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Apocalyptic Vision and Modernism's Dismantling of Scientific Discourse: Lugones's "Yzur"

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Abstract: Recent studies on Modernism have emphasized the movement's sense of catastrophism, its anticipation of apocalypse on the eve of the twentieth century. This attitude of trepidation and horror of the future is strongly reflected in Modernism's attitude toward science. The Modernist movement extolled pseudo-scientific doctrines associated with alchemy and spiritualism while it attacked experimental science as a Faustian bartering in death. One modernist whose work represents a frontal attack on the methods and discourse of science is Leopoldo Lugones. "Yzur," a masterpiece of modernist short fiction published in *Las fuerzas extrañas* (1906), displays Lugones's and by extension Modernism's skepticism surrounding the folly of experimental science by unmasking hypocrisies and misrepresentations in scientific discourse. An obsessed investigator sets out to teach a chimpanzee to speak, exposing the sham of scientific inquiry and the empty myth of human progress in the ironic reversal of human and simian identities.

Key Words: alchemy, apocalypse, *Caras y Caretas*, Darwin (Charles), evolution, Lugones (Leopoldo), Modernism, Poe (Edgar Allan), pseudo-science, spiritualism

Apocalyptic visions of the future have revisited society during the past millennium on the eve of each century. In the twilight of our own age, one of the most recent manifestations of the dread of the future appears in a jeremiad by Vaclav Havel, "The End of the Modern Era." Havel prophesies planetary devastation which is anticipated by such *heraldos negros* as "the population explosion and the greenhouse effect, holes in the ozone and AIDS, the threat of nuclear terrorism, and the dramatically widening gap between the rich north and the poor south, the danger of famine, the depletion of the biosphere and the mineral resources of the planet...." In like fashion, "the end of the modern era" loomed at the end of the past "century of centuries" and "the century of progress," when people around the world greeted the twentieth century not only with great trepidation, but with a fear of annihilation and even millennial horror as they approached what they perceived as the end of a cherished way of life. As Hillel Schwartz notes in *Century's End. A Cultural History of the Fin de Siècle from the 1990s through the 1990s*:

at the end of the 16th century, religious faith had been overcome by wild superstition; at the end of the 17th century, a vigorous aristocracy had grown senile, a good king cruel; at the end of the 18th century, the grand dreams of the Enlightenment had been lost in the gutter of puerile utopias. And in this 19th century *fin de siècle*, the world was undergoing a decadence which is too marked to deny, which is slowly transforming its polity into confused hesitations and sterile agitations ... and in that studied unconsciousness which has brought ruin to all the great empires. (156)

In Latin America during this period, as Evelyn Picon Garfield and Ivan A. Schulman have shown in *Las entrañas del vacío. Ensayos sobre la modernidad hispano-americana*, the shock of the future and despair facing the Apocalypse were touchstones of Modernism, the literary and cultural movement whose existential anxieties were an outgrowth of an ideological vacuum and the disorientation produced by a cultural malaise at the turn of the century:

La segunda mitad del siglo XIX es una era compleja en América; es un período de rápidas transiciones socio-culturales en que el hombre se halla en el centro de un universo inestable. El desmoronamiento de tradiciones—iniciado en la Colonia—y el sentimiento consciente por parte del escritor de la pérdida de estas produce un vacío cultural e ideológico que a su vez da origen a una literatura de ambigüedad, angustia,

enajenación, antítesis kinética, y metamorfosis constante. Y esta literatura, a su vez, genera una expresión lingüística de tonos y matices extraños, discordantes e insólitos. Se trata del arte de una crisis—el del modernismo y el de la modernidad—en que el escritor se arroga el papel de historiador y agente de su aventura creadora. (112)

It was Modernism's ambivalent perception of culture at the dawn of a new era which probably led Schulman to state in his 1991 essay "La modernización del modernismo hispano-americano" that critics undertake a new critical history of Modernism in order to emphasize "el carácter profundamente enigmático del Modernismo" (93). Perhaps a point of departure for such a new history of Modernism should include its apocalyptic vision of the future as revealed in the movement's ambivalent attitude toward scientific discourse.

