



Writing IN THE AIR

*Heterogeneity and the
Persistence of Oral Tradition
in Andean Literatures*

ANTONIO CORNEJO POLAR

Translated by **LYNDA J. JENTSCH** With a Foreword by **JEAN FRANCO**

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LYNDA J. JENTSCH
Samford University
Birmingham, Alabama

FOREWORD

Antonio Cornejo Polar's book *Writing in the Air: Heterogeneity and the Persistence of Oral Tradition in Andean Literatures* initiates the reader into an area of literary criticism that moves us beyond the familiar grounding of the Western canon into areas at once more challenging and more subtly subversive.

The title, taken from a poem by César Vallejo written during the Spanish Civil War, is in Cornejo Polar's words a "call to orality" that "builds imaginary bridges in order to reconvert the written word to voice." The traumatic origin of the contest between oral and written cultures was "the sudden appearance of writing and the book as enigmatic instruments of conquest with no immediate ties to language or communication. The foundational event that signaled the entry of the book into the New World was recorded by chroniclers and occurred soon after the victory of the Spaniards in Peru when the priest Father Valverde approached the Inca ruler, Atahualpa, and offered him a breviary that the Inca threw angrily to the ground. It was not only writing that baffled the Inca," argues Cornejo Polar, "but also the mechanics of the book (opening it and turning its pages), major indications of the absolute miscommunication that underpins the story of a 'dialogue' as enduring as it is traumatic."

Throughout the colonial period and beyond, the confrontation was enacted and revised in the written histories of conquest, in the ritual dances and reenactments, and in the many dramatic works in Quechua or Spanish on the theme of Atahualpa's death. It was not only the subjugation of the indigenous that was reiterated but also the confrontation of oral culture with the written word, and

“of an old system of verbal messages with the new communicative order based on writing.” The event was both an interaction and a conflict that extends into the present, producing political misunderstanding and stigmatizing Quechua-speaking peoples as “alien to modernity.” Cornejo Polar’s study takes the reader through all the variations of this interplay between speech and written word, thus proposing a counterhistory that subtly questions the traditional categories of literary criticism and underscores the contrapuntal rhythm of Peruvian culture. One of those high points is the marvelous evocations of Quechua song in José María Arguedas’s great novel *Deep Rivers*, whose protagonist, as Cornejo Polar argues, experiences “discontinuous times and plural cultures.” It is most particularly in his account of Arguedas’s novel that Cornejo Polar eloquently states his own convictions and belief in the possibility of nonhegemonic action “achieved through the construction of an intrinsically multiple and de-centered subject, discourse and representation.” The book ends with a lyrical exposition of Vallejo’s poem “‘Pedro Rojas,’ inspired by a comrade who wrote the message just before his execution.” The poem begins, “He took to writing in the air with his best finger: ‘Lib long, komrads! Pedro Rojas.’” Cornejo Polar’s reading of the poem is offered in place of a traditional conclusion and attests to his own utopian desire, and he reads it as a vigorous assertion of humanity as the words battle the negative force of extinction. *Writing in the Air* is not just a book of academic criticism but a thoroughly committed account of a culture that was inaugurated by conquest but was never conquered.

JEAN FRANCO

INTRODUCTION

He took to writing in the air with his best finger.

— CÉSAR VALLEJO

Now it's better but also worse.

There are worlds up above and down below.

— JOSÉ MARÍA ARGUEDAS

Memory is best served by time.

— MONTEJO/BARNET

We are contemporaries of different histories.

— ENRIQUE LIHN

It seems we've already walked across more ground
than we're covering now.

— JUAN RULFO

Whoever wants to see things deeply has
to accept contradictions.

