**Argentine Poetry Today: New Writing, New Readings**

**Editors’ Introduction.[[1]](#endnote-1)**

This special edition brings together an international group of academics and writers to explore new tendencies and readings in Argentine poetry, including contributions by some of Argentina’s foremost contemporary poets and internationally recognized experts in the field.

The last ten or fifteen years have seen a surprising upsurge in poetic production and publishing in Argentina, in spite – or at times because – of the economic and political crisis of the early 2000s. Young writers, independent publishers, and new forms of diffusion have all emerged. Critics have developed innovative approaches, rethinking both the poetic tradition of the last 60 years and the very latest poetry there. This makes Argentine poetry today a fascinating subject for literary and cultural analysis. The collection of essays and reflections builds on papers delivered during the Institute of Modern Languages Research/University of Oxford symposium hosted at Senate House in June 2013. Contributions explore the roots of the latest Argentine poetry, its formal and thematic characteristics, and the continued relevance of poetry as a means of cultural criticism and resistance.

In 1992, the poet and anthropologist Néstor Perlongher wrote about Argentina’s ‘secret poetry boom’ (1992: 178). One of the effects, he argued, of the military’s earlier crackdown on organized politics and activism, was to force those energies into other activities. Poetry was one such field, and Perlongher joked that the flowering of bards in the 1980s was such that at any social occasion one risked being offered, or possibly read, someone’s compositions. Censorship and inevitable self-censorship, Perlongher argued, led to a tendency towards coded, mannerist writing, full of allusions and metaphors. Writers like Perlongher or his Uruguayan counterpart Roberto Echavarren combined a fascination with Golden Age Spanish and contemporary Cuban writing with personal trajectories that took in, for example, anarchism, performance, and the Gay Rights struggle. The 1980s in Argentina were thus marked by the emergence of a so-called *neobarroco* in poetry, influenced by Luis de Góngora, José Lezama Lima, and Severo Sarduy, as well as contemporary trends in philosophy, not least the influential French thinker Gilles Deleuze. The magazine *XUL* and publishers such as Tierra Baldía and Último Reino, initially associated with a sort of neo-romanticism that emerged in the dictatorship years, offered a home both for these new writers – one must also mention Osvaldo Lamborghini, Tamara Kamenszain, and the Uruguayan Eduardo Espina, amongst many others – and a space for new poetry that differed strongly from the models of both social or committed poetry of the 1960s and 70s (Paco Urondo and Juan Gelman, for example, or the Uruguayan Mario Benedetti) or the existentialist and surrealist-tinged works of, for example, Olga Orozco, Alejandra Pizarnik, or Susana Thénon. The anthology *Medusario*, a compilation of two earlier collections, by Perlongher and Echavarren, respectively, offers a broad sample of *neobarroco* poetry.

What is perhaps most striking is the surge in production and public interest that occurred in the 1980s. In 1986, in Buenos Aires, the first edition of *Diario de Poesía* was published, a monthly newspaper dedicated to contemporary poetry, translation, and criticism. Its initial print run of 5,000 quickly sold out, and soon a further 2,500 were in print. For almost three decades, *Diario de Poesía* offered a home for new poetry, debates and discussion about aesthetics, and the occasional polemic in its letters pages. The paper has come to be associated with a rival tendency to the *neobarroco*, namely objectivism or *objetivismo*. *Objetivista* poets concentrated on the creation of images and objects in language, and reacted to the excess and sensuality of Perlongher, Espina, Echavarren and others with poetry that was stripped of excess, including metaphors and even, at times, adjectives or adverbs. Poetry came to operate at its most indexical level, as a recording of the observed world. Literary figures dear to *objetivista* poets were mostly Anglophone poets, including Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Louis Zukofsky. *Objetivismo* played a central role in the emergence of a new Argentine poetry scene in the 1990s but has representatives across the continent, as evidenced by many of the poems included in Julio Ortega’s 1997 anthology *El turno y la transición*.

