

The “Polémica de la lengua” of 1842: a “Liberal” Philology?

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In April of 1842, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento was a relatively well-known journalist who had arrived in Santiago de Chile less than two years before, by the end of 1840; he wrote for different periodicals, but his most frequent participation was in *El Mercurio*. Published in Valparaíso, this was the only permanent daily newspaper in Chile, which granted a wide readership that gradually started to notice him, up to the point that he would become its first stable writer and the editor-in-chief (Martínez Gramuglia et al. 266-70). Even though he did not sign most of his contributions, by 1842 *El Mercurio* was regarded as “Sarmiento’s journal,” in which debates fostered common good and civilization.¹ During the same years, Andrés Bello was living his “década triunfal,” as Iván Jaksic calls it in a fundamental study: the stellar man of letters in Santiago de Chile, he was both a well-reputed scholar, respected in many fields (Literature and Grammar, Law, Education, History), and a government official, a senator on whom the minister of Justice and Education, Manuel Montt, had delegated the creation of the Universidad de Chile (*Andrés Bello* 155-63), and who would later act as its first president. He was also editor-in-chief of *El Araucano*, a newspaper published by the government, and, at the same time he was writing, almost single-handedly, the first Chilean Civil Code.² Even his age (he was already into his sixties), and his long experience in London, where he had lived from 1810 to 1829, gave him an aura of distinct wisdom in the South American intellectual milieu.

Nonetheless, Sarmiento and Bello had some shared features. On the one hand, both of them were supporters of Manuel Bulnes, whose presidency started a period of extraordinarily stable political order (in the Hispanic American context) in 1841.³ As a matter of fact, although *El Mercurio* was not an official paper, as was *El Araucano*, it received strong support from the government in the form of subscriptions.⁴ On the other hand, both of them were still immigrants—Bello’s nationalization and Sarmiento’s repeated claims of being one more Chilean notwithstanding—in a conservative society, in which intellectual discussions took place as a ritual exchange of praise among equals, mainly in elite circles that shared common upper social origins.

The press, however, had evolved into a civic arena in which dissension and debate were to be found, many times expressed in rough terms, but generally participating in an effort to attain a common ground (Ossandón). It is true that periodicals were linked to “the new” throughout the century and, thus, writing for newspapers was supposed to be itself a manifest

for change and modernity (Godgel 50-51). However, the Chilean press during the Autocratic Republic (1831-1841), had suffered censorship, and newspapers, always tied with politics, were mostly the expression of the official opinion on any important subject. Along with censorship, the government could exercise some control over the publications with generous subscriptions, a common trait from the 1820s to the 1860s. Newspapers would multiply during elections with “belligerence, sectarianism, and slander” (Jaksić, “Sarmiento in the Chilean Press” 35), but everyday news would not challenge the political order. As José Victorino Lastarria would remember many years later,

La prensa era la imagen de aquella postración social y política. El partido dominante revelaba su pensamiento en *El Araucano*, una vez por semana, y los pocos que lo leían lo acataban como la palabra sagrada. *El Mercurio* de Valparaíso, haciéndole coro a veces, abría de ordinario sus columnas al interés comercial y a los desahogos de alguna rencilla personal. *El Valdiviano Federal*, tribuna del antiguo patriota don J. Miguel Infante, aparecía muy de tarde en tarde a perturbar, o más bien, con la intención de perturbar la tranquilidad de los dominadores; pero no se le hacía la gracia de leerlo, ni tenía público que lo conociera. Alrededor de estos tres astros opacos; nebulosos del cielo de nuestra prensa, solían aparecer algunos fuegos fatuos de luz siniestra que se apagaban en silencio. (38-39)

The intense debates spurred by Bulnes’s campaign in 1841 were actually an important step in the pluralization of the press that agitated that “postración política y social”; Sarmiento himself, hyperbolic as he was, portrayed his work as stirring that “indolente apatía” of his adopted country through the fierce controversies that he would embrace (Martínez Gramuglia et al. 267, 278-85). However, it was not a personal achievement; there was a common surge of journalistic activity during Manuel Bulnes’s administrations (1841-1846 and 1846-1851), generally described as a conservative government that gave way to a gradual reform in social terms, providing for progressive measures in education, rule of law, freedom of speech, foreign investments, and economic development in general, while maintaining a strict control over political participation.⁵

In this general landscape, Sarmiento, the young journalist, and Bello, the established scholar, would have their first public discussion regarding the status and the proper form of Spanish language in Chile and in Hispanic America in general. Their debate took place in the pages of *El Mercurio* from April to June, and it has been well studied as the “primera polémica literaria” (as the first editor of Sarmiento’s *Obras completas*, Luis Montt, would call it), the “controversia filológica” (Pinilla), the “polémica acerca del idioma” (Verdevoye), the “polémica filológica” (Mondragón), or plainly, “polémica Bello/Sarmiento” (Ramos, Albizú Labbé, Alfón). “Un hábito escolar,” Julio Ramos says, “nos lleva a concebir la relación entre Andrés Bello y D. F. Sarmiento en términos de una contradicción casi absoluta”: “Sarmiento romántico—pegado a la vida” against “la figura ascética de Bello, guardián de la forma” (35).