— ANTÔNIO CÂNDIDO

In recent decades, both literary production and critical thought in Latin America have dealt sequentially with three major themes clearly related to more global and compromising sociohistorical situations and conflicts:¹

1. Change, by means of the revolution that was “around the corner” in that splendid and beguiling decade of the 1960s, now the source of much nostalgia and sporadic cynicism, when imagination and plazas seemed to be ours, and ours the power, the

voice, and the capacity to invent love and solidarity anew. It was the time of the “new narrative,” not only conversational poetry, experimental theater, but also street chants and the graffiti that painted all our cities in hope. The field of criticism seized the moment to accelerate and haphazardly modernize its theoretical-methodological arsenal.

2. Identity, national or Latin American, where we defensively sought refuge once again, as in the bosom of a primordial obsession, in order to explain the late arrival and fading of so many dreams, but above all to reaffirm (unfortunately more by way of metaphysics than history) the peculiarity of our being and consciousness and the fraternal unity of the peoples south of the Rio Grande. In those days, we valued both magical realism and *testimonio*, which, in their contrast, demonstrated the consistency and keenness of our America. At the same time critics hotly debated the relevance of constructing a theory sufficiently specific to the nature of Latin American literature.² Back then, the almost obligatory referential framework was the most hard-line (and less-than-perspicacious) version of dependency theory.
3. Recovery of heterogeneity, which defines our society and culture by isolating regions and strata and emphasizing the vast differences that separate and sharply contrast their various social-cultural worlds, and which, in their many historical rhythms, coexist and overlap even within national boundaries. It was — and is — the time to revalue ethnic and other marginal literatures and refine critical categories that attempt to explain this tangled corpus: “transcultural literature” (Ángel Rama), “other literature” (Edmundo Bendezú), “diglossic literature” (Enrique Ballón), “alternative literature” (Martin Lienhard), “heterogeneous literature” (as I prefer to call it), options that in part could be subsumed under the macroconcepts of “hybrid culture” (Néstor García Canclini) or “clashing society” (René Zavaleta), as well as the argument of “changing notions of literature” (Carlos Rincón) and the radical questioning, at least for certain periods, of the very concept of “literature” (Walter Mignolo, Theodor Adorno, Lienhard).³

It is interesting to reflect on how and why the search for identity, usually associated with images of solid and coherent spaces that stitched together vast social networks of ownership and legitimacy, gave way to the restless lament or the agitated celebration of our diverse, multiple, and conflictive configuration. In my opinion it was a process as unforeseeable as it was in-

evitable, especially because the more deeply we examined our identity, the more evident the disparities and contradictions in the images and the torrential, crashing realities that we identify as Latin America became. Surely that process did not originate within our borders. Thus, in the first decades of [the twentieth century], Latin American historiography performed the complex operation of “nationalizing” the pre-Hispanic literary tradition, as one sees in nineteenth-century colonial literature.⁴ But the positivist underpinning of that historical thought, which interprets these processes as mono-linear, perfective, and self-canceling, cloistered that tradition in the depths of an archeological age and assumed that those literatures had come to an end with the conquest.⁵ Not until long after that, the unusual union of Amerindian philology and anthropology highlighted the importance of native colonial and modern literatures and the need to include them as part of the entire historic process of Latin American literature, not just its first stage.⁶ Clearly the corpus of our literature was distinctive in this way and could offer much to other marginal literatures. In addition we attempted a profound reformulation of its traditional canon.

This trajectory serves to underscore the fact that the present debate over the far-flung proliferation of our conflictive, contradictory literature is the consequence of the progressive and organic exercise of Latin American critical thought and its fluid relationship with its own literature. Several of us have pointed out that although the great epistemological project of the seventies failed (since in fact, a long-awaited “Latin American literary theory” does not exist), it was under its impetus that criticism and historiography found more productive—and more audacious—ways of dealing with a literature that is especially elusive because of its multi- and transcultural makeup.

