

Elisabel Larriba and Agustín Coletes Blanco, eds. *La poésie, vecteur de l'information au temps de la Guerre d'Espagne (1808–1814)*. Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2017. Pp. 168. €15.00. ISBN: 9791032001301

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Larriba and Coletes Blanco's edited volume *La poésie, vecteur de l'information au temps de la Guerre d'Espagne* is a welcome addition to the available scholarship on the period for two main reasons. First, in contrast to many works on the Peninsular War, it brings together five essays (in French) offering a potential departure from what may be described as a monographic perspective, i.e. one that is focused chiefly if not exclusively on evidence from a single side of the conflict. Second, it addresses poetry from the angle of its documentary value, running counter to the preconception that poetry is typically lyrical and therefore nonpolitical if not altogether ahistorical. The collection shows how poetry can serve as a repository of collective experience, personal emotion and political opinion—undeniably, a “vehicle of information” for contemporaneous readers as well as modern scholars. The quotation from Victor Hugo's *Orientales* in the preface to the collection is apposite: Hugo claims all topics have *droit de cité* in the sphere of poetry; the editors remark this should be allowed to encompass “that which is the least poetic in the world: that which provides the subject matter for newspaper columns: information” (5; translations are mine throughout).

Although the basic research of identifying the relevant poems was not entirely lacking in any of the countries covered in the collection, these surveys produce new findings and offer valuable critical assessments. On the whole, the collection is the result of laborious research in newspapers and other sources, and it presents readings of texts that are scattered and, in several cases, unknown. For the French reader, it has the added value of giving translations of poems and excerpts.

The volume opens with the only study of French material proper, Gérard Dufour's “La poésie, source d'information clandestine sous le premier Empire.” Professor Dufour starts by noticing Napoleon's preoccupation with, and active engagement in, propaganda and censorship as an introduction to an outline of the war of propaganda taking place during



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the postrevolutionary years. Prominence is duly given to the tireless counter-revolutionary journalist Jean-Gabriel Peltier, an exile in England from the time of Napoleon's consulship, who in 1803 founded *L'Ambigu*, published in French thrice per month. This magazine, which was sponsored by the Foreign Office, emerged from the royalist circle in exile in London and is shown to have had underground circulation. On its pages the poem operated as a "newsflash," as *L'Ambigu* included compositions by Peltier and others. Poems functioned as the condensation of reports concerning the events of the war and especially of Napoleon's armies' setbacks: "The poem was therefore, in a way, the moral of the narrative. What it mattered to remember from the event; what it mattered to convey" (15). Poetry had the advantages of rhyme and rhythm, for purposes of memorization. Some authors also wrote lyrics to be sung to well-known tunes. The upheavals in Spain, the retreat from Russia and the victory at Trafalgar are instances of the events at stake.

Other poets mentioned by Gérard Dufour include Canon Humblet, like Peltier an exile in London, and François Chéron, who was opposed to "the Corsican ogre" but remained in France. In the latter context, poetry is perceived to take on the role of a periodical press that the state had silenced—hence becoming a sort of "spoken newspaper" (31) disseminated from mouth to ear.

Whereas poetry as an ideological counterdiscourse of resistance and opposition is the focus of the first study in the volume, Elisabel Larriba's chapter "Des trompettes de la renommée difficiles à emboucher: information et désinformation par la poésie chez les afrancesados" concentrates on pro-imperial poetry from Spain. Larriba submits that it was a poem by one P. D. M. C. D. on the Madrid uprising of 2 May 1808 that inaugurated a new form of propaganda on the French side. The author underlines both the thematic relevance of the poems she identifies, and the comparative scarcity of such poetry, which may be taken as indicative of limited support among the Spaniards for the invaders, both Napoleon and King Joseph I. A significant number of poems in her inventory nevertheless express support for the emperor's brother as he faced-off with insurgents in the Spanish provinces, and praise him promoting and attending bullfights (which he did in order to ingratiate himself with his Spanish subjects), the emphatically national character of which, it may be observed, was barely compatible with the fact that Joseph was a foreigner. As a supplement to her study, Elisabel Larriba transcribes the poem "La Tauromaquia," of doubtful attribution, signed "M.," and accompanies it with a French translation.

While Larriba notices the prevalence of dithyrambic poetry in her corpus, it is interesting to acknowledge the fact that narrative poetry appears to be predominant in Britain together with the ode, according to the findings of Alicia Laspra Rodríguez in “Presse, politique et poésie anglaise de la Guerre d’Indépendance (1808–1814).” In line with Dufour’s conclusions, Laspra Rodríguez remarks that British poems of the age “underline and facilitate the assimilation of a piece of news on Spain published a few days before (sometimes on the very same day) in the same or in another newspaper” in some cases emphasizing “abstract values like patriotism, courage or the ability to conduct the war” (73). Unsurprisingly, poems tend to praise the exploits of the British army, with a natural spotlight on the Duke of Wellington. Although exceptions challenge the policy of the British Cabinet in regard to the affairs of Spain, Laspra Rodríguez finds ideological differences to be “less strong than the unanimity over the Spanish question” (75). Pro-Spanish poetry was frequently inserted in newspapers of both Tory and Whig affiliation, such as *The Morning Post* and *The Morning Chronicle* respectively, including a good number of contributions sent spontaneously by readers, which is evidence of an engaged public opinion. While predominantly empathetic towards Spain, openly admiring the bravery of the “Spanish patriots,” some contributors remained aware that Spain had been an opponent at engagements like Trafalgar, which meant that a measure of ambivalence remained.

