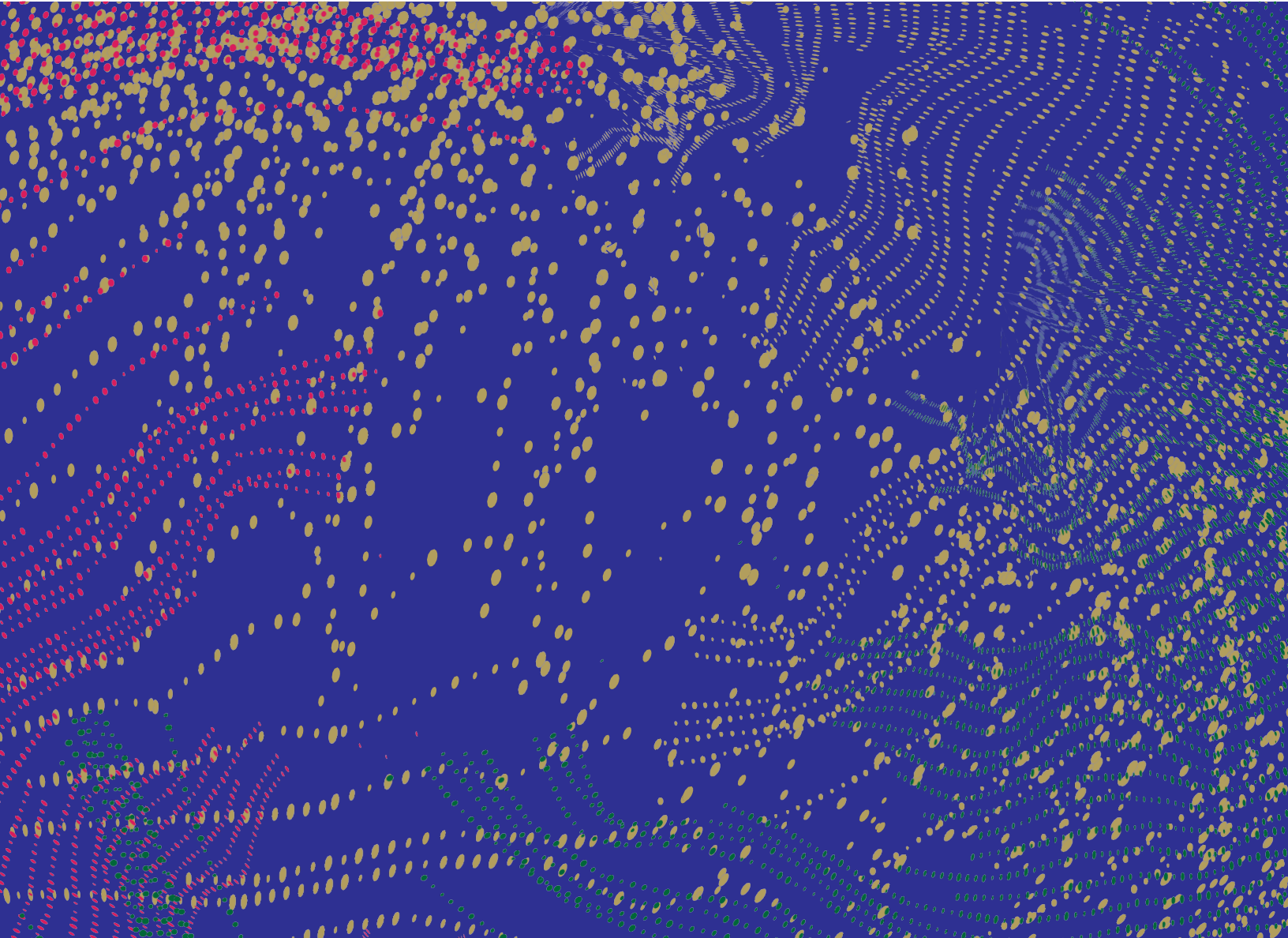


The World Humanities Report

Andrés Bello's Imagined University

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Andrés Bello's Imagined University

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The *sententia* “all truths touch one another” (*todas las verdades se tocan*) remains vital to the University of Chile. It was first used by Andrés Bello (1781–1865)—founder and first chancellor of this public institution, as well as poet, grammarian, and philologist—in his 1843 “Address Delivered at the Inauguration of the University of Chile” (“Discurso pronunciado en la instalación de la Universidad de Chile”).¹ The saying is regularly quoted during commencement ceremonies, chancellor elections, and anniversary celebrations, which continues to carry on its validity into the present. The persistent invocation of Bello’s famous *sententia* has inspired this essay and its two interrelated topics: interdisciplinarity and the function of language and literature inside and outside the university.