What is perhaps more striking is that two writers closely associated with both the *Diario* and *objetivismo*, Martín Gambarotta and Sergio Raimondi, have produced highly influential and frequently republished works that stretch the bounds of any simply observational poetics. Much as it is an oversimplification to accuse the *neobarroco* of superficiality or frivolity – for there are few more devastating political poems than Perlongher’s reflections on the violence of the 1976-1983 military dictatorship, such as ‘Cadáveres’ or ‘El hule’ to name but two – it is false to see these later poets as uninterested in the formal possibilities of poetry. Gambarotta’s use of repetition, multiple viewpoints, and a clash of registers in collections such as *Punctum* (1996), or Raimondi’s creation of what might be called an ‘epic style’, marrying precisely measured lines, political observations, and cutting irony in his epochal collection *Poesía civil* (2000), both demonstrate the poetry of the 1990s’ ability to address contemporary politics without the sloganeering and didacticism often found in earlier political poetry, while at the same time drawing on the formal inventiveness of their more recent predecessors.

Poetry continues to enjoy an important political position in Argentina today. Consider the role played by the poet Juan Gelman in human rights activism; poets’ presence alongside senior politicians at major events, such as the recent Frankfurt Book Fair; the current Ministry of Education campaign to take poetry into schools (Poesía a la escuela); or the controversy over the resignation of Raimondi from his post as Head of Culture in the city of Bahía Blanca, after his boss switched political allegiances. The president, Cristina Fernández, quotes poets and tango lyricists in her speeches and Twitter messages. Poetry is vital to our understanding of cultural and political life in Argentina. As this edition intends to demonstrate, there is an integral connection between political themes, form, and mode of circulation in much of the best recent Argentine poetry.

One must also consider the powerful relationship between individual creativity and expression, and ways of engaging politically in Argentina today. These include innovative means of disseminating poetry in the public sphere. The group ‘Poetas con Cristina’ used verse as an effective means of vocal support for the government of President Fernández in demonstrations after the death of her husband and former President Néstor Kirchner. New publishers, like the pioneering non-profit collective Eloísa Cartonera, who work with unemployed young people to make handmade books of contemporary literature out of recycled cardboard, sprang up in the wake of the 2002 crisis, combining new poetry with social activism. Poetry ‘slams’ have emerged in the metropolis, inserting poetry into nightclubs and bars, alongside stand-up comedy and improv. The Movimiento Acción Poética (Poetic Action Movement) takes graffiti-poetry to the walls of cities and towns in an attempt to reengage verse with everyday life.

Indeed since the turn of the millennium, the creativity and energy of Argentine poetry has been quite striking. Recent poets have discovered innovative ways to create public space, real and virtual, exploiting both new media and contemporary modes of face-to-face contact. These include blogs, webpages, virtual chain-mails such as the website *La elecciones afectivas/Las afinidades electivas*, as well as poetry readings and events in dedicated spaces (such as the Casa de la Lectura in Buenos Aires), bookshops, theatres and bars. The poet Arturo Carrera recuperated a series of buildings, including a number of abandoned railway stations, as cultural centres dedicated to poetry reading and translation, near his hometown of Pringles in the Province of Buenos Aires. For many years Sergio Raimondi ran the Museo del Puerto, a museum dedicated to oral history in a neocolonial context, in the port town of Ingeniero White. Two young poets, Victoria Schcolnik and Marcelo Carnero run the Espacio Enjambre, an independent cultural centre in Buenos Aires dedicated to poetry and literary experimentation. Another centre, Pachamama, hosts poetry readings and ‘slams’, organized by the writer and comic Sagrado Sebakis.

At the same time, new or re-launched publishers, such as Mansalva, Siesta, Bajo la luna, Hilos, Gog y Magog, Blatt & Ríos, and Eloísa Cartonera (Buenos Aires), Vox (Bahía Blanca) or Espacio Hudson (Chubut Province) have created impressive catalogues of new poetry. Also worthy of note, in particular for the student or researcher of poetry, is the number of recent anthologies: *Antología de la nueva poesía argentina* (López ed., 2009), *Última poesía argentina* (ed. Franco et al, 2006), *23 chichos bahienses* (López ed.), *Antología de poesía argentina de hoy* (Campaña ed., 2010), *La tendencia materialista* (Kesselman et al eds., 2013) and *30.30 poesía argentina del siglo XXI* (VV.AA., 2013), to name just a few of the many available. If the early period of the so-called ‘post-crisis’ (i.e. immediately after 2001-2) saw poetry emerge in artisanal, often ephemeral publications, combining design, handicraft, and literary energy, it is notable that greater professionalization of production, distribution and marketing characterise the more recent efforts of poets and their editors, although still within the limits of a system in which earning significant amounts of money from publishing as a poet is, in effect, impossible. The poet Cristian Aliaga has referred to this as the ‘tombola without any prizes’ (2009: 62) of the literary world.