It should be noted, too, that there came a time when Latin Americans’ intense reflection on the plurality of their literature intersected with the categories belonging to poststructuralist criticism and postmodern thought in general. Decidedly “post” themes, such as the critique of the subject, the skeptical repositioning of the order and meaning of representation, the celebration of the dense heterogeneity of discourse, or the radical disbelief in the value and legitimacy of canons, to mention only the obvious ones, inevitably crossed with the Latin American agenda. This hybridization is curious (and should be treated in detail at a later date), first because of the frequency with which metropolitan postmoderns collect provocative references and citations from Latin American authors, from Jorge Luis Borges

to Gabriel García Márquez, and eventually Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Manuel Puig; second because the question of borders, peripheries, and the fringe continues to generate much excitement; and third because, paradoxically, “the postmodern condition,” as expressed by the most advanced form of capitalism, would seem to have no better historical model than the crippled and deformed subcapitalism of the Third World. The irony here is obviously inviting, but I shall opt for (1) recognizing that poststructuralism has given us more refined and illuminating critical tools, but also (2) emphasizing that there is nothing so unseemly as trying to force — at times even ourselves — into “post” parameters by estheticizing a world of atrocious injustice and poverty. And, as a final caveat, the attempt to read all our literature under the paradoxical model of a criticism that does not believe in canons is just as unfortunate.⁷

Be that as it may, I would like to return to the theme of the destabilizing hybridity of Latin American literature. Initially critics tried to explain this through macrocomprehensive alternatives. Thus, for example, they attempted to delimit literary systems as “cultured,” “indigenous,” “popular,”⁸ or otherwise, while underscoring internal stratification. Here critics tried to render an image of our literature as a boiling pot of blurred systems. This was a difficult task, above all because of an obvious lack of information and the deficit of theoretical-methodological tools appropriate for those subjects: the treatment of oral literature is a case in point. This is why it was preferable to probe multiform diversity within the first category: the “enlightened” system. In these matters one should remember that Alejandro Losada attempted a sort of regionalization that would clarify the differences among the literatures from the Andes, the River Plate, and the Caribbean. He also proposed examining the parallel functioning of highly differentiated subsystems.⁹ At almost the same time Ángel Rama proposed distinguishing the literatures produced in large, urban centers open to transnationalizing modernity from those originating in provincial cities still imbued with rural customs and values and clearly less attentive to the demands of modernity. This exposition would lead him, on one hand, to elaborate the category of the “lettered city” and, on the other, to examine the intersection of modernity and tradition in transcultural literature.¹⁰

Clearly an analytical perspective, which separates out what is distinctive in order not to fall back on modes of globalization that are as abstract as they are false, seeks to encourage the study of a network of relationships

interwoven with diversity. In fact, this is what Rama splendidly achieves with the term *transculturation*, which he takes from Fernando Ortiz's renewed and deepened anthropology. This is what I attempted upon observing the processes of how literatures that I called "heterogeneous," in which two or more social-cultural universes intersect, actually produce new forms of expression from the chronicles to testimonio, with gaucho, indigenist, and black discourses, the northeastern Brazilian novel, magical realism, and conversational poetry in between. This is also what Martin Lienhard proposes under the rubric of "alternative literatures," beneath whose "western" texture lie native forms of consciousness and voice. These three streams feed Carlos Pacheco's illustrative contribution on fiction and the effect of orality on transcultural literature.¹¹

Is it possible, then, to guide the analysis of these literatures in new directions? This is what I intend to do in this book with respect to Andean literatures, but with the assurance that some of the proposals can be applied much more widely. As my subtitle indicates, underlying this is the concept of heterogeneity, a topic on which I have been working since the late 1970s. I would like to reiterate, however, that this category suited me well from the beginning to explain the "production processes" of literatures in which two or more social-cultural universes intersect in conflict (as in the case of Indigenism) by placing emphasis on the diverse and opposing relationships that emerge. I understood later that heterogeneity was infiltrating internal configurations, making them scattered, brittle, unstable, and contradictory within their own limits. At the same time I attempted to historicize what started out as the structural description of a process. This description contained a most fruitful paradox, since it found itself at an intellectual juncture in which the terms *structure* and *process* seemed inevitably contradictory, each pointing to different disciplines. In each case my focus is on the exceptionally complex nature of a literature (understood in its widest sense) that functions on the fringes of dissonant, sometimes incompatible cultural systems such as the one most dramatically produced in the Andean region. Since the horizons that this book attempts to scan are obviously vast and complex, I have pulled out three vital strands: discourse, subject, and representation. Of course these overlap deeply and mutually and are necessarily joined to others found not only in society itself but also in diverse discursive and symbolic settings.

