practice of poetry and political resistance, in particular solidarity with national liberation struggles across the globe.

El juego en que andamos (1958) includes poems written towards the end of the 1950s. Again, the connection between childhood and tenderness is clear from the start. In the poem ‘Los niños’, children are ‘Puros, azules, limpios’ (*Poesía reunida*, 37) (one hears echoes of Gabriela Mistral’s lullabies in her collection *Ternura*, a title which gives an impression of stereotypical depiction of maternity, behind which one encounters a cruelty absent from Gelman’s poem).³⁰ The inventive metaphors so characteristic of Gelman’s later poetry appear (‘el pájaro en su sitio’, expressing childish enthusiasm) alongside the foregrounding of emotions (‘el asombro en su lugar’) and bodily expressions or manifestations thereof (‘sonrisa’) (*Poesía reunida*, 37). *Ternura* takes on similarly metaphorical qualities, ‘found’, as above, in unlikely places: ‘Bajo sus delantales la ternura hace ruido’ (*Poesía reunida*, 37). The ‘delantal’—the school apron or white coat—sets the poem in the context of public education, of youth and the shared experience of the State. The next poem is ‘Huelga en la construcción’ (*Poesía reunida*, 37) in which industrial action, physicality (‘cojones’), childhood (‘el niño’) and now typical diminutives (‘pedacitos de pan’) all appear together; tenderness forms part of a particular working-class outlook that Gelman’s poems depict as central to political resistance in contemporary Argentina.

The following poem, ‘Testamento de Pepe Díaz, soldado’ (*Poesía reunida*, 38–39), again links emotions, political struggle and international solidarity. Set in Nicaragua in 1934, in the context of the guerrilla struggle against, initially, US occupation, and later the imposition of the Juan Bautista Sacasa government, the poem outlines the doomed final days of Augusto Sandino’s forces; in 1934 Sandino was assassinated, and two years later General Anastasio Somoza was to seize power in a *coup d’état*. In the fog of war, family and love stand out in memory; the soldier speaks of ‘la dulce

Emancipation: Cultural and Poetic Practices, ed. Arturo Casas & Ben Bollig (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 379–95.

30 Gabriela Mistral, *Ternura* (1924) (Buenos Aires: Espasa Calpe, 1959).

cama l de hacer un hijo a golpes de amor' (*Poesía reunida*, 39). Posterity —'nuestros hijos'—is the judge of the soldiers' actions, of their decision to 'morir como varones' in the pursuit of 'libertad, paz, mantel, café, violetas' (again) for Nicaragua (*Poesía reunida*, 39). This is an early example of the role that feelings play in Gelman's conception of poetry as a part of the international struggle.

Alongside tenderness, *dulzura* makes multiple appearances in these early collections. The sequence of poems that shares the title of the book ('El juego en que andamos') includes 'Ausencia de amor', in which the speaker invites the absent loved one: 'Me comerás entonces dulcemente'; he refers to himself, with a neologism, as 'pobrecristo [*sic*] a tu recuerdo' (*Poesía reunida*, 40). This cannibalistic streak continues with poems that blur the lines between lovers: 'Hábítame, penétrame' prays the speaker in 'Oración'; 'Sea tu sangre una con mi sangre' (*Poesía reunida*, 40), 'Caigas entera en mis entrañas' (*Poesía reunida*, 41). They offer a plea: 'Cólmeme tu dulzura' (*Poesía reunida*, 41)—that the other, the lover, come to constitute the speaker. The supplication continues: 'Estés en mí como la madera en el palito' (*Poesía reunida*, 41). If the verb *estar* suggests physical location, the concept of wood in the little stick suggests a more fundamental, essential presence: that the other constitutes the speaker, just as, above, we saw tenderness constituting poetic language. Love is a kind of bodily vulnerability, a breaking down of the self; something similar occurs earlier, in the poem 'Un hombre' (see above), in which *ternura* comes to define the person. This relies on a constant unmaking of the self, but one made by, and in, love. Anahid Nersessian writes, with reference to John Keats, of 'love's complementary processes of absorption and dissolution', and of sexual love 'as the emancipation of the self in the body of another'; readers may recall some of the more intense love poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik, for example.³¹ In Gelman, this extends beyond the human into nature and even concepts. In 'Presencia del otoño' the speaker presents the autumn as the third party in a benevolent love triangle, conditioning the relationship and carrying out the act of love in his place. The final line sums this up as 'Un lento asesinato de ternura', the speaker sacrificing self to tenderness (*Poesía reunida*, 42). Emily McLaughlin, building on the work on Jean-Luc Nancy, and his idea of the 'inoperative community', in which there is no being that precedes relation—no 'pre-existing generality', in which existence is ungrounded, and we have nothing in common but *are* in common—writes of 'the line of division or sharing where some are exposed to others'.³² We see this in the treatment of love and tenderness in

