

DEMOCRACY IN HISPANIC AMERICA

BY MARY WILHELMINE WILLIAMS

BEYOND the Rio Grande are twenty nations, most of which have been for about a century republics in name and, in theory, politically democratic. But in actual performance most of them have fallen so short of their pretensions as to furnish the opponents of popular government with apparently unassailable proofs of the failure of political democracy, or, at least, of its very limited possibilities. All of these States have at some time been controlled by Dictators, backed by military force, and the so-called Presidents of many of them are even now possessed of a large degree of despotic power. Yet, these facts prove nothing against Democracy as a principle of government: they merely demonstrate the inevitable and immediate futility of granting the machinery of self-rule to a people unqualified by both tradition and education to appreciate and operate it.

When, in the early part of the nineteenth century, the Hispanic American colonies cast aside the domination of the mother country and proceeded to set up for themselves politically, their experience in self-government was less than that of England when, six hundred years before, a group of angry and resolute barons forced *Magna Charta* from a tyrannous and despotic King; and democratic theorizing was perhaps even more foreign to their habits than was it to thirteenth century Englishmen. This situation in itself boded ill for any experiments in self-government which zealous Hispanic American patriots might essay; but there were other factors which greatly increased the probability that the political novices would have a turbulent and discouraging experience. Ten years of battling for independence had supplied the youthful nations with a surplus of ambitious military leaders and a fatal training in arms; and the long wars had accustomed the population to look to force rather than to law as a means of securing their rights or desires. Furthermore,

in most of the States there was a numerical preponderance of aborigines, whose ignorance and superstition enabled almost the first military chieftain anxious for political power to rally them to his support. And, last, but not the least in its fatal effect, the Spanish officers of the colonial period had furnished abundant precedent for political corruption and autocratic misrule, which the warrior-politicians, when once they had secured control of the government, were not slow to follow, and even to improve upon.

These military executives, known as *caudillos*, usually retained their political grip and held tyrannical sway until overthrown by other rivals of their own type; then, as a rule, came a period of anarchy such as was recently witnessed in Mexico, finally ended by another *caudillo*, who, in turn, had his day and ceased to be. Thus was created and thus continued the vicious political circle characterizing Hispanic American politics, whose component segments are dictatorship, revolution, and anarchy.

Despite the practice just described,—practice made inevitable by existing conditions,—all of the new States carved out of the wreck of the Spanish colonial empire possessed republican constitutions; for monarchical government was in high disrepute at the time, and the United States and France, which had inspired them to revolt against the mother country, offered constitutional models, as well as precedents for republican control.

Notwithstanding the lowering outlook, some of the States made astonishingly rapid progress towards harmonizing governmental principles with political practice; and in this regard Chile was the leader. After ten turbulent years of experimental politics, it established an orderly government in harmony with a new constitution, and has ever since deserved the right to be classed as a republic. A few decades later, Argentina, whose governmental problems were more complex than those of its western neighbour, learned to prefer ballots to bullets in effecting changes in administration. As time passed, all of the other States showed some progress, and a few of them attained to the rank of genuine commonwealths.

Naturally, the countries advancing the most rapidly were those situated in temperate climates and possessed of but small

aboriginal populations. The basic reason for improvement, however, was neither geographic nor ethnic, but economic. During the brief intervals between the periods of violence, rapid industrial development was marked, and this fact enabled men lured by the desire to acquire wealth to see that war and political instability were antagonistic to financial prosperity. Hence, these potential capitalists became advocates and supporters of peace and order, which, though often purchased at the price of election frauds and other varieties of political corruption, was, nevertheless, an advancement upon recourse to the sword.

Contemporaneously with an increasingly active regard for constitutional government in itself, have come changes favourable to a greater degree of political democracy. In some countries, such as Chile, the modifications have been produced by gradual evolution; in others, as Mexico, they have largely been the result of explosion—revolution. During the past ten years especially have opportunities multiplied for the exercise of popular influence in political matters.

