

## The Questing of the Americas

Ernesto Livon Grosman



*boundary 2*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 99 Poets/1999: An International Poetics Symposium (Spring, 1999), 128-131.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0190-3659%28199921%2926%3A1%3C128%3ATQOTA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-0>

*boundary 2* is currently published by Duke University Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/duke.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

**Ernesto Livon Grosman**

**The Questing of the Americas**

*America is impossible and for this reason, also, it exists. Or Americas, for it is in the resistance to any singular unity of identity that the impossibility of America, of a Poetics of the Americas, may be said to dwell. (Charles Bernstein, "Poetics of the Americas," 1996)*

The response to the question of the whole is found in its parts. The question of "the Americas" is problematized in English where the plural is necessary to distinguish it from "America." Geopolitical differences (Central America, South America, North America) are expressed in English as being absolute. The continent is therefore referred to in its dismembered parts. In this sense, a poetics of the Americas is an impossibility, which, in spite of the problematic noun, becomes necessary. Is it not these very same difficulties which allow us to conceptualize such problems?

*Let us assume that home for you means tree-covered mountains and waterfalls. Do you feel moved when you see similar mountains and waterfalls in another part of the world or are you disappointed? (Max Frisch, Sketchbook 1966–1971)*

Let us assume that we are not neither disappointed nor moved but rather curious about what this vision tells us about a certain order of reality. Where to find a vision that can embody the reflection about poetic practice, national identity and its changing borders without lending to the discussion a centrality comparable only to the authority of essences? The responses of the Latin American writers who contributed to this issue of *boundary 2* do not deny the importance of such questions but they avoid giving definitive responses.

*The villager fondly believes that the world is contained in his village, and he thinks the universal order good if he can be mayor, humiliate the rival who stole his sweetheart, or add to the savings in his sock—unaware of the giants with seven-league boots who can crush him underfoot, or the strife in the heavens between comets, which stretch through space, devouring worlds. What remains of the parochial in America must awake. (José Martí, Our America, 1881)*

If a nation is defined by its culture, such a mutable concept, it is less definable and predictable than the Latin American literary canon suggests. How can we understand the rigidity of national literatures except as a result of the institutional violence with which the university defends them? Why not consider literary study in terms of a practice of a pedagogy of limits?

The monumentality that dominates Latin Americanism, “a grand territory of great works,” suppresses the specificity of works that do not illustrate the idea of a literature that transcends regional specificities, a kind of national literature for all Latin America. This project limits the possibility of reading canonical works in relation to other works, other literatures, within and outside of the same language. The conflict does not arise from the necessity of replacing canonical works with another reading that is equally definitive and hierarchical but in understanding that this monumentalist interpretation suppresses by definition the self-critical gesture out of which it constructs itself as though the reader were not dealing with a single interpretation among many; as if it were not from the beginning and in all circumstances simply a possibility. As though the a priori that determines the Latin American program were a natural product and not yet another cultural artifact.

One of the reformulations of this point of view arises in the United States in Chicano literature. A literature that defines itself from the start in terms of the intersection of cultures, and which is written in great part in English, causes there to arise anew the discussion of the specificity of national literatures, even if those encounters have always been there. In the past we could think of other individual examples: Witold Gombrowicz in Argentina, Copi in France, and J. R. Wilcock in Italy, all writers who caused Spanish to intersect with other languages. It is in that sense of encounter that Chicano literature is one among many opportunities to think anew the boundaries of national literatures.

The sense of unity that pan-Latin Americanism proposes was, in its most strict sense, attained at the exclusion of Portuguese, aboriginal languages, French and Caribbean English and, up to some extent, the dialectal variations of Spanish found throughout the continent. And if Chicano literatures can extend the definitions of what is Latin America, so must Brazil. Is it possible to think of a “Latin American literature” without Brazil?

A different way of thinking of a poetics of the Americas would be, then, in the intersection of common issues and different languages. Instances in which some concerns, not their outcome or resolution, could be recognized as a shared moment. A case in point would be the connection between Thoreau and Guillermo Enrique Hudson or Waldo Emerson

and José Martí, writers who were dedicated to reading the landscape as a defining feature of the Americas. Works that carry out a displacement of the state's sovereignty toward the community's independence.

A similar case could be made for the avant-garde in the Americas during the early 1900s. It might now seem inevitable to look at the Americas' vanguardism in regard to the way in which they try to differentiate themselves from Europe through their emphasis on vernacular language and mestizo culture. And among more recent movements when considering formal experimentation as political resistance as appears in magazines like the Argentine *XUL* and the U.S. *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, both of them committed to investigating a poetics in which meaning is better understood as process.

The field of the Americas has been slowly claiming its space and, like any new field, it becomes more revealing when confronted with the obvious. There is a need to see that the conflictive political and cultural relationship between the United States, Latin America, and Canada has been strong enough to leave traces all over those literatures. They share a contact zone and, the more we look into their many poetics, the better chance we have of finding contiguities and not just bipolar oppositions.

But in this context Europe is just one possible reference and not the only criteria that justifies the interest to establish an area of contact with works that have been written as a reaction to Europe. Nonetheless, proposing genealogies that constitute a line of transmission and recourse to an authoritative order with respect to Europe creates the dissatisfaction of having to justify them as a mere reaction.

In an excellent anthology of the most recent poets of Brazil, Régis Bonvicino and Nelson Ascher formulate the problem in relation to Brazilian poetry:

*Paradoxically, poets from Brazilian Modernism on are unknown, owing less to their failure than to their success. Not only have they created many individual sets of poems (though that is surely true): they have created a literary universe of their own. Each one of them is, of course, connected with other universes, including those of French, German, Russian and Anglo-American poetry, but preferably acting through the whole. There can be no Weltliteratur if a whole set of concerns and debates is not universalized. Thus, we are left in the odd position of having to define Brazilian poetry by what is not. (Bonvicino and Ascher, Nothing the Sun Could Not Explain, 1997)*

Still, the Brazilian anthologers make their own genealogy while showing that:

Europe  
Got-here  
Former/there  
Formal?  
Americas

Less interested in establishing a hierarchy than in working on the collective perception of what happens locally in more than one place. They develop a personal and textual dialogue, of the moment, of institutional limits, a (the) history turned to thought.

As Roland Green would say, "New World studies often poses problems of these sorts, and in addressing them one must move readily between historical and contemporaneous dimensions, national and linguistic registers, 'old' and 'new' worlds in a single textual artifact" (Roland Greene, "New World Studies and the Limits of National Literatures," 1996). I would add that several literary projects could also be seen as contemporary among themselves, as it is the case when looking at the different registers of poets from the same generation, all of them part of the same state of affairs but evolving in different directions.

. . . an equally disabled history or a history of the disabled . . . my history is (also) your (hi)story. Faith in history as a mechanical matrix with no chance of comparison except when they share same space and time as if we didn't have already constant coexistence in time and space . . .

Resistance of terror.  
The Americas: a list of instruments.  
Those fragmentations of Europeanness do not make for a whole,  
so much wreckage and is all here.  
You tell me how many languages you lost and I will tell you what we  
are not.  
Unsubstantiated direction.  
A crossing point, a path, a poetic position?  
Such a deep love for a long-lasting mistake makes  
room for an extended detour. It is not in the shelves,  
it has no shelf life. Being so anamorphic  
makes up for a lot of wasted time in unperformed operations.  
Is that awareness?

The Americas, who are they? Where are they?