The extraordinary stature of these two writers (in the case of Sarmiento, obtained later), and the use of pseudonyms—or the absence of signatures in the texts—have led the critics to set aside the other men of letters involved and focus on what we could label a “great writers” approach. This has resulted in important insights on Bello’s and Sarmiento’s ideas about

language, as well as much needed studies of their fine talent as polemicists, but has perhaps created misleading images of what was an anonymous controversy between “los redactores” of *El Mercurio* and (probably) a handful of men of letters disguised with pseudonyms.

To gain a better perspective, we should also consider the figure of José María Núñez in the discussion, in spite of his minor role in literary history. He was a young Chilean neoclassical poet and a grammar professor at the Instituto Nacional in Santiago, the most important secondary school in the country and the center of scholarly life until the creation of the university. He was also one of Bello’s most capable disciples, who would assume the same pseudonym in the press to continue the controversy with Sarmiento when the master declined it. His participation was key, since in his texts, he unveiled Sarmiento’s intellectual strategy and, ultimately, dismantled his fallacious arguments. More importantly, as a conservative author, Núñez pointed to the inner contradictions of a liberal discourse that established parallels between language change and political progress.

In this essay, I will study the characteristics of this controversy in order to explore the political background that informed it, in which conservative and liberal perspectives towards language and politics appeared tangled in the strategic arguments that writers used. Building on the already studied positioning of Sarmiento as a public figure in the Chilean press, this episode of its history, albeit minor—remembered today mainly because of the importance of Sarmiento and Bello—, reveals the potency of conservative answers as a corrosive force in liberal discourses. If we leave aside the more common “great writers” approach, we may better understand the ideological assumptions behind the controversy.

The main polemical battle

On April 27, 1842, *El Mercurio* published a brief text by Pedro Fernández Garfias, titled “Ejercicios populares de la lengua castellana,” that was basically a list of words and expressions common in everyday language in Chile, “que en el día no se oyen sino en la boca de gente vulgar y común” (Pinilla 10).⁶ Fernández Garfias was a Latin and Spanish Grammar professor, who took up the task of publicly correcting these expressions; that is why the proper form followed each one of them. The piece was a lexicon presented as a table in alphabetical order that resembled an *errata*, divided in two columns: “se dice” and “debe decirse,” starting with “abajar” and finishing with “avenimiento.” It was, then, the first installment of what was supposed to be a series of educational texts, produced from a normative point of view, rooted in an idea of “proper” Spanish being the one written in Spain.⁷ Sarmiento wrote an unsigned presentation for it, with the same title, that initially celebrated the content, accepting the normative angle: “He aquí un *buen pensamiento*: reunir en una especie de diccionario los *errores* en que incurre el pueblo...” (qtd. in Pinilla 1, my emphasis). However, his text challenged some of Fernández Garfias’s basic ideas, advancing a different view of the relationship between language and the people as a political entity. First of all, while the latter identified mistakes and lexical archaisms, Sarmiento mentioned other sources of “el uso popular”: “cambiando unas letras, suprimiendo otras o aplicándolas a ideas muy distintas de las que deben representar, o bien usándolas aun después de que en los países y entre las que con más perfección habla el castellano, han caído en desuso y han sido substituidas por otras nuevas” (2), and even explained those archaisms as a consequence of isolation, somewhat “exculpating” common speakers. But he

went on and transformed a descriptive/prescriptive lexicon into a vindication of the popular right to shape language, rejecting the intervention of grammarians as a conservative reaction, as impertinent in linguistic issues as in political ones:

La soberanía del pueblo tiene todo su valor y su predominio en el idioma; los gramáticos son como el senado conservador, creado para resistir a los embates populares, para conservar la rutina y las tradiciones. Son a nuestro juicio, si nos perdonan la mala palabra, el partido retrógrado, estacionario de la sociedad habladora; pero como los de su clase en política, su derecho está reducido a gritar y desternillarse contra la corrupción, contra los abusos, contra las innovaciones. (qtd. in Pinilla 3)

Thus, Sarmiento changed not only the evaluation of Chilean everyday language, no longer a mistake but a proof of popular sovereignty, but also the center of the argument, considering prescriptive grammar as politically reactionary (“partido retrógrado”). *El Mercurio’s* journalist was probably looking for an impact with his words, charging against grammarians and arguing that errors are no longer errors when shared by a large group of people (Alfón 27). Whether he was hoping to start a debate or not is hard to know, but it is clear that he was consciously re-shaping Fernández Garfias’s argument by the mere expedient of adding his presentation which, in fact, was almost twice as long as the presented article. Fernández Garfias’s pre-text was actually a pretext for Sarmiento’s attack on linguistic and political conservatism in which he actually denied any usefulness to the Senate. According to him, the Senate could only complain about ongoing changes, described however in a rather negative—maybe ironic—manner with the series *corrupción, abusos, innovaciones*.