31 Anahid Nersessian, *Keats's Odes: A Lover's Discourse* (London/Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2021), 109.

32 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor et al., foreword by Christopher Fynsk (Minneapolis/Oxford: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1991),

Gelman's early work, with a directly political edge, connecting local militancy with international solidarity.

In the collection *Velorio del solo* (1961), written and published at the turn of the 1960s, *ternura* continues to occupy a central position. The poem 'Arte poética' begins with the oft-cited line, 'Entre tantos oficios ejerzo este que no es mío' (*Poesía reunida*, 61). This gives a sense of Gelman's view of poetry and the poet at a key moment in his career—his 'versos' and the position they occupy in society and the poet's own life. Poetry consists of 'amor', 'dolor', 'lluvia', 'catástrofe' and calls on the poet 'cuando se abren los brazos de la ternura o del alma' (*Poesía reunida*, 61). 'Ternura' is personified, made the syntactic equal of the soul, in a line which mixes and confuses the physical, the emotional and the spiritual. Poetry entails—indeed stems from—an obligation to the suffering of others; even in one of Gelman's more lyrical poems, there is this demand to transcend the perceived self.

'Invierno', from the same collection, is a love poem inscribed against the backdrop of political struggle against 'la injusticia', and again is marked by the prevalence of intense feelings. The city is personified, 'gime como loca', as is love, with its diminutives: 'el amor cuenta bajito' (*Poesía reunida*, 62). Gelman bends parts of speech: 'los pájaros que han muerto *contra* el frío' (*Poesía reunida*, 62; my emphasis)—and the poem, with its familiar figures such as the birds mentioned above, concludes with the erotic being inscribed alongside revolution, with its setbacks and potential advances: 'las cárceles, los besos, la soledad, los días | que faltan para la revolución' (*Poesía reunida*, 63). The line break marks a move from the everyday, incidental or conceptual, to the underlying revolutionary purpose. Love and politics work together in Gelman's work from this period, with a particular reliance on tenderness to challenge the limits of the self.

In 'Juguetes sobre la mesa', Gelman mixes reflections on childhood and family life with revolutionary politics, with a strong hint at the violent backdrop of political activism in Argentina during the early 1960s. The 'oso', the 'pato', the 'perro'—presumably childhood toys—jostle for space with 'las balas del adiós' (*Poesía reunida*, 65), simultaneously literal and metaphorical bullets. The animals conspire, 'sin ruido contra el temor, la oscuridad' (*Poesía reunida*, 65). In part a late-night, homely scene, the poem hints at the militant's situation, and the risks that Gelman and his comrades were running in the context of the dictatorships and political repression, alternating with brief moments of something closer to liberal democracy, after the coup of 1955. Again, there are references to politics,

75; Emily McLaughlin, 'At the Limits of the Lyric: Towards a Community of the Human and the Nonhuman?'; paper delivered at the conference 'Rethinking Lyric Communities', Christ Church Research Centre, Oxford, 23 June 2022.

childhood and tenderness, as well as increasingly unusual or marked language and phrasing, characteristic of Gelman's poetry from this period. Despite the brevity of the poem, and despite its idiosyncratic phrasing, it clearly depicts a scene of family life within the political struggle. This personal, emotional edge to political commitment, the setting of militancy within a hope for future generations, comes to mark much of Gelman's later poetry; we might also detect it in the political poetry of writers from earlier and near contemporary generations, from Pablo Neruda through to Roque Dalton, Gioconda Belli and beyond.