Bello’s speech defended belles lettres, or “beautiful writing,” as the guiding principle of intellectual pursuit. According to Bello, belles lettres, a system regulated by eloquence (*elocutio*), permeated not only texts of fiction but also those from the human and natural sciences. Because the university constituted a formal and common space where “all truths touch one another”—that is, where different areas of knowledge are put into conversation with each other—Bello imagined the university as an eminently interdisciplinary institution. His defense of belles lettres arose from the specific historical circumstances surrounding it. According to the literary scholar Ángel Rama, the lettered class in Latin America was in charge of the organization and reproduction of power over the course of the colonial era, the wars of independence, and the formation of the new republics because of their access to writing. These lettered subjects (*los letrados*) did not correspond to literary writers—that is, those who compose fictional texts—but more broadly to scribes, jurists, priests, and grammarians, among others.² This idea of the lettered subject permeates Bello’s speech and his concept of the university as a lettered city. The recently installed institution sought to preserve and deepen the power of the written word, with the added need to cultivate a governing elite for the new independent American republics.

¹ Throughout the essay, I quote from both the original Spanish text of Bello’s speech and its English translation.

² Ángel Rama, *La ciudad letrada* [The lettered city] (Hanover, NH: Ediciones del Norte, 1984), 25.

Even though Bello's address represents a pinnacle of the Spanish American Enlightenment, it also foresees the progressive transition from belles lettres to literature during the nineteenth century. This transition meant differentiating between the figure of the lettered subject (*el letrado*), governed by the prescriptive rules of eloquence and characterized by his public presence, and that of the literary writer, guided by a free, private, and imaginative impulse, no longer located in the agora but in an ivory tower. However, unlike the nineteenth-century European aesthete, the Latin American lettered subject continued to participate in the public sphere through diplomatic work, the practice of law, or political partisanship.³ The progressive emancipation of literature from the system of belles lettres was the result of a gradual process of specialization of the disciplinary fields, intensified by the institutional creation of new schools, programs, and departments.

Despite this historical context, Bello's address, as my following close reading shows, contains a view of language as an engine of interdisciplinarity both inside and outside the university whereby the study of language use and literature builds the necessary conditions for dialogue between disciplines. Such study involves the examination of the linguistic limits, rhetorical operations, and aesthetic possibilities that language itself offers. Let us begin with the address's most quoted line—"all truths touch one another." For Bello, if each area of knowledge has its own "truth," then the university brings all of them together into a common space, where "all truths" coexist. The verb "touch" (*tocar*) suggests boundaries that separate the disciplines while also enabling dialogue between them. The *sententia* casts the university as more than a formalized institutional space, that is, as the very possibility of the interdisciplinary.

Despite his suggestion of discrete boundaries between disciplines, Bello also recommends that these boundaries remain porous and flexible. At the beginning of the address, he writes: "Achievements along all lines attract each other, become linked together, urge each other on" (*Los adelantamientos en todas líneas se llaman unos a otros, se eslabonan, se empujan*).⁴ The selection of verbs here

³ Julio Ramos, *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina: Literatura y política en el siglo XIX* [Divergent modernities: Culture and politics in nineteenth-century Latin America] (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989), 12.

⁴ Andrés Bello, "Address Delivered at the Inauguration of the University of Chile," in *Selected Writings*, trans. Frances M. López-Morillas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 126; "Discurso pronunciado en la instalación de la Universidad de Chile," in *Repertorio americano: Textos escogidos* [American repertoire: Selected texts] (Santiago, Chile: Penguin Books, 2019), 225.

extends and deepens the previous metaphor about communication between disciplines. Here there is a “call” (*se llaman*) or attraction (in the English translation), all carried out in harmony, because the advances of knowledge are present “along all lines.” In this spatial figuration, the disciplinary boundaries are elastic and dynamic, since they are drawn and blurred in the very act of dialogue and collaboration, hence Bello’s word choice: disciplines “become linked together” (*se eslabonan*), and they “urge each other on” (*se empujan*).