The “Ejercicios” received two immediate answers on May 1 and 3, which focused mainly on the omissions and mistakes of the lexicon presented by Fernández Garfias, signed with pseudonyms whose identities remain a mystery: *Un recoleto* and *T.R.E.S.* After generally congratulating the initiative, they pointed out that many of the words considered archaisms were actually correct, that others were not common in Chilean everyday language, and that the list lacked other relevant items, without considering Sarmiento’s preface. *Un recoleto*, however, made a somewhat conventional praise of grammarians, which resounded like a response to the Argentine author:

Nada más laudable, a nuestro modo de entender, que el celo de que se hallan animadas muchas personas cuando se dirige a extirpar los infinitos vicios de todos los géneros con que, por decirlo así, se encuentran connaturalizadas las sociedades. Sería fatigarnos en balde mencionar, para apoyar nuestra aserción, los nombres de tantos ilustres varones que en todos los tiempos han consagrado, no una parte de su vida, sino toda ella a tan noble y filantrópico fin... (qtd. in Pinilla 13)

As we have mentioned, controversy was a center and the motor of Sarmiento’s journalistic production, and he would take advantage of what seemed like the start of the public discussion. Four days later, on May 7, he insisted on the usefulness of the publication in the article “Se contesta a un comunicado,” answering to T.R.E.S., who had written that “Ejercicios...” was so bad that the periodical should not accept more articles of this kind.

Being the skillful polemicist as he was, he retorted, making the text agree with his own previous idea:

...nos ha llenado de satisfacción la indirecta contestación que nos ha dado el comunicado sobre una cuestión que indirectamente proponíamos, a saber, si nosotros debíamos repudiar en nuestro lenguaje hablado o escrito aquellos modismos que nos ha entregado formados el pueblo de que somos parte, al tiempo que adoptamos los que usan los escritores españoles. Se ha alegado en el comunicado que el que *aleta* del tejado sea anticuado en España no es razón para repudiarlo entre nosotros, puesto que esta expresión es usada por toda clase de gentes. Hay en esta solución una solución liberal, aplicable por analogía a nuestra cuestión... (qtd. in Pinilla 22-23)

Besides his ironic satisfaction, he was building on his own argument in favor of a freer use of language, “una solución liberal,” that stressed freedom in local use, rather than the mere defense of a distinctive dialectal option. But a real controversy would become apparent when a more explicit and better argued article attacked the philological foundations of Sarmiento’s and Fernández Garfías’s ideas. Signed by “Un quídam,” repeating the title of their texts, “Ejercicios populares de la lengua castellana” came out on May 12. The first editor of Sarmiento’s complete works, Luis Montt, attributed this piece to Andrés Bello, even though Bello himself never acknowledged his authorship.⁸ The grammarian would challenge the very idea that the people had the ultimate decision about correctness in language and defend the role of specialists when speaking about the issue:

A la verdad que no para las mientes (no que los monos) el avanzado aserto de los redactores, atribuyendo a la soberanía del pueblo todo su predominio en el lenguaje; pues parece tan opuesto al buen sentido, y tan absurdo y arbitrario, como lo que añade del oficio de los gramáticos. (qtd. in Pinilla 26)

Bello’s rampant answer was probably the result of a personal offense: grammarians were, in his view, much needed, not as “conservadores de tradiciones y rutinas, en expresión de los redactores, sino como custodios filósofos...” (26-27). However, he went on stressing precisely his “conservative” view of language change, only legitimate when sanctioned by scholars, drawing a parallel with politics that was actually a condemnation of the popular will:

En las lenguas, como en la política, es indispensable que haya un cuerpo de sabios, que así dicte las leyes convenientes a sus necesidades; como las del habla en que ha de expresarlas; y no sería menos ridículo confiar al pueblo la decisión de sus leyes que autorizarle en la formación del idioma. (28)

A first interpretation of this paragraph could easily agree with the one that Sarmiento published ten days later: the claim was an expression of a conservative thought that had no place in a democratic society as the Chilean one claimed to be in those years. We will return to Sarmiento’s interpretation, but first, there is another side to Bello’s argument that we should consider. Along with disregarding “la soberanía del pueblo” in linguistic matters, he questioned the idea of the people whom Sarmiento had shaped. In part, Bello was simply criticizing romantic writers’ preference for French literature and language; but, more

importantly, he was addressing a hollow point of liberal discourse itself: given that sovereignty—whether linguistic or political, as it was not the issue at the time—was supposed to be an attribute of the people, who actually were the people? Who, in fact, might be able to say who the people were? Certainly not, for Bello, writers deemed as ignorant of their own cultural tradition as fascinated by foreign ones:

...ese pueblo que se invoca no es el que introduce los extranjerismos como dicen los redactores; pues, ignorantes de otras lenguas, no tienen de donde sacarlos. Semejante plaga para la claridad y pureza del español es tan solo transmitida por lo que iniciados en idiomas extranjeros y sin el conocimiento y estudio de los admirables modelos de nuestra rica literatura se lanzan a escribir según la versión que más han leído. (qtd. in Pinilla 26)

Again, the argument had at least two levels. On the one hand, innovation in language should not be confused with the adoption of foreign expressions or their influence, not truly *popular*—activating yet another sense of “the people,” not a political body, but rather a fraction of the population, the common people, populace or *plebs*—, since “the people” ignored foreign languages. In a strictly philological sense, Bello also followed his own ideas about Hispanism as an encompassing identity for all the Spanish-speaking countries, considering that the already severed colonial ties with Spain did not involve their shared cultural inheritance. As Amado Alonso put it, Bello did not practice “la prédica de una independencia idiomática que viniera a completar la política, como desde sus tiempos han venido reclamando algunos escritores de nacionalismo especialmente susceptible en Argentina, en Brasil y en Norteamérica” (xvi). Other romantic writers, mainly from the Río de la Plata area—Juan Bautista Alberdi, Vicente Fidel López—, advanced the idea of a cultural secession, even in idiomatic terms. In a similar way, on the other hand, romantic aesthetics consider writers and artists in general to be the best suited to represent popular will, and that is precisely what Bello denied in his article: “los ilustres redactores de *El Mercurio*” should not consider themselves to be the spokesmen of the people, even less when there was a “cuerpo de sabios” to do so. Challenging Sarmiento’s assumptions, Bello tackled two of the undecidable problems of modern democracy: the definition of the people and its representation (Rosanvallon).⁹

One week later, Sarmiento took the controversy a step further. Whereas his brief answer to *Un recoleto* and T.R.E.S. had simply insisted on his views and toyed a little with his antagonistic ideas, when answering Bello he clearly saw an opportunity to establish himself as a man of letters. As Ramos has pointed out, “Sarmiento generó una o varias imágenes de sí mismo como *otro* posible [de Bello]” (35, original emphasis). On May 19, he published “Contestación a un quídam.” In this article, he accepted the accusation of using foreign terms, but took advantage of it to move the controversy into a literary, rather than purely linguistic, arena. Assuming a supposedly neutral voice, Sarmiento portrayed himself as an observer of cultural phenomena. Rather than supporting the use of foreign words, he was merely describing it: “...nuestro ánimo es solo explicar la causa sin justificar los efectos; decimos por qué sucede tal cosa, sin entrometernos a averiguar si esta cosa es buena o mala” (qtd. in Pinilla 31). Thus, he cornered Bello on a conservative view of linguistic change, an “apegado a la forma del lenguaje” who was not able to understand that the preference for foreign terms was due to the current degradation of Spanish. Quoting Father Isla and Tomás

de Iriarte, whom Bello had invoked to make fun of French influences in romantic writers, he pointed out that the fear of “la invasión del galicismo” was actually very old, born at least at the beginning of the 18th century. The reason for that, according to Sarmiento, was that the Spanish language was no longer useful to interpret the ideas of the peoples who spoke it. The poverty of Spanish literature moved Spanish speakers away from their own language, in search of a better understanding of the modern world:

... en todo, sin excluir un solo ramo que tenga relación con el pensamiento, tenemos que ir a mendigar a las puertas del extranjero las luces que nos niega nuestro propio idioma [. . .]. ¿Con qué motivo de interés real y de apreciación práctica a nuestras necesidades actuales, se quiere que vayan a exhumarse esas antiguallas veneradas del padre Isla y Santa Teresa y Fray Luis de León y el de Granada y todos esos modelos tan decantados que se proponen a la juventud? [. . .] Un idioma es la expresión de las ideas de un pueblo, y cuando un pueblo no vive de su propio pensamiento, cuando tiene que importar de ajenas fuentes el agua que ha de saciar su sed, entonces estará condenado a recibirla con el limo y las arenas que arrastra en su curso... (qtd. in Pinilla 34-35)

Sarmiento made a point, as well, by portraying himself as a layman whose knowledge came from his own deductions and observations, leaving aside formal studies and ideas. He would stress this idea and turn it into a political stance in his second answer, three days later, titled “Segunda contestación a un quídam.” In it, we see the use of the ample polemical talent that Sarmiento commanded, clearly longing for a controversy that Bello would demise. The aforementioned disciple, Núñez, would write further answers, but Bello, in the end, did not accept Sarmiento as a valid interlocutor.

This second answer to Bello was far more political and aggressive. First of all, Sarmiento used a fragment of “Un quídam’s” text as an epigraph for his own article. He quoted the sentence we already examined that said that a body of wise men was as necessary in grammar as in politics, so they produce the laws of language after a fashion similar to the laws of the republic. It was not the only epigraph; the other one was a quote of Alexis de Tocqueville that stated that only a minority decided in matters of intelligence, both in politics and literature. Paired with a notable conservative thinker, thanks to this montage, “Un quídam” (Bello) appeared as conservative as well.