Gotán (1962) features a series of poems that depict individual workers—'A la pintura', 'María la sirvienta' and 'Pedro el albañil'—mixing distinctive portraits of their personalities with stories of tragedy or loss: more of Gelman's dramas in miniature, as mentioned above. 'A la pintura', set in Paris, like a number of poems in the collection, sketches the routine of Dénise, a worker in the Louvre Museum's 'buffet' (*Poesía reunida*, 78). Like many favourably drawn characters in Gelman, she is described with surrealist-tinged (and once again avian) metaphors: 'suelta especie de pájaros', 'a veces se le volaban pájaros oscuros' (*Poesía reunida*, 78). Again, tenderness appears, indeed is personified: 'Cuando abrazaba al hombre miraba hacia la puerta | como si la ternura fuese a entrar de repente' (*Poesía reunida*, 78). Love and sexuality are expressions of the freedom sought by poetry and political action.

'María La Sirvienta' tells the story of a young domestic servant who hides her dead baby in a suitcase. Gelman decries the hypocrisy of the urban middle classes who condemn her. Again, tenderness is present lexically and emotionally: we see little birds ('pajaritos' [*Poesía reunida*, 78]) and read the term 'tierno'. The latter describes the dead baby—also called 'puro'—who silently speaks uncomfortable truths about inequality to the 'señoras y señores' who judge her case. The dead baby is at once a physical object, whose smell initially attracts the attention of the authorities, and a symbol, of 'todos los niños muertos que cargaban en las valijas del alma' (*Poesía reunida*, 78). The literal and metaphorical stench makes uncomfortable the lives of the bourgeoisie. Any sentimentalism is tempered by the shocking central image and the force of the poem's invective. Again, the revolutionary drive of the poem works through the politics of emotion.

Cólera buey

The collection *Cólera buey* brings together a series of books from the 1960s and a long poem dedicated to Che Guevara. Politically it marks a break in Gelman's career, away from the Communist Party and towards emerging forms of militancy in Argentina. Biographically, Gelman noted that it had been written 'en un momento muy particular de mi vida' (*Poesía reunida*, 151). With two sections dedicated to apocryphal translations, it also

includes some of Gelman's last work before his shift increasingly towards heteronymous writing. In *Cólera buey* we come to the end of Gelman's first period as a more traditional lyrical poet. It includes multiple references to *ternura*, while accentuating the tendencies towards linguistic virtuosity (after the fashion of the Peruvian poet César Vallejo) and eye-catching or impossible comparisons in the surrealist tradition. Tenderness again has a central role in the collection's treatment of political commitment, as in the direct reference to 'mis asambleas de ternura' (in 'Es grave grave grave' [*Poesía reunida*, 166]). The tricontinentalism of earlier poems reappears in 'Épocas', dedicated to Patrice Lumumba, president of the then Republic of the Congo, assassinated at the age of thirty-five, in 1961. The poem is marked by strong emotions ('odio', 'amor'), diminutives ('pequeñitos') and a depiction of the murdered political leader as bordering on the divine—the poems asks that he 'ora por nosotros' (*Poesía reunida*, 168). The use of religious language to describe politics and political figures is another feature of Gelman's poetry during this period, particularly when dealing with important revolutionary figures, as we shall see below.

'Por la palabra me conocerás' is a poem dense with Gelman's linguistic wordplay, warping parts of speech, creating neologisms and breaking conventions of syntax. It appears between two more directly political poems: 'Muerte de Felipe Vallese', dealing with the murder of a metal worker, unionist and member of the Juventud Peronista in 1962; and 'Argelia', which makes reference to the ongoing struggle for independence from France in the North African country. This presence of local politics and international solidarity,³³ alongside what Gelman calls in 'Por la palabra ...', 'penas enfoguedidos o políticas' (*Poesía reunida*, 180) lends important context to the reappearance of 'los rostros los oleajes la ternura' in the middle poem. They are not separated by punctuation; thus tenderness and responsibility to the other, at home or abroad, become the basis for political action. At the same time, 'Argelia' makes reference to 'las frases del odio de la ternura' and 'monstruos de la ternura' (*Poesía reunida*, 181). The poem patterns variants on the term 'duro/a', as adjective and verb (i.e., hard and to last, persist), in places rhyming with 'ternura'. With its references to 'testículos' and 'huesos podridos', as well as 'húmedas mujeres | cortadas en pedazos', this is a poem in which the body and its sensations figure prominently, alongside emotions ('miedos', 'cólera', 'esperanza' [*Poesía reunida*, 181]). Arthur Rimbaud makes an appearance, in the last word of the poem—a link between France (and its literature) and colonial ventures in Africa, a warning against contemporary poetry ignorant of its social or material context—and perhaps a dig at