One of the most general changes has been in the direction of making and keeping the Chief Executive the servant of the people, rather than their master—of preventing Presidents from becoming Dictators. The seizure of absolute power in times past was made comparatively easy through close organic relationship between the nominal President and the army. Hence, the Mexican Constitution of 1917 and the Peruvian Constitution of 1920 both state that no member of the army is qualified for the Presidency unless he resigns his military office within a certain minimum period previous to the election. To prevent Presidents from becoming so attached to their offices as to be tempted to cling to them indefinitely, the Chilean and Mexican Constitutions make the Chief Executive permanently ineligible for reëlection, while the Uruguayan Constitution of 1919 increases the period of ineligibility from four years to eight. The Constitutions of both Mexico and Uruguay likewise guard against the usurpation of Congressional authority by the President, through provision for joint committees of Congress which shall act for that body during its vacation.

Hispanic American Chief Executives have been forced also to

yield to others some of the authority formerly vested in themselves alone by the national constitutions. This fact is especially significant of progress towards greater popular control. Chile has gradually developed a cabinet system of government, as a result of which the President now occupies a position no more influential than that of the Chief Executive of France; in Peru, on the other hand, a somewhat similar change has been provided for at one stroke by conscious legislative action. A Cabinet, or Council of State, of seven members, according to the new Peruvian Constitution, must be appointed by the Council of Ministers with the approval of the Senate. This body is responsible to Congress and must resign if at any time either the Senate or the Chamber passes a vote of lack of confidence. If this provision is enforced, the President will most certainly lose power and become but a shadow of the dictator type which has filled the Chief Executive's chair in Peru most of the time during a hundred years.

Uruguay, the most progressive politically of all of the States,—which fact has led it to be called the “social political laboratory” of South America,—has curtailed the power of its Chief Executive by measures of a more original nature, for Uruguay does not consider it necessary to wait for precedents. All of the former administrative functions of the President have been transferred to a *Comisión Nacional de Administración* of nine members elected by popular vote for six years, one-third being chosen biennially. This body is responsible to Congress and has charge over such matters as education, labor, banking, health and sanitation, and the like. The division of work indicated leaves only matters which are distinctly political in the hands of the President; but Dr. Baltazar Brum, during whose administration the innovation was introduced, is quite favorable to the change, for he believes that formerly too much power was in the hands of the Chief Executive. He has, furthermore, expressed a cheerful willingness to resign his whole remaining authority to an Executive Commission, which change is under serious consideration, should the people at any time decide that they desire it.

President Brum is a truly remarkable man, typical of a small but growing group which is the best hope of Hispanic America.

Not only is he characterized by a spirit of generosity and of practical idealism, but unusual mental hospitality is his also, as is instanced by the fact that before taking office he traveled extensively through North and South America studying conditions and making friends in the hope of helping his people to the best.

An Executive Commission such as the Uruguayans have under discussion was included in the governmental machinery of the short-lived Central American Union of 1921, as a guarantee against Presidential usurpation of authority, which has been the worst political curse of the Isthmian countries. It was based upon the Swiss model, and vested executive authority in a Federal Council, the members of which were elected by the people for a term of five years from each State having membership in the Union. Such an arrangement will doubtless be found in the Constitution of the permanent Central American Union which is bound to appear in the future.

In harmony with the movement elsewhere, most of the Hispanic American governments have, by one means or another, extended the suffrage to include new classes. Property qualifications have been reduced or eliminated, Chile, which has abolished all such qualifications being a marked example; educational facilities have been improved, thus enabling more persons to meet the literacy test; and many women have been given the ballot. It is through the enfranchisement of women that the greatest change in the personnel of the voters may be expected in the near future. In Costa Rica and in parts of Mexico women now have the ballot, and by the Central American Union they were granted a voice and vote in federal matters as well as the men. Within the past year bills giving women the suffrage have been introduced into the Congresses of Uruguay and Brazil. President Brum himself initiated the measure in Uruguay, while in Brazil Dr. Bertha Lutz, "the brains of the Brazilian woman movement," and president of the Brazilian League for the Emancipation of Women, was largely responsible for the introduction of the bill and has since been the vigilant guardian of its interests. So far, neither measure has become a law, but little doubt exists that the enfranchisement of the women

of Brazil and Uruguay will be accomplished in the near future. Several of the other Hispanic American States possess strong and active suffrage organizations, notably Argentina, whose women have for many years shown themselves to be large visioned, public spirited, and outstandingly efficient in their undertakings; and Chile, whose president, Dr. Arturo Alessandri, is pledged to woman suffrage and has shown unusual friendliness towards other proposed legislative reforms in the interest of women and children. Even in the most backward States faint feminist stirrings are perceptible.