The whole article would insist on this interpretation of Bello’s text, pushing further the critique and re-creating an informally educated persona who lacked intellectual prestige, placing Sarmiento on the progressive side. After the quotation, Sarmiento wondered whether it was possible that it had been written “...en una república donde el dogma de la soberanía del pueblo es la base de todas las instituciones y de donde emanan las leyes y el gobierno” (qtd. in Pinilla 39-40). For him, the reason for a political institution in charge of passing laws, the Senate, was not that its members were wiser than the people, as in the Classical republics, but rather that it represented the people, expressing their sovereign will. The same went for the imagined foe, the grammarians:

...si hay en España una academia que reúna en un diccionario las palabras que el uso general del pueblo ya tiene sancionadas, no es porque ella autorice su uso, ni se forme el lenguaje con sus decisiones, sino porque recoge como en un armario las palabras cuyo uso está autorizado unánimemente por el pueblo mismo y por los poetas. (40-41)

The rejection of “academia”—not necessarily the Real Academia Española, but the scholarly medium as a whole—subtly answered Bello’s impugnation: language is sanctioned by the people, yes, but also by the poets; and, in the general sense of “creator,” Sarmiento considered himself one, even though he never published verses. Poets, at that time, were in need of new expressions which they found in foreign languages as much as in everyday use, albeit incorrect; a new chaotic magma, taking place in the press, was the cradle of language renovation:

...el contacto diario de todas las naciones que mantienen el comercio; la necesidad de estudiar varios idiomas; la incorrección y superficialidad de la prensa periódica y las diversas escuelas literarias; en fin, el advenimiento de hombres nuevos, audaces y emprendedores, hacen vacilar todas las reglas establecidas, adulteran las formas primitivas y excepcionales de cada idioma y forman un caos que no desembrollarán los gritos de los gramáticos todos... (43)

It was implied that Sarmiento considered himself one of those “hombres nuevos”; however, he made a point of stressing it, portraying himself as a man without a prestigious past, unlike the aristocratic scholar that he saw in Bello. Indeed, after writing that the very preoccupation with style was conservative and aristocratic—opposed to modern democratic ideas—, he shaped his own discursive authority on the basis of *deficits*: of education, scholarly prestige, social position, grammatical art, stylistic rules:

...arrojando al público una improvisación sin arte, sin reglas, hija sola de profundas convicciones, logramos llamar la atención de algunos, y sentándonos en la prensa periódica estamos diariamente degradando el idioma, introduciendo galicismos; pero al mismo tiempo ocupándonos de los intereses del público, dirigiéndole la palabra, aclarando las cuestiones, excitándolo al progreso. [. . .] un advenedizo, salido de la oscuridad de una provincia, un verdadero quídam, que no ha obtenido los honores del colegio ni saludado la gramática. (44-45)

In a democratic republic, social origins and academic titles were not needed, and he appeared as the true *quidam*: i.e., an inconsequential, unknown person, devoid of any previous entitlement. Democratic countries, as well as in the literary field, should not ask for social or academic credentials: “*A cada uno según sus obras*, esta es la ley de la que rige en la república de las letras y la sociedad democrática” (qtd. in Pinilla 45, emphasis in the original). The only criteria for personal consideration in literature, then, should be merit, creativity, and the transgression of rules, which were a jail that “tiene agarrotada la imaginación de los chilenos” (46). Sarmiento completely changed the subject of the controversy by the end of his second article: he was now defending his own journalistic work,

with which he was starting to stand out in the Chilean capital's intellectual arena. As mentioned before, he was still a newcomer whose articles appeared in a provincial, though ever more important, newspaper; instead of accepting this marginal position, he used it to assert his figure as the proper writer of a liberal order, ascribing a conservative position to Bello and to anyone against him.

Doing so, Sarmiento was not defending an ideological position as much as creating a *locus* of enunciation in which he appeared as both the begetter and the result of a liberal order.¹⁰ Language, however, is conservative in its very nature, an ever changing language would soon cease to be shared, and at the same time cannot be permanently stable; conservative or liberal positions regarding language change are, therefore, as relative as regarding political strife. That is perhaps what Sarmiento perceived better than any of his counterparts; he was “neither a doctrinaire liberal nor an opportunistic conservative” (Jaksić, “Sarmiento” 32), and he could still appear as both when participating in the many controversies in which he took part.