33 Felipe Vallese is often commonly referred to as 'el primer desaparecido'.

contemporary symbolist-inspired writers, such as Octavio Paz, to give one example.

In a poem from the 1963 sequence ‘Perros célebres vientos’, entitled ‘La acción lírica’, we read a critique of politically disengaged poetry, that in the midst of ‘desastres íntimas destrucciones y asia áfrica américa latina caras caídos [*sic*] en la lucha cuba’, dedicates itself to ‘el gran lirismo’ and thus, for the speaker, ‘degüella esperanzas’ (*Poesía reunida*, 196)—precisely the negative emotions that Gelman writes against in these poems. ‘Ternura’ provides the connecting thread between the feelings of political and poetic commitment, and a wider context of international solidarity, in particular with national liberation struggles in colonized countries. Rimbaud appears again in ‘Explicação’ [*sic*], while the poem that separates them, ‘Celda 4’, speaks of ‘eugenio el tierno’, who ‘ardía y con su cucharita espantaba bestias’ (*Poesía reunida*, 197). Like many of his fellow communists, Gelman knew the inside of a jail, having been imprisoned under anti-subversion laws in the early 1960s.

We see such politics of emotion throughout the collection. The section ‘Otros mayos’, dated 1963, consists of loosely structured sonnets, marked by a certain emotional sweetness or even romanticism. ‘Otro mayo’ talks of those people who ‘se han puesto dulces’, and asks, ‘dónde consiguen la ternura’ (*Poesía reunida*, 195). ‘Cosas’, the final poem of the series, is once again rather whimsical, reflecting on the actions of ‘los atacantes del amor’, who are able to use ‘ternura’ to ‘shoot’: ‘contra todos también confiando | que alguna vez alguien alguno | empuñe su ternura | empiece a fusilar’ (*Poesía reunida*, 195). Whimsy aside, *ternura* operates as a weapon, as surrealism meets armed insurrection. Again, we see Gelman’s provocative approach to poetry, his inventive attitude to language, and an operative connection between linguistically innovative verse, political commitment and tenderness. Gelman’s poetry becomes increasingly ambitious in its approach to language and phrasing; at the same time, political violence is ever more present; *ternura*, though, is a constant, often uniting the various emotional, linguistic and political facets of his writing.

Gelman’s politics is rooted in the Argentine context, but we cannot ignore its international dimension, which he shares with other politically engaged writers of the Left operating during this period (Neruda and Julio Cortázar, for example). Gelman was a member of the ‘Pan duro’ group of poets in the 1950s, and was closely linked to their publication *La Rosa Blindada* (1964–1966), which brought together a collective of left-wing activist writers working with the support of the more established poet and political fellow traveller, Raúl González Tuñón. Although Gelman was not from a strictly working-class background, and had attended university, he was a unionist, with the Sindicato de Prensa. At the same time, he was also a long-standing member of the Partido Comunista (PC), which had been critical of the ‘Pan duro’ group for its support for the Cuban

Revolution, the Vietcong, and its alleged *foquismo*, at odds with the PC's longer-term strategy.³⁴ Some of those involved in *La Rosa Blindada* were criticized or expelled from the PC for being 'heterodox', while Gelman was singled out because of his work for the Chinese state news agency, Xinhua, in Buenos Aires; Maoism was against the Soviet doctrine, espoused by the local PC, of 'coexistencia pacífica'.³⁵ Hernán Fontanet records that Gelman quit the PC in 1964, as a result of a row that began over his admiration for China.³⁶

China appears in Gelman's poetry already in 'Fotografías', from the collection *Velorio del solo* (1961):