In the most recent poetry, furthermore, one must also note an increasing tendency towards both lyricism and a more traditional forms, at odds perhaps with earlier trends towards the colloquial and the everyday that could be found in the works of poets such as Fernanda Laguna, Alejandro Rubio, or Daniel Durand. One can detect what might be called a ‘new formalism’ in the poetry of young writers such as Alejandro Crotto or Ezequiel Zaidenwerg, and in the pages of the review *Hablar de poesía*, seen by some as a contrast and possibly a rival, in its day, to the now defunct *Diario de poesía.*[[2]](#endnote-2)

Thus while much recent theoretical work on the poetry of the 1990s and 2000s has focused on the split between *neobarroco* or neobaroque, and *objetivista* or objectivist works, the panorama of contemporary Argentine poetry is more complex than a simple binary division. A more accurate assessment requires both close reading and culturally-rooted contextualization, in order to reveal the literary operations in action and the forms of political and social engagement and grounding at play. *Objetivista* poetics are still relevant for many authors, combining colloquial language with political comment, at one remove from the ideological commitments of 1970s social poetry. Yet the excess and sensuality of the *neobarroco* is still present amongst those who the Argentine poet Tamara Kamenszain calls the true heirs of Néstor Perlongher, with their socially provocative and often highly erotic verse. Social poetry of the 1970s also leaves its mark in the continued activity of those writers who suffered under the dictatorship, and in writings dealing with protest and memory in the wake of state terror. Poetry today circulates in Argentina by both traditional and innovative means, combining the extremely local and the truly international in one.

The articles in this collection reflect on the recent history of Argentine poetry and the state of the field today. William Rowe analyses one of the most daring experiments of the *neobarroco,* Néstor Perlongher’s writing based on his experiences with psychotropic drugs and esoteric religions in Brazils. Rowe explores the poetics of the writer and anthropologist’s later collection, *Aguas aéreas* (1990), based on his experiences with the Brazilian religion Santo Daime and his experiments with the drug *yagé* or *ayahuasca.* With references to Deleuze and Zizek, Rowe examines Perlongher’s radical poetics, in particular his creation of visual elements that function as referents without symbolization.

Tamara Kamenszain, herself a renowned poet and essayist, also reflects on Perlongher, although in this case his literary legacy, which cuts across some of the supposed generational and ideological splits of Argentine poetry in the 1990s and 2000s. Kamenszain argues that in the work of contemporary poets such as Washington Cucurto, Alejandro Rubio, and Fernanda Laguna, we find striking echoes of Perlonghers’s radical poetics. The true legacy of Perlongher, Kamenszain argues, is less to be found in those who imitate his style or themes, rather in those who rework his aesthetic of provocation and constant renovation.

Claire Taylor’s article examines another aspect of the legacy of the baroque in Argentina. Belén Gache is one of the leading authors of digital fiction in Argentina, and her oeuvre is frequently characterized by an intertextual play with pre-existing literary genres, authors and texts, set in a creative dynamic with new cyber technologies. Taylor examines how Gache’s collection *Góngora Wordtoys* (2011) not only makes intertextual reference to Góngora’s *Soledades* (1613-14), but also makes metatextual reference to the process of their own (digital) creation. In this collection, digital technologies come to stand for, and are allied with, Baroque literary experimentation, yet at the same time, Gache cautions us against seeing IT as purely liberating. The techniques employed by Gache in the presentation of the individual poems make overt reference to digital technologies themselves, often referencing deliberately dated or limited platforms or software, and thus play with (and yet question) key notions of interactive literature.