As for discourse I have gone from the created schism and crude, compromising conflict between the voice of the agraphic Andean cultures and

the written word of Western literary institutions to the spoken word transcribed in *testimonio* and the construction of the effect of orality in literary discourse, while analyzing bilingualism and diglossia. Evidently the construction of these discourses, which reveal the existence of opposing worlds and daring points of alliance, contact, and contamination, can be subject to an attempt to globalize that perturbing variety into a closed, powerful, and monologic authorial voice. But this can also serve to fragment diction and generate an exacerbated dialogism that abandons both the Bakhtinian polyphony it creates and the unpredictable and fickle intertextualities. On more than one occasion I have been able to read these texts as linguistic spaces in which discourses of greatly varying origin complement each other, overlap, intersect, or fight, each one searching for a semantic hegemony that is rarely achieved in any definite way. Upon examination it can surely be proven that within these dissimilar discourses there are also varied senses of time. In other words these discourses are historically dense because their internal social rhythms and time are arranged vertically, resonating in and with voices that can be separated from each other by centuries. Pre-Hispanic myth, sermons of colonial evangelization, and the most audacious proposals of modernization can coexist in a single discourse and confer upon it a truly perplexing historic depth. In this way the synchrony of the text, as a semantic experience that theoretically seems forced into a single block of time, can be deceiving. What I am proposing is that one can (and at times should) “historicize” synchrony, as aporetic as this statement may appear. Obviously this does not contradict but rather enriches the traditional option of making the history of literature into a sequence of artistic experiences, although in the case of Latin American literature’s plural configuration such an alternative cannot be imagined as a single, totalizing historic trajectory. Rather it necessitates working with sequences that, in spite of their coetaneity, correspond to diverse historical rhythms.

As far as subject is concerned, experience and the modern concept of subject are clearly and forever linked to Romantic imagination and thought, especially in artistic and literary matters and their respective theoretical-critical correlates. An exalted and even mutable “I” firmly and coherently shows itself able to always return to itself; the “overflow of emotion” never exhausts the well from which it springs, in the same way that, for example, the almost obsessive topic of the journey in time or space never places in doubt the option of returning to the point of origin.¹² Like it or not,

Romanticism became, in these and other matters, the common-sense basis of modernity. This is why Walter Benjamin, who passionately probed the meaning (or meaninglessness) of modernity, dedicated his doctoral dissertation to early Romanticism and its construction of the image of the self-reflective and autonomous subject.¹³ Thus, a discussion of the identity of the subject and the perplexing possibility that it may become a space full of internal contradictions and more relational than self-sufficient leads to nothing other than the Romantic image of the “I.” We should add here that as for the identity of social subjects, Marxist concepts of social class did not displace Romantic formulations such as those concerning the “spirit of the people.” This did not happen because class was imagined as an internally coherent totality. In some ways the category of social class, in the simplified interpretation I have just summarized, has the same function as the Romantic idea of the “I” in the modern debate over social identities. It is not irrelevant that in militant iconography and rituals the proletariat identifies with the simple image of the raised fist. What I have frequently found in my research is precisely the opposite: a complex, scattered, multiple subject.