Bello figures and conceives the university as a structure of relations among its constituents. Thus, the founder of the University of Chile argues that “all human faculties form a system, in which there can be no regularity and harmony without the contribution of each” (*todas las facultades humanas forman un sistema, en que no puede haber regularidad y armonía sin el concurso de cada una*).⁵ Here, by means of personification, Bello understands the schools of a university (*facultades* in Spanish) as if they imitate or are modeled on the “human faculties,” which are working together as one. However, this collaboration has a common goal: to “increase and spread swiftly, to the benefit of religion, morals, and freedom itself, as well as material interests” (*se aumentará, se difundirá velozmente, en beneficio de la religión, de la moral, de la libertad misma, y de los intereses materiales*).⁶ In this light, Bello understands and represents the university as an “eminently expansive and disseminative body” (*un cuerpo eminentemente expansivo y propagador*),⁷ where disciplinary advancements “will increase and spread swiftly” (*se aumentará, se difundirá velozmente*).⁸

With words that indicate the different attributes constitutive of this common space, this passage illustrates a more radical figuration of both disciplinary and institutional limits. If we talk about the university’s “expansive” and “disseminative” character, then it is clear that the university, precisely because of its purpose and its public role, permeates social spaces as it thinks about them. Although this conception implies the reproduction of the *lettered city*, that is, the discursive order of reality, Bello’s understanding of the university invites us to imagine interdisciplinarity as a communicative event, where dialogue does not happen exclusively on campus but also outside its boundaries. In Bello’s vision, the university becomes a place of collaboration within the public sphere, with language playing a crucial role.

⁵ Bello, “Address Delivered,” 126; “Discurso pronunciado,” 226.

⁶ Bello, “Address Delivered,” 125; “Discurso pronunciado,” 223.

⁷ Bello, “Address Delivered,” 129; “Discurso pronunciado,” 230.

⁸ Bello, “Address Delivered,” 125; “Discurso pronunciado,” 223.

For Bello, the system of belles lettres is configured both as an access to thought and as the guiding principle of ethical and intellectual pursuits. In the middle of the address, Bello points out that belles lettres “forms the primary discipline of the intellectual and moral being, [and] teaches the eternal laws of intelligence in order to guide and affirm its progress” (*[las bellas letras] forma[n] la primera disciplina del ser intelectual y moral, expone[n] las leyes eternas de la inteligencia a fin de dirigir y afirmar sus pasos*).⁹ In this sense, the study of language use is elevated to matrix of interdisciplinary dialogue, engine for its dissemination into the public sphere, and vehicle for civic education. Therefore, the main objective of belles lettres is to “establish on solid foundations the rights and duties of man” (*establecer sobre bases sólidas los derechos y deberes del hombre*).¹⁰ The selection here of “establish” (*establecer*) and “foundations” (*bases*) allows us to visualize Bello’s structural and systematic conception of language as the governing architecture of discourse.

Bello does not offer an instrumental conception of language and literature as a mere vehicle for interdisciplinary, civic, and institutional communication. Rather, he sees it as a constitutive condition of the university. When he rhetorically asks, “Are universities, are literary bodies, the proper instruments for the diffusion of learning?” (*Las universidades, las corporaciones literarias, ¿son un instrumento a propósito para la propagación de las luces?*),¹¹ he means that the university creates the necessary material and discursive conditions for the unfolding of language as an expansive entity and propagator of knowledge. Later in his address, Bello points out that “if the diffusion of knowledge is one of the most important functions of letters . . . , then the bodies chiefly responsible for the rapidity of literary communication confer essential benefits both on learning and on mankind” (*Si la propagación del saber es una de sus condiciones más importantes . . . , las corporaciones a que se debe principalmente la rapidez de las comunicaciones literarias hacen beneficios esenciales a la ilustración y la humanidad*).¹² The study of language and literature provides the necessary tools for the rise, cultivation, and reciprocity of interdisciplinary dialogue, and for its ramifications within the public sphere.