Edgardo Dobry, also a widely respected poet and author of an influential collection of essays, *Orfeo en el kiosco de diarios* (2007), examines the poetry of Alejandro Rubio. Rubio, (in)famously, declared the lyric to be dead in an *ars poetica* published in Arturo Carrera’s anthology *Monstruos* (2001). Dobry analyses Rubio’s poem ‘Carta abierta’ from the book *Metal pesado* (1999), looking at the way the poet ironizes the lyric voice, seemingly a representative of contemporary political common sense, to perform an acute analysis of the political moment, namely the neoliberalism of the 1990s. Dobry argues, against conventional wisdom, that in the 1990s it was precisely in poetry that politics could be analysed and kept alive. Through references to Argentine history, Peronism, and the use of a certain form of colloquialism, Rubio treats poetry not as a cliché or a slogan, but as both theme and plot of his poetry.

In her article, Maria Cecilia Graña analyses the work of a writer almost synonymous with the poetry of the 1990s and *Diario de poesía.* Graña examines the long poems of Daniel Samoilovich, including *El carrito de Eneas*, *Las encantadas* and *El despertar de Samoilo*. These works oblige the reader to reconfigure the lyric as well as the place of art in the public sphere. Samoilovich distanced himself from and was critical of the *neobarroco*, and is seen by some as an ideologue for *objetivismo*. Yet at the same time, the length and complexity of his poems sees the lyric voice come undone, the voice become mixed, as if the poem was forgetting itself.

Constanza Ceresa also considers a writer closely associated with *Diario de poesía,* but one whose work, through reprints and translations, has transcended generational and national boundaries. Ceresa argues that Martín Gambarotta’s work, in particular his first collection *Punctum* (1996), carries out an ideological critique of neoliberalism, using a diverse set of techinques to subvert the dominant contemporary representations of reality. Gambarotta’s second collection, *Seudo*, Ceresa maintains, goes one step further, radicalises the combination of speech and speed found in *Punctum* as an emancipatory or revolutionary technique.

Two pieces examine explicitly politically poetry. Katherine Dunn examines the role of testimony and education in the poetry of Alicia Partnoy. Partnoy survived kidnap, unlawful detention and torture during the 1976-1983 Argentine dictatorship. After being forced into exile in the USA, she testified about her experiences at the United Nations, Amnesty International and CONADEP (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas). To literary scholars, this writer is perhaps best known for her testimonial narrative in the short stories of *The Little School* (1986). This article, however, will consider Partnoy’s poetry as a form of *testimonio*, a writing of resistance against authoritarianism and injustice. In a close reading of the poem ‘Clases de español’ from the 2005 collection *Volando bajito*, Dunn analyses Partnoy’s creation of the poet-teacher, a first person speaker who constitutes a testimonial voice. The article considers how Partnoy uses this figure to comment on the transmission of *testimonio* and on the educational function that it serves. Through the construct of the classroom, the poet creates an atypical testimonial space. Partnoy uses this to reflect on the situation of the exiled survivor of state violence, as well as the responsibilities of those who listen to testimony. This article examines the possibilities that poetry offers for the expression of *testimonio* and how Partnoy uses the poetic form to challenge the limitations of linguistic communication.

Ana Gloria Chouciño looks at the representation of memory in the poetry of Néstor Ponce. Chouciño sees Ponce as an example of contemporary tendencies towards ‘non-lyric’ poetry, in which the divisions between voices, points of view, registers and genres break down, in favour of heteroglossia and hybridization of enunciation. Ponce’s first collection work, *Sur* (1981), demonstrates colloquialism and irony. His collection *Desapariencia no engaña* (2010) recreates a series of voices to denounce the crimes of the Videla dictatorship. In his *La palabra sin límites* (2013), Ponce establishes a dialogue with a variety of poetic traditions and figure, including Quevedo, Vallejo, Neruda, Gelman) while at the same time expanding the range of poetic practices available to the writer.

A number of the pieces focus on very recent poetry. Luciana di Leone examines the poetry of Andi Nachón, and in particular the modes of circulation and exchange between Nachón and contemporary Brazilian poets. Leone analyses the role of so-called ‘affective election’ in the functioning of poetry meetings, events, and publications. She identifies in some of this production something close to a reworking of the earlier tradition of ‘poesía de circunstancia’, or ‘occasional verse’. Di Leone assesses the complex interaction between the creation of transnational, fluid, and mobile groups, and the risks of cliques and relationships of friendship and mutual appreciation.