Mirando en viejas fotos mi rostro en que no estás
la mejilla en que estás como dolor, olvido,
pienso en qué harán en China ahora
con tanta tristeza como se me caía (*Poesía reunida*, 69)

Again the poem mentions 'dulzura', but with a rather more specific geographical (and historical) reference: 'Hangchow'. The city, today known in English as Hangzhou, south of Shanghai, was ruled by the Kuomintang, then occupied by Japanese soldiers, before being retaken by the Kuomintang, who in turn fell to Mao's revolutionary forces in 1949. For Gelman, the city is characterized by its 'lotos' or lotus flowers—for which it is still renowned—and as a site where the speaker finds both justice and love. 'Justicia' is mentioned directly, and the poem ends on an address to the beloved other: 'te amo' (*Poesía reunida*, 69). Like his tricontinentalist poems, cited above, this piece sees internationalism, political revolution and strong emotion working together, taking us out of nostalgia and loss and into political action.

Gelman's sinophilia continues in the poem that closes the collection, 'Desfile popular del 11º aniversario de la R.P. China'. The October march is 'un río de ternura', 'un río de victoria' and those walking do so with 'pies dulces' (*Poesía reunida*, 72). Peking (Beijing) becomes a place of possibility, of working-class pride ('obreros mezclados al otoño' [*Poesía reunida*, 71]), or freedom ('libertad' [*Poesía reunida*, 72]), 'la suavidad del alma', with flags, happy faces and the Revolution. Gelman idealizes the situation in China; these were the years of the 'Great Leap Forward' (1958–1962), the

34 José Luis Mangieri, 'Una vez más, a resistir', in *La Rosa Blindada: una pasión de los '60*, ed. Néstor Kohan, prólogo de José Luis Mangiueri (Buenos Aires: La Rosa Blindada, 1999), 11–18 (pp. 11–13).

35 Néstor Kohan, 'La Rosa Blindada: una pasión de los '60. Estudio introductorio', in *La Rosa Blindada: una pasión de los '60*, ed. Kohan, 17–57 (pp. 35 & 37). See also Fontanet, *The Reasoning behind the Act of Striking a Spent Match*, 33; and Ciro Bustos, *El Che quiere verte: la historia jamás contada del Che en Bolivia* (Buenos Aires: Javier Vergara, 2011), 227.

36 Fontanet, *The Reasoning behind the Act of Striking a Spent Match*, 33.

resulting Great Famine (1959–1961) and of tensions between Mao and his inner circle, which would have terrible consequences for very many ordinary Chinese people. But for Gelman, in the early 1960s, China and its revolution are again symbols of justice, love and the role of poetry and the poet, in uniting international solidarity, revolutionary politics and emotion.

Alongside China, also important for the ‘Pan duro’ group—and for Gelman—were the figure and ideas of Che Guevara, and in particular his focus on the role of culture within the revolution, which *La Rosa Blindada*, and Gelman, espoused.³⁷ The collection *Gotán* (1962) includes a sequence entitled ‘Cuba sí’. There are poems to and about Fidel Castro, his fellow revolutionary Camilo Cienfuegos, and the poet and essayist Roberto Fernández Retamar, an influential ideologue of Cuban revolutionary culture (it is notable that Che Guevara is not present at this stage). The titular poem qualifies Cuba and its revolution with tenderness; the speaker contrasts his feelings for Cuba with the dry and defeated land from which he speaks—‘como regado con derrotas, llores oscuros’ (*Poesía reunida*, 86)—and offers, ‘no más que mi ternura’, a lone voice from the Argentine wilderness. Yet Cuba is already itself ‘tierna’, while the speaker links this tenderness to ‘mis nacimientos’—to childhood, or even childishness. Cuba is a source of ‘sed’ for the speaker, and also of education, through love: ‘lo que aprendí de mí, queriéndote’ (*Poesía reunida*, 86). These words look ahead to some of Che’s most memorable speeches and writings, as outlined below. For Gelman, they demonstrate again the role of political feeling in constituting an activist self.³⁸