In his address, Bello urges a diversity of perspectives (*todas las verdades*) as a heterogeneity of voices that move from the university to the community, and

⁹ Bello, “Address Delivered,” 133; “Discurso pronunciado,” 237.

¹⁰ Bello, “Address Delivered,” 133; “Discurso pronunciado,” 237.

¹¹ Bello, “Address Delivered,” 128–29; “Discurso pronunciado,” 229.

¹² Bello, “Address Delivered,” 129; “Discurso pronunciado,” 229.

vice versa: “I believe that the multitude of new ideas that daily pass from literary intercourse into general circulation demands new [voices] for its expression” (*creo, por el contrario, que la multitud de ideas nuevas, que pasan diariamente del comercio literario a la circulación general, exige voces nuevas que las representen*).¹³ Here Bello emphasizes how the public sphere enters into the institution (“new [voices] for its expression”). Both disciplinary advance and the democratization of university spaces and its educational programs produce the expansive and propagating body of the university.

Within this interdisciplinary collaboration, the university offers formalized spaces for both the dissemination and the accumulation of knowledge. Thus, Bello conceives the newly installed institution as the cornerstone of the *lettered* city for the nineteenth century precisely because of its ability to organize and reproduce power both inside and outside of campus. As the chancellor points out, “in this propagation of knowledge each of the academies, the universities, forms a reservoir where all scientific acquisitions tend to accumulate continually; and it is from these centers that they most easily spill over into the different classes of society” (*En esta propagación del saber, las academias, las universidades, forman otros tantos depósitos, a donde tienden constantemente a acumularse todas las adquisiciones científicas; y de estos centros es de donde se derraman más fácilmente por las diferentes clases de la Sociedad*).¹⁴ From a historical viewpoint, although Bello reproduces the model of the *belles lettres*, the verb *derramar* (spill over into) suggests the model’s elasticity and flexibility, a phenomenon that reinforces the diffuse and porous figuration of disciplinary and university boundaries.

Bello’s 1843 address took place amid the gradual transition from *belles lettres* as “beautiful writing” to literature as imaginative, which entailed a new conception of language, autonomous and separated from the public sphere. The cultural theorist Hayden White has conceptualized this suppression of rhetoric amid the rise of aesthetics as a new theory of language. This process meant a differentiation between literacy (governed by an instrumental conception of language as a means of communication) and literature (regulated by an aesthetic conception of language as an intransitive force, identified by its own, immanent laws).¹⁵ This eventual understanding of literature, epitomized by the *Modernismo* movement in Latin America, rendered Bello’s project of *belles lettres* and

¹³ Bello, “Address Delivered,” 134; “Discurso pronunciado,” 237.

¹⁴ Bello, “Address Delivered,” 129; “Discurso pronunciado,” 229.

¹⁵ Hayden White, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 294–95.

its underlying interdisciplinary implications obsolete, in a century where the formation of discrete and autonomous disciplinary fields became the norm. However, a hundred years later, the birth and rise of cultural studies in Latin America allowed for dismantling and expanding the restrictive concept of literary as an aesthetic project. Cultural studies did not entail a return to the model of *belles lettres* as a prescriptive system, but it did foster the expanding and propagating impulse of language within the public sphere. If we read Bello's address with the rise of cultural studies in mind, then we find in it the lesson that the study of language use (in both linguistics and literary studies) should consider the liberating impulse of aesthetics and the categorial rigor of rhetoric. Both are vehicles that can disarticulate the virtual borders between disciplines and those between the university and the community.

Diego Alegría holds a BA in English linguistics and literature and an MA in literature from the University of Chile. He is currently a doctoral candidate in English (specializing in literary studies) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. His scholarly work is situated at the intersection of poetics, grammar, and rhetoric in the long nineteenth century, particularly the poetry of British Romanticism and Spanish American *Modernismo*. He is the author of the poetry book *Raíz abierta* (2015), the bilingual (Spanish and English) chapbook *γ sin embargo los umbrales / and yet the thresholds* (2019), and the essay collection *Poética del caminar: Poems (1817) de John Keats* (2023).