Interestingly, taking a cue from the scholar Diego Saglia, Laspra Rodríguez suggests poems constitute “imaginary geographies” made up of the *loci* where battles took place. She demonstrates “the atomisation of the events of the war” (81) through quantitative and diachronic analysis, showing that the names of specific cities and rivers were gradually substituted for “Spain” and “Iberia” in the course of the conflict. It is also pointed out that the two sieges of Zaragoza (1808–09), the Battle of Talavera (1809) and the siege of Cádiz (1810–12) were among the events most commonly recorded in poetry, and the data collected in the study allow us a glimpse into the process by which the deaths of Lord Nelson at Trafalgar and Sir John Moore at A Coruña came to be superseded by the emergence of Wellington as a focal point of public opinion.

The fourth chapter in the collection is “La poésie sur la Guerre d’Indépendance espagnole dans le monde germanique comme instrument de propagande” by Ingrid Cáceres Würsig and Remedios Solano Rodríguez. Understandably, given the specific features of the context, it is in the study of the German-speaking parts of Europe that the question of the *nation* plays

the strongest role in this volume. One of the paradoxical realizations put forward by the authors of this chapter relates to the clash between the Romantic exaltation of the unity of the German nation, regardless of political borderlines, on the one hand, and the disappearance of German patriotic expression from periodicals for most of the period under discussion, on the other. This proves to be true of the Confederation of the Rhine, which was a French protectorate of sorts, as much as of other parts of the German-speaking world. The German press was in fact obligated to follow *Le Moniteur* as the source and template for information. Other measures taken by Napoleon (for whom control of the press was a *personal* concern) included censorship as well as punishment of transgressors, the suppression of newspapers and the creation of new ones. The state of affairs described obviously changed with the beginning of the war between Prussia and France in 1813, but before that the coverage of the events in Spain was highly conditioned.

In this context, Cáceres Würsig and Solano Rodríguez point out that the poetry celebrating the heroes and martyrs of the war is less abundant than other text types, and that, in respect of forms, dialogue poetry and the *Wechselgesang* (made up of an individualized character and a chorus) are the most characteristic. A stimulating aspect of this corpus resides in the fact that it includes poems written by well-known authors like Friedrich Schlegel, Heinrich von Kleist and Clemens Brentano.

The final contribution examines “Évocations poétiques de l’Espagne dans la presse et autres imprimés portugais pendant la Guerre d’Indépendance (1808–1814).” Here Gabriela Gândara Terenas gives an overview of the pro-Spanish poetry published in Portugal (including translations), setting it against the background of the print culture of the period (the latter aspect also a concern of the authors of the preceding study). Gândara Terenas covers poetical miscellanies and periodicals, which allows her to establish the role of poetry in disseminating information regarding military episodes and the most important individuals involved. Propaganda poetry is shown to express emotions ranging from indignation to enthusiasm, from grief to patriotic fervour. It often depicts the bravery of the Spanish as an example of resistance for the Portuguese people, and it celebrates the Triple Alliance between Portugal, Spain and Britain. The occasional apology for Iberian political unification may also be located. The ode is a privileged poetic form, at a time when Classicism still very clearly prevails, and poetry assumes an edifying tone, becoming “an instrument for

the patriotic glorification of collective pedagogy.” Gândara Terenas significantly adds:

If poetic texts evoked the mythological conventions of Classical Antiquity, or the fascination aroused by great actions and noble subject matter, they were on the other hand unsettling on account of the demands of the concrete, by means of simple and realistic descriptions of events and of the individuals therein involved. (153)

José Agostinho de Macedo, Nuno Álvares Pereira Pato Moniz and Manuel Borges Carneiro are among the poets covered in this chapter.

It hardly comes as a surprise that the five contributions to this volume differ somewhat in style, critical apparatus and methodology. The state of the art varies from country to country, and the raw data cannot be presumed to be closely interdependent, let alone converge entirely. The diversity of approaches is therefore natural, and more of an advantage than a drawback. One would not wish to disguise specificities under a cloak of assumed uniformity. The collection thus remains a mosaic, leaving it to the reader to attempt transversal readings. The essays themselves, insofar as some touch upon certain matters and others do not, inspire several appealing questions. How, for instance, does the poetic record of the Peninsular War correlate with political factions internal to different European countries—and with international disputes around *Ancien Régime* politics, imperialism, and liberalism? How does it compare with non-Spanish national identities (since the collection is often felt to focus too exclusively on Spain, which the title does not imply)? How does the depiction of pivotal events and conspicuous individuals compare between the poetry of the several countries? How do the preferred poetic forms compare, and what does the preference suggest regarding the standards of taste? What was the role of renowned, as compared to obscure or anonymous, poets in this context, and to what extent can it be taken as an index to the degree of canonicity of war poetry in the period? How important was manuscript circulation as opposed to publication in print? How often do we find poets who witnessed or had first-hand experience of combat—or, conversely, who lived war at a distance? Is it really to be believed, as the evidence suggests, that there were virtually no female poets writing about the war?

The crucial point that is thoroughly made in the collection is this: poetry has informational value not only *for us*, as poems provide testimony to how authors viewed the events, individuals and peoples involved in the

Peninsular War, but also for *their contemporary* reader, as poems were intended to communicate an ideological stance together with actual details of current events. It is the fact that this dual relevance has been established beyond question that enables the potential readings mentioned above.

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