The collection ends with a death, and a lament, in the poem ‘Final’: ‘Ha muerto un hombre y están juntando su sangre en cucharitas’ (*Poesía reunida*, 91). The man is named as ‘Juan’—Gelman’s own name, but also a common, almost generic name for an everyman. Death is a form of self-shattering, but marked again by tenderness: ‘De nada te valieron tus pedazos | mojados en ternura’ (*Poesía reunida*, 91). Diminutives appear (‘agujerito’, ‘hermanito’) as well as Gelman’s manipulation of morphology (‘ponido’ for ‘puesto’) and colloquialisms (e.g., ‘triste triste’). Death, though, comes with the possibility of partial rebirth, through emotions, or at least that Juan’s hands may reappear: ‘brotan sus manos | empujados por su rabia inmortal’ (*Poesía reunida*, 91); the hands are both a synecdoche for Juan and a symbol of his status as a worker, and it is emotion that brings

37 Kohan, ‘*La Rosa Blindada*: una pasión de los ’60’, 22 & 42.

38 Sergio Ramírez’s political novel *Sombras nada más* (México D.F.: Debosillo, 2015 [1st ed. 2002]) gives another example of the importance of love in (Nicaraguan, Sandinista) revolutionary discourse. As one of the multiple narrators states: ‘comprendí lo que sus compañeros de lucha no habían sido capaces de explicarme, que si dormía en el suelo era por amor, que si se había ido de la casa de mis [*sic*] padres [...] era por amor’ (92). Love and tenderness feature prominently in the novel.

them back to life. The linking of emotion and politics, with near religious undertones, looks ahead to Gelman's long poem dedicated to Che, analysed below.

In a similar vein to 'Final', 'Sefiní', a sequence in *Cólera buey* from the mid 1960s, includes poems that make reference to Cuban- and Guevara-inspired insurgencies in rural northern Argentina of the period; 'Masacre de guerrilleros' seems to describe, in typical Gelman terms, the sad end of one such attempt at revolution, the 'hijos que no vivirán cayendo', killed 'en los montes de Salta de Jujuy' (*Poesía reunida*, 211), at the hands of 'gendarmes'. Yet, the poem takes hope from these deaths, seen as sacrifices:

nadie
se ha terminado de morir, nada
dejará de alentar
hasta el día del triunfo final
por fin hay muertos por la patria (*Poesía reunida*, 211)

The previous poem in the sequence features an appearance by 'Comandante Segundo', the name by which Che Guevara's second-in-command in Argentina, Jorge Masetti, was known to his cadres.³⁹ The speaker reflects on his sense of guilt at being indoors under a roof while the Comandante and his men are out in the open and 'acosados a morir' (*Poesía reunida*, 210); the poem however reclaims these deaths for the nation-to-come.

Cólera buey includes a long composition dedicated to 'Che' (dated October 1967); 'Pensamientos' reflects on the death of the Argentinian revolutionary. The poem reveals its own context with a mention of the magazine and cultural institute Casa de las Américas, which is preparing an issue in homage to Guevara; also named is Roberto Fernández Retamar, who appeared earlier in Gelman's poems on Cuba. In Gelman's poem stanzas open with the phrase 'soy de un país' (*Poesía reunida*, 241–49) before depicting moments of political repression and hypocrisy, as well as Che's own commitment and eventual death. The speaker at points denies that what we are reading is a poem, that it is the poem requested by Retamar *et al.*, or that one can or should write a poem to/about Guevara. Politics in Argentina is contrasted unfavourably with revolutionary struggles elsewhere, not least through the poem's repetition and implication of a lack of political change or progress. Again, China appears, in an address to readers: '¿ustedes miraron a China sin entender que l mirar a China en realidad l era mirar nuestro país?' (*Poesía reunida*, 244); Vietnam, Bolivia and of course Argentina also feature.

39 See Bustos, *El Che quiere verte*, 157–206; and María Seoane, *Todo o nada: la historia secreta y la historia pública del jefe guerrillero Mario Roberto Santucho* (Buenos Aires: Debolsillo, 2009), 336.