Later skirmishes

That Sarmiento was pushing his arguments further just for the sake of polemics is conspicuous in the last words of his second answer to Bello: “aguardamos impasibles la explosión de la mina, sonriéndonos de antemano de la sorpresa o rabia del enemigo” (qtd. in Pinilla 48); the “mine” was a metaphor for his own explosive argument. As Mondragón has argued, Sarmiento succeeded in something that not many people had done before: annoying Bello to the point that he did not answer either of his “contestaciones” (19).¹¹ However, as previously noted, Núñez would continue the controversy with three articles, two of which were signed by “Un quídam.” The other one, the first one to come out, on May 27, signed as “Otro quídam,” was a very ironic piece that celebrated Sarmiento's ideas in a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of his arguments, congratulating him for enjoying “esa libertad jamás conocida” in more than thirty centuries of Western civilization (qtd. in Pinilla 50). In addition, like Sarmiento as well, he (ironically) paired stylistic freedom with a liberal order: “Los aristócratas con sus reglas y su purismo enristran las plumas; débiles armas que no resisten al acero bien templado de los demócratas” (50). The answer was, nonetheless, very aggressive, since it used Sarmiento's foreign origin to challenge his assertions, deploring the state of the Argentine provinces:

...para mejorar de condición deberíamos importar a esta tierra bruta la ilustración transandina, fecunda en verso, representante (como es toda literatura) del estado de ese pueblo medio destruido, medio salvaje, en que el rencor de los partidos despedaza las entrañas de la patria, en el que el degüello es un timbre de honor [. . .]. Venga esa literatura y la imaginación de los chilenos quedará libre de su engarrotamiento; venga esa ilustración y volarán avergonzadas las reglas que nos habían hecho modestos, tolerantes, pacíficos, pero que no nos permitían hacer versos. (qtd. in Pinilla 52)

Even in the joyful, ironic tone of the article, the xenophobic tirade signaled what was perceived as a concrete limit for public discussions. In the Chilean republican order of the 1840s, figures like Núñez could trace conservative frontiers in social, rather than political,

terms, and repudiate the cultural origin of a foreign newcomer like Sarmiento, who prided himself on being “el verdadero quídam.”

The other texts by Núñez would come out on May 28 and June 6. Sarmiento, for his part, would answer on June 3 and 5, but would do so to “Otro quídam”; that is, the ironic article of May 27th, and ignored the other two.¹² The new articles signed by “Un quídam”—that, according to the editorial tradition that we follow, were not written by Bello as the first one—went back to the specific philological discussion, denouncing the change of focus. Núñez, in the article titled “A *El Mercurio* números 4.094 y 4.097,” continued the previous arguments displayed by Bello and criticized the use of foreign expressions which, according to him, should not be equal to neologisms. He brought up the examples of Alexander Dumas and Victor Hugo, not coincidentally French writers who “han formado combinaciones suyas, peculiares de su lengua” (qtd. in Pinilla 57) when they thought the proper ones did not exist, instead of importing them from other language. To copy literary innovations in another tongue, thus, did not mean using the terms of that tongue. It was, in sum, a defense of Hispanic tradition, which ought to be a deep enough wellspring for new writers.¹³

In his third article, “Segundo artículo”—his second one signed “Un quídam”—, Núñez came back to the political argument, only to re-evaluate the implications of a “conservative senate.” Copying Sarmiento’s montage, he chose as epigraphs the same two quotes as in “Segunda contestación a un quídam,” by Tocqueville and Bello. In a calmer mood, he dissociated the linguistic and political aspects, and denounced a demagogic intent in Sarmiento’s texts that he called “una fanfarronada democrática”:

El gran Tocqueville, señor redactor, ha presentado un hecho, ha dicho una gran verdad en su fragmento, y *Un quídam* en el suyo ha dicho también otra verdad, aunque humilde, y tan en su lugar quedan ambas verdades como un axioma de lógica y otro de jurisprudencia. [. . .] ¿Quién ignora que cuando el pueblo por una necesidad de su existencia política y por su propia suficiencia nombra ese cuerpo de legisladores que ha de arreglar sus instituciones ejerce el acto más augusto de soberanía? ¿Y en qué se mengua esa soberanía, o de qué modo la pierde un pueblo, porque se le prescribe hablar como hablan las personas bien educadas...? (qtd. in Pinilla 76-77)

Núñez went on, attributing the whole controversy to the need for material for the newspaper, and made ironic quotes from Sarmiento’s texts, repeating similar arguments in defense of stable institutions. But he also wrote in praise of Bello himself at the close of his article, reminding young Chilean writers of the laborious efforts of the Venezuelan. As a conservative author, Bello’s disciple pointed to the inner contradictions of the liberal discourse that established parallels between language change and political order. His way of doing so is similar to what Lucas Alamán would do some years later in the “polémica del monarquismo” in Mexico: by pushing liberal discourse further to its extreme consequences, it ultimately appeared devoid of foundations.¹⁴

Perhaps the best confirmation of Núñez’s corrosive effect is that Sarmiento did not answer these two texts signed with “Un quídam.” Instead, in “El comunicado del otro quídam” and “Los redactores al otro quídam,” he went back to the xenophobic attack that Núñez had

employed, knowing all too well that public opinion would probably be on his side on the issue. After praising the free press and the impulse that controversies brought to the common good, Sarmiento stated that “El otro quídam” had gone from a literary to a social discussion, guided by a “patriotismo exclusivo”; he presented himself once again as devoid of titles and, at the same time, a hero of public opinion who:

...sin pretender ser llamado un oráculo, ha manifestado francamente sus opiniones, ha levantado su voz contra un abuso, contra una costumbre añeja y retrógrada; a la policía le ha dicho: nuestras calles son inmundas e intransitables; a la municipalidad, no tenemos caminos [. . .]; al gobierno le ha dicho, los carros ambulantes son una monstruosidad, remediadla; a la juventud [. . .] ilustrad al público con vuestros escritos. Ha ridiculizado lo que era ridículo a todas luces, aplaudido todo lo que mostraba visos de merecerlo [. . .] ...el redactor de *El Mercurio* ha tenido particular empeño en sembrar aquí y allí doctrinas sanas de liberalismo... (qtd. in Pinilla 66-67)

Thus, Sarmiento turned Núñez’s attacks on his Argentine origins, which was one more of his ironies amongst many, into the main thrust of the discussion, and accumulated paragraphs with anathemas against the colonial inheritance that made Chileans hate “todo lo que no era español y despótico y católico” (71). He defended Hispanic American brotherhood and, most of all, his right to intervene in the public arena without any consideration for the nationality of the writer. He said nothing, however, of Núñez’s arguments in favor of a representative regime.

Conclusion

Our intention with this essay was to revisit the now famous “polémica filológica” of 1842 and trace its ideological assumptions, which appeared in arguments that entangled linguistic and political freedom. The traditional focus on Sarmiento and Bello, who were of course the most important writers involved, somehow obscured the insights the controversy can provide us about this particular moment in the development of the Chilean press. As mentioned before, newspapers were becoming the arena for public discussions, in which arguments were supposed to be valid based on their own rationality, rather than on the social position or cultural prestige of their author. However, in the polemical dialogues that took place, these factors were still present to the extent that some of the writers involved dared to make them explicit. That is what Núñez did when attacking Sarmiento for his Argentine origin, but also what Sarmiento did when he portrayed himself as a “man without a past,” “el verdadero quídam.”

However, yet another source of soundness for an argument was its popularity: ideas attributed to the people had validation in a democratic liberal order, or at least some of its men of letters would assert. Thus, the very start of the controversy, Fernández Garfias’s survey exploring “proper” language, recognized and challenged the issue of popular sovereignty. Nonetheless, once admitted as a source of authority, the question remains who the people are and how to assess that, as seen in the discussion about foreign terms. After this fashion, Un quídam (Bello) was challenging one of the very foundations of liberal

discourse: popular sovereignty. How can it be supported if the people themselves are a subject open to contention?

Both Bello's and Núñez's conservative ideas posed questions about the "liberal" approach of Sarmiento to linguistic change. Doing so, they also pinpointed the hollow foundation of liberal politics: an undecidable concept of the people. Its definition, we know, would be the task of political struggles from then to this very day.

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Notes

¹ Raúl Silva Castro links the national expansion of *El Mercurio*, and especially its consolidation among Santiago's readers, to the participation of Sarmiento and his belligerent prose (137-38).

² Bello was formally in charge of the sections "Exteriores" and "Variedades" of *El Araucano*, but most historians assume that from 1835 to 1846 he was the main writer and served as an informal editor (Santa Cruz 562).

³ Sarmiento was a public servant as well: he had been appointed as the first director of the recently created Escuela Normal de Preceptores in January of 1842. It was an institution aimed at the education of future primary school teachers, shaped after Horace Mann's normal schools in Massachusetts.

⁴ In 1845, the government devoted 4,375 pesos to buy copies of *El Mercurio*, by far the most subsidized of all newspapers. The second was *El Progreso* (in which Sarmiento wrote from late 1842 onwards), which received 3,770 pesos (Barros Arana 1: 485).

⁵ A key element of the so called "régimen portaliano"—Chile's authoritarian conservative model, whose leaders were part of an economic elite with colonial origins that lasted roughly from 1830 to 1880-1890—was a combination of a democratic republic with limits on citizenship. According to the 1833 Constitution, only adult men (i.e., older than 21 if married, older than 25 if single), who were able to read and were in possession of certain capital or rent, had the right to vote. Also, an elitist Senate was supposed to arrest any "demagogic" deviation of the bicameral Congress, and the President had extraordinary powers in times of turmoil—"estado de sitio," "facultades extraordinarias"—that gave him discretionary measures. See Palma González.