Here it is imperative to mention that in Latin America the debate over the subject and its identity goes back in time and activates a premodern way of thinking. I am referring to the medieval theological and juridical discussion concerning the condition of the Indian. In this discussion remote and somewhat eccentric scholars, flanked by Aristotle and the Church Fathers, would concede or negate the human condition of the inhabitants of the Indies (animal, savage, man) or at best would scrupulously measure the degree, magnitude, and consistency of our barbarity. I have no irrefutable proof, of course, but I suspect that the obsessive probing of American identity has much to do with that debate, whose context was not Spain, but the colonial state of the Indies, which destroyed the subject and perverted all the relationships (with itself, its fellows, its new masters, the world, the gods, the future, and its dreams) that made it what it now is. In many ways the colonial condition entails precisely this: denying the conquered their identity as subjects, breaking the bonds that used to confer that identity, and imposing others that disrupt and disjoin—with intense severity. Clearly this does not invalidate the powerful emergence of new, future subjects and a respect for the profoundly reshaped remains of former ones.

Nevertheless, even in these cases, the subject that springs from a colonial situation is placed in a web of multiple and cumulatively divergent

crossroads: the present is no longer anchored to memory, becoming a repository more of incurable nostalgia or seething rage than of formative experiences; the other meddles in the desires and dreams of intimacy and converts these into an oscillating and at times ferociously contradictory space; and the world and one's relationship to it change, just as these frequently incompatible relationships are superimposed one on another. I am attempting to sketch out both the clashing nature of a subject, which precisely because of its essence is exceptionally changeable and fluid, and the character of a reality composed of fissures and overlays, gathering several epochs into one and stolidly taking the risk of fragmenting the discourse that both represents and constitutes it. I intend to neither lament nor celebrate what history has done. I want to free myself from the shackles that impose the false imperative of defining once and forevermore what we are: a coherent and uniform identity, complacent and ingenuous (the ideology of *mestizaje* would be a good example), which has more to do with metaphysics than society and history. In other words I want to escape from the Romantic—or, more generically, modern—legacy that demands that we be what we are not: strong, solid, and stable subjects, capable of configuring an “I” that remains unchanged. And then cautiously explore horizons where the subject renounces the magnetic power that resides within, meant to deactivate all dissidence and anomaly, and comes to recognize itself in not one but several faces, even in their most vivid representations.

One could take this argument as a somewhat naïve or even perverse strategy to convert necessity into virtue, an underhanded celebration of the breaking down of a subject subdued and dominated by the colonial regime. Not so. It should be more than evident that the conquest and colonization of America was a meticulously atrocious act, and atrociously realized, but also that, in spite of all our condemnation and imprecation, those events did happen and forever mark our history and our consciousness. Out of that trauma comes a modern America capable of expressing a permanent lament for all that was lost to the self-willed enthusiasm of those who see in past intermixtures the potential to universalize the experience. Thus, for example, the epic “cosmic race” and the modest, but effective, “new Indian.”¹⁴ And all this without taking into account the asinine raptures of the Hispanizers that still stalk our shores and continue relishing the “feats” of the conquistadors. Despite the temptation to psychologize, it seems to me that trauma is trauma until it is no longer assumed as such. In short, can we really speak of a Latin American subject that is either unique

or totalizing? Or should we dare speak of a subject formed by the unstable fissures and intersections of many dissimilar, oscillating, and heterogeneous identities? I wonder why it is so difficult for us to accept the hybridity, the ill assortment, and the heterogeneity of a subject thus configured in our space. Just one answer occurs to me: we introject as our only legitimacy the monolithic, strong, and unchangeable image of the modern subject, based on the Romantic “I,” and we feel guilty, before the world and ourselves, when we discover that we lack a clear and distinct identity.

But I have grown more and more suspicious about the matter of identity being too closely tied to the dynamics of power. It is, after all, an intellectual and political elite, with all its inherent desires and interests, that converts an exclusive, comfortable “we” into a broadly inclusive, ontological “we” that may well disfigure all those voiceless individuals forced into this process. This “we” is, of course, that intensely desired “identity.” I am being ironic. I do not know if the affirmation of a heterogeneous subject implies a pre- or postmodern stance, but in either case it is curious—and uncomfortable—that there has been such untimely interweaving of a centuries-old experience finally rendering the image of a subject that is not afraid of its multivalent plurality. I sense that this is not so much a matter of subscribing (or not) to the “postmodern condition,” which is really none of our concern, as it is the acceptance or rejection of the existence of several modernities in any one of which the subject could take root and find nourishment in various historical and cultural soils without losing its true nature in the process. Again, a heterogeneous subject.