Ben Bollig examines questions of lyric and form in the poetry of Alejandro Crotto. Crotto is a young poet whose work is at once entirely contemporary in theme and lexis, yet also marked by an overt formal and syntactical literariness that seems, today, almost deliberately anachronistic. Born in 1978, he is a lawyer by profession, and has published two collections of poetry with the independent publisher Bajo la luna. Much of Crotto’s activity as a poet is in keeping with that of his peers: he contributes to literary workshops, he gives readings, nationally and as an invited speaker overseas. As well as his books, he publishes extensively online, including an entry on the online poetic network Las afinidades electivas / Las elecciones afectivas. That is to say, Crotto is at once at the heart of the Buenos Aires poetry scene and yet something of an outsider. Not only does Crotto write in sonnets, *silvas*, *liras* and other forms mostly abandoned by his immediate predecessors and his peers, but also these forms are often hidden, and require some skill and knowledge on the part of the reader to detect. The article addresses what it means to at once display old-fashioned poetic skill and to hide it, not least in his second collection, *Chesterton.*

The final piece, by Cecilia Rossi, reflects on both the poetry of Tamara Kamenszain, and her own experience of translating it. The symposium closed with a reflection on the translation of Argentine poetry in the UK, including contributions from Rossi and Andrew Graham-Yooll, the respected journalist and translator, and Rossi’s piece stems from this discussion. Tamara Kamenszain is one of Argentina’s leading poets and essayists. Rossi focusses on her collections *Solos y solas* (2005) and *El eco de mi madre* (2010) and traces the thematic ‘spirals’ which turn and develop in and across the poems building what can be termed a ‘story-telling nucleus’. It also explores Kamenszain’s interest in stretching and stripping words until they touch upon and capture ‘the real’, beyond metaphorical readings and implications. This exploration, in turn, leads to a close study of Kamenszain’s use of language, in particular, her use of colloquialisms and rhythms encoded in Argentine speech, especially *porteño* speech (i.e. from the city of Buenos Aires). In the final section of this paper, Rossi turns to the process of translating her poetry by drawing a parallel with *truco*, that most typical of Argentine card games, where (as reader/ player/ translator) one is fully aware of the ‘tricks’ involved – from word game/ play, pun, allusion, to dialogues with other poets and even tango steps – but chooses to conceal, rather than reveal so as not to ‘give the game away’. Through this process the translator would thus remain true to the particular neo-baroque nature of Kamenszain’s poetry, characterised by its suggestiveness, allusive power, as well as its tendency towards elision.

The editors would be the first to accept that the focus of this special edition is at best partial – Buenos Aires is over-represented, as are certain poetic tendencies, such as the *neobarroco* and *objetivismo*. Other issues that would need to be addressed more carefully in the future include, for example, the question of what we call ‘Argentine poetry’ (there seems to be a return of the ‘color local’ but stripped of the nostalgia attached to it in previous national literature). The question is more important particularly in an increasingly globalised world. Should we include, in this corpus, poets born in Argentina who grew up in exile? There is also the issue of generations. Many of the poets analysed here have already become part of the canon while there is perhaps not enough representation of the younger poets, born for example in the 1980s and 1990s. Whether the echoes of the dictatorship mark many of the poems examined here, little is said of the ‘post-dictatorship voices’. In this sense, the collection *Si Hamlet duda le daremos muerte. Antología de poesía salvaje* (2010), which gathers together poets born in the 1970s and 1980s, gives an overview of what these generations are producing.

However, it is hoped that any gaps and flaws, but more importantly the breadth and variety of what *is* on offer here, as well as the obvious connections between superficially opposed or exclusive modes or movements, will inspire future scholars to explore recent and contemporary Argentine poetry more widely and in even greater depth. Furthermore, it is our aim that some of these poets may reach a wider audience, beyond the academic sphere. The articles in this special edition give just a taste of the remarkable productivity and vibrancy of poetry in Argentina today. The heterogeneity of form, voice, tone, format of publication and means of circulation, is quite striking. The editors intend that the contributions included here may contribute to making the current ‘boom’ in Argentine poetry rather less secret.

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2. See, for example, Porrúa (2003, 2011) or the introduction to Fondebrider (ed. 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)