

## LEXIKÓN

SERGIO RAIMONDI

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In his short story, “The Aleph”, Jorge Luis Borges mocks what we might call encyclopedic poetry, real and fictional. The genre includes Michael Drayton’s *Poly-Olbion*, a vast topographical survey of seveneenth-century England and Wales. The butt of Borges’s joke is the character Carlos Argentino Daneri who, with the aid of the titular aleph - a miniature viewpoint on the entire universe - has dispatched overwrought stanzas dedicated to rivers, farms, Turkish baths and a gasometer.

Encyclopedic poems are not rare in Latin America. Gabriela Mistral penned a *Poema de Chile* (1967; published posthumously), dedicated to the landscape and people of her native land. Pablo Neruda went a step further with *Canto General* (1950), a digressive yet self-centred “general song” of Latin America. In Argentina, Leopoldo Lugones produced a series of *Secular Odes* (1910) to celebrate the anniversary of independence, including hundreds and hundreds of lines praising the flocks and fields of his native land. He also left unfinished an etymological dictionary of Spanish that ran to over 600 pages, without completing the letter A.

Sergio Raimondi’s *Lexikón* lacks none of the ambition of the volumes above but is both more coherent and kinder on its readers. This alphabetical collection of 275 poems, spread over 16,248 lines, is immediately impressive for its sheer size. The poems look daunting: solid blocks of neatly aligned text that recall medieval ballads or the modern calligram. More important, though, is its range. The poems take on biology, astrophysics, literature, finance, agriculture and - this being an Argentine author - football, and often treat or allude to what might seem unlikely subjects for poetry, such as industrial processes, global trade, or labour legislation. Some are based on box-files full of information. Yet alongside the research and the cold-eyed analysis, there is room for humour, pathos, and empathy with the ordinary people caught up in world-historical happenings. Raimondi’s formal rigour, his use of ordered, measured lines, draws on his training as a classicist to address some of today’s most urgent political issues: environmental emergency, globalization, injustice and inequality. Readers may recall the work of another classicist, Hannah Sullivan, or the prosodic precision of Nick Laird.

Raimondi is widely considered Argentina’s most important and influential contemporary poet and his previous collection, 2001’s *Poesía Civil* (Civil Poetry), marked a watershed in the development of his country’s poetry. He was born in Bahía Blanca, a port city south of Buenos Aires, and one of his first books was a funny, often filthy translation into contemporary River Plate Spanish of Catullus. He led the city’s Ingeniero White Museum, an influential oral and popular history centre, surrounded by industrial plant and agro-export depots. In the early 2010s he was Director of Culture for the city, before returning to university lecturing and to his work on *Lexikón*. These experiences - finding poetry in unlikely places, reading popular culture in the context of geopolitics - inform all his writing.

A poem by Raimondi can turn the reader’s world on its head. “Foucault, Michel” examines a contradiction: while one might welcome the French philosopher’s critique of the disciplinary function of the education system, the picture is very different on the world’s periphery, where there may not be any system to critique. Raimondi focuses on small, telling details - the run-down district school, the right-handed desk for the left-handed child, the poorly paid teacher - to question high theory in the real world. “Peak Oil” reflects on how the pages of

classical economic texts will fade because of parallel chemical processes to those that will clog the poisoned sea with murk and filth.

Poems also pick out moments of hope, from publishing projects in Salvador Allende’s Chile to indigenous education schemes in the Andes. One of the most moving poems, “Granadero Baigorria”, is dedicated to Lionel Messi, and his distinctive goal celebration, “index fingers pointing to a height no camera can reach”, in memory of the grandmother who accompanied Messi to practice when he was a boy. Diego Maradona appears, too, “in mid-trick or celebrating on the run”, in the poem “Metis”), as a modern-day Neapolitan demi-god in the city that adores him.

I know from my own experience of translating Raimondi that these circumlocutions can be hard to follow; however, the effort is repaid. The final poem, “Z - Zm + C”, addresses the Fukushima disaster, and with it scientific hubris. The “fractures” in “this orb beneath the moon”, caused by our failure to take nature’s unpredictability properly into account, are among the many threats Raimondi’s collection refuses to ignore.

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