This is a deeply emotional poem, expressing personal love for Guevara, as well as feelings of ‘rencor’ (*Poesía reunida*, 242), ‘tristeza’ (*Poesía reunida*, 246) and ‘melancolía’ (*Poesía reunida*, 246). There are also thoughts for Che’s orphaned children (‘padre Guevara ¿qué será de tus hijos?’ [*Poesía reunida*, 249])—one of a number of references, including to God and to miracles, that lend a near-divine air to Gelman’s Guevara, similar to that afforded to Lumumba, above. Despite everything, this is a poem of hope: ‘sé pocas cosas’, the poem states, but, ‘sé | que no debo llorar Ernesto’ (*Poesía reunida*, 248). Like the deaths of the revolutionaries in Salta and Jujuy, Che’s death is a source of revolutionary sorrow but also expectation. Just as in life Guevara was resistant to enemy insults (*Poesía reunida*, 242), in death he is capable of a ‘milagro’ (*Poesía reunida*, 248), Gelman again adopting religious language that we might not expect in this political context. Meanwhile, the speaker ‘sigue mirando el mundo | sabe | algún día la belleza vendrá’ (*Poesía reunida*, 249), in a line which for many readers may well carry echoes of Pablo Neruda’s political poetry of the 1930s and 1940s. The task is left to posterity: ‘¿quién habrá de juntarte otra vez?’ (*Poesía reunida*, 249).⁴⁰ The promise of uniting the shattered—though never whole—revolution motivates the ongoing struggle.

Guevara is a recurring figure in Gelman’s poetry and writing more generally. A look at Che’s writings may go some way to explaining this presence. In his essay *El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba*, Guevara reflected on the role of sentiment, of feelings, in revolutionary action. He was trying to solve a particular quandary—the relationship between individual and collective action in the revolutionary context, and with it the role of culture in the creation of the ‘hombre nuevo’ of the Cuban revolution.⁴¹ Guevara criticized ‘realismo social’ in literature and art more generally, calling socialism itself an ‘extraño y apasionante drama’.⁴² Guevara foregrounds the importance of youth in the revolution—unlike his generation and older, ‘arcilla maleable’ for the new political reality—as the basis for the ‘hombre nuevo’. Alongside a willingness towards self-sacrifice (not fearing death) and a closely connected desire for freedom,⁴³ Guevara rather unexpectedly—and famously—speaks of the role of love as an inspiration for revolutionary politics: ‘amor a los pueblos’, and with it ‘cariño’.⁴⁴ *Ternura* is

40 For example, ‘ahora pasa un árbol cuyo fruto es el Che’ (*Poesía reunida*, 556)—poem thirteen in the sequence ‘Los poemas de José Galván’, included in the collection *Hacia el sur* (1981–1982).

41 Ernesto Che Guevara, *El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba* (1965) (Barcelona: Linkgua, 2017), 14; in fact a letter from 1965 sent to Carlos Quijano, editor of the Uruguayan weekly *Marcha*, initially published as an article and later a (short) stand-alone book.

42 Guevara, *El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba*, 20 & 12.

43 Guevara, *El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba*, 25.

44 Guevara, *El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba*, 23.

not mentioned, but the attitude towards the people bears distinct comparison to the *ternura* that we find in Gelman's poetry, from various stages in his literary career.⁴⁵ Che signs off with that most Argentine of phrases, 'Ave María Purísima'—like the religious references in Gelman, rather unexpected in a text by a (sort of) Marxist.⁴⁶

The death of Che Guevara marked a turning point for the history of the Latin-American Left, and was a defining moment for Gelman's development as a writer and political actor. In his *El último lector*, Ricardo Piglia reflects on the literary and political significance of Guevara for the Latin-American Left. For Piglia, Guevara matters because, paradoxically, what he transmits is his example, 'que es intransferible'.⁴⁷ Guevara offers, in his life and especially his writings, not the construction of a revolutionary subject, but the construction of the self as an example.⁴⁸ This has links to literary questions—especially Guevara's self-perception as a frustrated or even failed poet. In contrast to more orthodox Marxism, or the position of the CP, Piglia sees Guevara as 'una suerte de modelo mundial del revolucionario en estado puro',⁴⁹ with a definition of the political that is novel and highly personal.⁵⁰ Politics is intimately linked to literature in Che's life and writings, but is also a kind of flight or escape from it. Piglia calls this Che's 'Dahlmann syndrome', with reference to Jorge Luis Borges' short story 'El sur': like the protagonist, Guevara is drawn to escape the pages of his readings and enter into action, like Dahlmann accepting the invitation to fight, and the knife he hardly knows how to hold, at the end of the earlier tale.⁵¹ Guevara overlooks objective conditions (a tenet of orthodox contemporary Marxism) instead imposing 'decisión pura como condición de la política'; skipping over working-class culture to go straight to war (and Piglia notes that Guevara initially joined the *Granma* expedition as a doctor, not a soldier).⁵² He becomes thus an 'ejemplo de una nueva forma de vida'.⁵³ His death was the basis for Gelman's bitter critique of the PC (see above) of which he, Gelman, had been a member, and a