⁶ Due to Covid-related restrictions, we could not visit archives to check the original sources, as was our intention for this article, for reasons that will become apparent when reading this essay. We have relied mostly on Norberto Pinilla's well-informed anthology from 1945, available at the Memoria Chilena website (<http://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/>), a superb tool for research during a pandemic. We follow Pinilla as well in the possible identities of the pseudonyms "Un quídam" (Bello and Núñez) and "Otro quídam" (Núñez). Even though he does not offer strong proof of these identities, there is an uncontested tradition of the attribution to Bello at least; not only the argumentative style is coherent with the idea, but also the following answers of Sarmiento and the next links in the polemical chain allude to the Venezuelan. That is why in this essay we have accepted this attribution. As mentioned in note 8, the origin of this attribution is the first edition of Sarmiento's complete works.

⁷ According to Pinilla, "son tan atinadas las observaciones de *Un recoleto* primero y de *Un quídam* (Andrés Bello) en seguida que el trabajo de Fernández Garfias queda, pues, inconcluso" (12, original emphasis).

⁸ We have already advanced several hypotheses about the invention of the controversy by Luis Montt and Sarmiento's second editor, Augusto Belin Sarmiento:

La hoy llamada 'polémica sobre la lengua' [. . .] es resultado, en buena medida, de una operación de los editores de las Obras de Sarmiento. [. . .] Al presentarla como polémica, Montt da por buena la idea de que Bello quería discutir con Sarmiento, cuando en realidad parece evitar la confrontación, mientras que el sanjuanino puja por entrar en ella como modo de reconocimiento intelectual. [. . .] Hijo de Manuel Montt, presidente de

Chile en la década del 50 y amigo de Sarmiento y Bello, es la única fuente que tenemos sobre la posible identidad del quídam. Montt no solo da estos detalles, sino que en una larga nota al pie, que ocupa once páginas, reproduce la nota atribuida a Bello, ‘por no aparecer en sus obras.’” (Martínez Gramuglia, n/p)

As mentioned in note 6, the original idea for this essay was to re-check the original texts, but for the time being we can only promise future research on the topic.

⁹ A third, undecidable tension that Pierre Rosanvallon has identified is the one between reason and popular will; defining the Senate as a body of wise men, rather than the representative forum of the people, Bello was actually taking a position on the issue.

¹⁰ Postcolonial and decolonial critics, in their always provocative recycling of linguistic terms, have used the concept of “locus of enunciation” fruitfully. Conceived as an epistemic position from which the subject thinks and writes, it usually refers to a position relative to European discourses. We use it here because of its relational meaning, even though the texts we analyze fall clearly within a Western discursive and epistemological tradition. Postcolonial and decolonial concepts, after all, can only lose their dependency on a colonial situation when they become useful for understanding phenomena that are not exclusively original to such a situation. See Mignolo 1989.

¹¹ Two weeks later, in his article “El comunicado del otro quídam,” Sarmiento would admit his deliberate search for a controversy that led him to exaggerate and twist his arguments, trying to bring as much attention to them as possible:

quisimos poner la cuestión en términos que removiese los ánimos, suscitase antipatías o aficiones, a fin de que todos los que se interesan en esta materia prestasen atento oído a lo que se iba a decir por ambas partes y no sucediese lo que de ordinario con los trabajos de la prensa periódica, que pasan de día claro delante de nosotros como las aves nocturnas cruzan el cielo en el silencio de la noche, sin que nadie se fije en ellas.” (qtd. in Pinilla 64)

¹² One last episode of the controversy, which had clearly become agonizing by then, was the article published on June 25, with the title “La cuestión literaria,” a sophisticated text that mixed quotes from Mariano José Larra’s articles with very minor alterations. With it, Sarmiento defended the use of new and foreign terms, and specifically the imitation of French literature. Because of the lack of Spain’s progress, for Larra, imitation was an obligation. Five days later, in a brief note titled “¡Raro descubrimiento!,” Sarmiento “explained the joke.” Considering that “El otro quídam” had mentioned Larra among the good Spanish writers, the quotations were a strong counter-argument, although he denied Larra’s idea had “el peso de una autoridad.” However,

“como nosotros i antes que nosotros, ha pronunciado un decreto de divorcio con lo pasado, i hecho sentir la necesidad de echarse en nuevas vías para alcanzar una rejeneracion en las ideas i en la literatura; como nosotros ha declarado la incompetencia de un idioma vetusto para espresar las nuevas ideas; como nosotros, en fin, ha recomendado la libertad en idioma i literatura, como en política.” (Sarmiento 247)

Pinilla does not include this literary experiment in his compilation, even though he does include one article signed by “Uno de antaño” about the dispute between romantic and neoclassical poets. Montt included it in the section “Primera polémica literaria” of Sarmiento’s works.

¹³ It is curious to read the examples that Núñez chooses, not because of his ingenuous assertion that “se leen y se leerán siempre” (who would not err in such a prediction?), but rather because of the mainly neoclassical and Peninsular “honor roll” that he mentioned: “a Isla e Iriarte, a Moratín y Jovellanos, a Meléndez y Hermosilla, a Quintana y Martínez de la Rosa, a Mora y Saavedra, a Breton, y en fin a Larra” (qtd. in Pinilla 58).

¹⁴ With regards to this issue, see Palti.

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