But the subject, whether individual or collective, is not built within and for itself. It is formed, virtually, in relationship with other subjects, but also (and most notably) through and in its relationship to the world. In this sense mimesis is finally freed from its historic constraints of re-presenting the reality of the world or, as a correlative to this, being a “control of the imaginary” on either a personal or social level.¹⁵ Rather, as a discursive construction of what is real, the subject defines itself in mimesis just as it proposes that an objective world be ordered and evoked in terms of the independent reality of the subject that, nevertheless, does not exist except as uttered by the subject. Obviously I am in no way postulating that reality does not exist, but that the material of discourse (sadly reality does not speak for itself) is a rocky crossroads between what is and the way the subject constructs it, either as a peaceful dwelling place, a contentious space, or a purifying but desolate “vale of tears”: a singular and final shore

or a passage to other transmundane dimensions. In other words there is no mimesis without a subject, but there is no subject that can be constructed outside of the mimesis of the world.

Latin America, and the Andean world especially, is subject to extreme violence as well as extreme disintegration. Here everything is mixed with everything else, and the most startling contrasts are juxtaposed, face-to-face, on a daily basis. This viscerally dislocated, intense social framework imposes its own codes of rupture and fragmentation on verbal representation. Unfortunately what should be a bright path toward human and social abundance (the same ability to live in one as in any other homeland)¹⁶ is in reality the repeated carrying out of injustice, abuse, and wide-ranging discrimination, the machinery of unbearable misery. There is nothing more basely treacherous than estheticizing in writing a meticulously and radically inhuman reality. So if I attempt a demythification of not only the monolithic, one-dimensional and prideful, coherent subject but also the harmonious discourse of a single voice whose only response is its own echo and a representation of the world that forces it to constantly turn on the same axis, and if I seek a parallel justification of the profound heterogeneity of these categories, it is, of course, because they are literary, but also because they aptly express ideas and life experiences. I do not wish to celebrate chaos: I am simply and plainly pointing out that, inside and outside of ourselves, there exist other, much more authentic and worthy existential alternatives. But they are worthless, naturally, if individuals and peoples cannot work them out in liberty, with justice, and in a world that has become their dignified dwelling place.

At one point I was tempted to undertake an exhaustive study by treating many other topics and organizing them along rigorously historical lines. Fortunately I soon recognized that neither my abilities nor the very material under my reflection could stand up to such a commitment. After all, there is nothing wrong with a book about heterogeneity being heterogeneous itself. I therefore opted to select certain decisive points in time and tried to place them within their pertinent problematic universes. Chapters 2 and 3 are especially fragmented because of the variety of topics they treat and certain analytical changes in perspective. I truly regret that my greater knowledge of Peruvian literature has led me to treat it more than those of Bolivia and Ecuador. My consolation is that, in the main, the problems (and even texts) are broadly Andean in nature.

I should add that absolutely coincidental circumstances caused me

to write this book over a span of five or six years, during which time I taught at various universities: primarily Pittsburgh and San Marcos, but also Berkeley, Dartmouth, Montpellier, and Alcalá. In every case, my obsession with the topic caused me to offer courses and seminars related to it, which helped me define this book in wider terms. I am most grateful for the invaluable help of colleagues and students at these universities and other friends (mentioned in the text) with whom I consulted. There were also dozens of conversations with participants in conferences, symposia, and seminars where I had the opportunity, time and again, to speak about a topic that continues to touch me viscerally. And finally, because destiny seems to have placed me in the First World, I have discovered that I myself am irremediably (and happily?) intermixed and heterogeneous.