45 See Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, especially Chapter 6, on the often-problematic politics of love, in particular in relation to national identity: 'I would challenge any assumption that love can provide the foundation for political action, or is a sign of good politics. But what would political vision mean if we did not love those visions [...] Perhaps love might come to matter as a way of describing the very affect of solidarity with others in the work that is done to create a different world' (141).

46 Guevara, *El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba*, 25.

47 Ricardo Piglia, *El último lector* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2005), 109.

48 Piglia, *El último lector*, 110.

49 Piglia, *El último lector*, 124.

50 Piglia, *El último lector*, 125.

51 Piglia, *El último lector*, 127.

52 Piglia, *El último lector*, 129–30.

53 Piglia, *El último lector*, 136.

reconsideration of political action and militancy in contemporary Latin America.

Geneviève Fabry makes explicit the link between Guevara, Gelman and tenderness:

Como en el caso del Che, una entrañable ternura y un respeto sincero por las personas involucradas en la lucha armada, corren parejas a una puesta en tela de juicio (de intensidad variable según los textos) del discurso de cuño castroguevarista, que la dicción de Gelman aísla, interroga hasta poner al desnudo su falta de adecuación a la complejidad de lo real.⁵⁴

She writes that in ‘esta mezcla de ternura, de autoironía y de confianza testaruda en el poder humilde e inquebrantable de la poesía, hay que buscar el tono propio que Gelman ha ido forjando para enfocar la Historia y sus figuras heroicas cuando se han derrumbado las posibilidades concretas de un triunfo de la Revolución’.⁵⁵ While it is true that, later in his career, Gelman would move beyond Guevarism, in these early poems we can see its key role in his formation as a writer and political actor, one of the links between emotion, internationalism and local political critique and action. Importantly, this picks up features already very much present in Gelman’s work, also joined, constituted even, by *ternura*.

This reading of Gelman’s work sits in the wider context of the tradition of UK and Irish Hispanism that the *BSS* was so instrumental in developing, pre- and post-Parry Report (1965). One might mention C. M. Bowra’s studies of Latin-American poetry (Pablo Neruda in particular); the work of Robert Pring-Mill on poetry and political engagement; still influential studies by pioneers in the field such as Jean Franco, or Mike González and David Treece and their *The Gathering of Voices*;⁵⁶ and of course the work of the *Bulletin*’s founding editor, E. Allison Peers, and his own interest in poetry and mysticism (the latter a vital presence in Gelman’s later writing). Tenderness appears throughout Gelman’s poetry, but its role in the early verse required a more detailed study than had been previously undertaken, not least in the light of recent work in the history of the emotions—*affect*, feeling, sentiment and so forth. This article, drawing on the proud history of Hispanic studies that the *BSS* represents, in particular on Latin-American poetry, offers such a study: tenderness is linked throughout Gelman’s early work to political repression and revolution—be it in China, Nicaragua, Cuba or closer to home. It also

54 Fabry, *Las formas del vacío*, 65.

55 Fabry, *Las formas del vacío*, 74.

56 Mike Gonzalez & David Treece, *The Gathering of Voices: The Twentieth-Century Poetry of Latin America* (London: Verso, 1992).

creates a space for the religious vocabulary that Gelman mobilizes around revolutionary figures and the struggles itself, a tendency that will continue into his later poems, both those addressing post-dictatorial mourning and—on occasion in the same piece—various traditions of mysticism. Tenderness is the basis for Gelman's poetry: its distinctive attitude to self and other, to the role of the writer, and to the contribution of poetry to political struggles worldwide.*

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