With the extension of the suffrage have come new and wider opportunities for its exercise. The provision in the recently-adopted Constitution of Uruguay for the election of the President by direct vote of the people, instead of by Congress, is an instance of this, but a more general and more significant new application of the ballot is that resulting from the increase in local autonomy. In Chile, the provincial governors, formerly appointed by the Central Government, are now chosen by popular vote, and in Uruguay the former *jefes politicos*, likewise appointed by the central authority to headships in the provinces, have given place to assemblies and councils whose members hold their positions by the direct will of the people. The Carranza Constitution gives the Mexican municipalities the right to choose their own councils by popular vote, while the new Constitution of Peru not only extends to the municipalities authority never before enjoyed but likewise shows an increased regard for local interests and sectional differences through the creation of separate congresses elected by popular vote for the three regions into which the country has been divided. These congresses are empowered to meet annually and enact legislation subject to the approval of the President, or, in the case of his veto, of the Congress of the republic, which, under the new Constitution, is a more democratic body than formerly because the property and high intellectual qualifications previously required for membership have been abolished.

The changes in the direction of greater political democracy mentioned in the preceding pages make a rather impressive array—on paper. In view of the past record of many of the

States concerned, it is entirely legitimate to ask whether, after all, the new legislative trend is of any real significance. Will the modifications provided for remain mere "paper laws", or will they be enforced and become vital influences in the government of the States? Any answer based upon even a superficial knowledge of the situation must, though qualified, be optimistic. Without doubt, some of the laws will be ignored to a greater or less degree—as are our Fourteenth and Eighteenth Amendments and portions of our national Bill of Rights; and, in all probability, such a State as Peru, which possesses a virtually unbroken record of autocratic rule, will do less to democratize its Government in conformity with its Constitution than will Chile with its well-established precedent for constitutional government, or even Mexico, whose political traditions are more varied and which has during the past ten years laboured hard to gain its political salvation.

Nevertheless, in most of the Hispanic American countries a much more rapid growth in political democracy may be expected in the near future than has been witnessed in the past. The increased intolerance with autocratic rule resulting from the World War helps to offer assurance of this, as does the improvement in educational facilities, and likewise the healthy spirit of self-criticism found in most of the States—a spirit never entirely wanting, but much augmented during recent years by the influence of young men and women who have returned to their own lands after studying in the United States. The persistent, growing political idealism of the people is, however, the best guarantee for the realization of true democratic republicanism in Hispanic America.

MARY WILHELMINE WILLIAMS.

WHAT IS BAD POETRY?

BY ROBERT GRAVES

BEFORE attempting to examine the question "What is *bad* Poetry?" I owe you some idea of what I understand by Poetry without any qualifying adjective and must show where I am in agreement with the traditional view of its nature, mechanism, and functions, and where I disagree. Also I must ask those of you who are acquainted with my recent *On English Poetry* to recognise my present position as being a development and in many aspects a downright denial of the views tentatively and often half-humourously held in that volume of notebook reflections.

I will ask you to think of Poetry in two very different capacities without for a moment confusing them—Poetry as it fulfils certain needs in the poet, and Poetry as it fulfils certain needs in the reader. I have held hitherto and still hold that Poetry is for the poet a means of informing himself on many planes simultaneously, the plane of primitive imagery, the intellectual plane, the musical plane of rhythm structure and texture—of informing himself on these and possibly on other distinguishable planes of the relation in his mind of certain inharmonious interests, you may call them his sub-personalities or other selves. For the reader, Poetry is a means of similarly informing himself of the relation of analogous interests hitherto inharmonious on these same various planes. For the poet, the writing of poetry accomplishes a certain end, irrespective of whether the poem ever finds another reader but himself, that of ridding himself of these conflicts between his sub-personalities. For the reader, without necessarily any direct regard to the history of the poet, the reading of poetry performs a similar service; it acts for him as a physician of his mental disorders. I hold that a well-chosen anthology should be a medicine-chest against all ordinary mental disorders, but I should add that no medicine and no