To begin to understand this particular ambiguity, we should note that the daring stylistic innovations of Modernism were attempts to understand the elements of the universe in a new, expanded discourse of science. The tactile associations stimulated by the evocation of precious objects, for example, not only enriched the "sensational" function of language as Ned Davison (35–38) has termed it, but also formed the centerpiece of a new theory of language, one which underscored enigmatic ambiguity and the flexibility of the linguistic sign. Supporting this notion, Octavio Paz recognizes that *objets d'art* and precious gems are themselves linguistic signs, not symbols, that express a "perpetua búsqueda de lo extraño" and a desire to return to an archetypal and alchemical past (21–22). In this regard, Angel Rama has labeled precious objects "objetos culturales" whose presence neutralizes the external world's fragmentation and dehumanization within the modernista's "reino interior" (110–11). More than jewels, precious gems are touchstones that provide entrée to the vitality, spontaneity and carnal pleasure of nature's "selva sagrada" (Rama 106). Discussing the ironic presence of *preciosidad*, Gwen Kirkpatrick demonstrates how the superficial fetishism

of "glittering sign-objects" in modernist poetry are themselves subversive. Rather than mimetic symbols, the *modernistas'* superficial "luxury of accumulation" underscores a deep "reaction to what they saw as the poverty of their circumstantial reality" (15).

These critics conclude that the incorporation of preciousness in modernist style were more than a superficial "manía del estilismo." In support of their ideological upheaval against the threat of experimental science, *modernistas'* linguistic revolution went beyond stylistic innovations. They perceived literary language as an elastic and flexible instrument to express a spiritualist vision of the cosmos while undermining traditional scientific discourse. In this way, the modernists' linguistic mission, if it can be viewed as such, sought to infuse language with an anti-scientific imprecision to bear witness to their "horror por el progreso" (Paz 37) and to serve its pseudo-scientific ideology: "supieron interpretar los signos de la expresión modernista a la luz de una renovación espiritual e ideología coetánea" (Schulman 92).

As an expression of this, it is evident that the coexistence of spiritual renovation complete with pseudo-scientific ideology and a corresponding antiscientific discourse is present from Modernism's early years. For example, the spiritualist component of modernist poetic discourse which was expressed in the movement's obsession with *objets d'art*, precious gems and metals, reveals a thoroughgoing renovation of the linguistic sign. This renovation consists of an increase in the semantic load of words referring to precious objects so that they now embody a broader range of expressive and symbolic possibilities which go far beyond their dictionary definitions. In their revised encoding of linguistic elements, the *modernistas* sought to express their awe of the unknown, their wonder at the enigmas of nature, and their attempt to transform language into an instrument of alchemical and pseudo-scientific experimentation. ("Antes [Darío] había dicho que las cosas tienen un alma; ahora dice que las palabras

también la tienen" [Paz 37].)

Pseudo-scientific experiments are present in the works of the first modernists, including José Asunción Silva and Julián del Casal, and utilize the enigmas of alchemy to enrich their poetic language. Alchemical readings of Casal's "Soneto Pompadour" (1886)¹ and Silva's "Ars" (1890) show how the precious materials present in these poems provide a series of coded references to new spiritualist realities beyond the printed page.

Casal's sonnet, which begins, "Amo el bronce, el cristal, las porcelanas," can be interpreted as an alchemical experiment because it penetrates into the animating force contained in precious objects. The poet carries out the experiment in a logical way, moving from the general statement of his "loves" in the quartets to the specific objects of his desire in the tercets (el oro de tu larga cabellera, / el rojo de tus labios temblorosos. . . .) In the transition from the predominating "yo" in the first half of the poem to the "tú" below, inanimate objects obtain a life force from the poet when they make contact with his loved one and are thus transformed. By the end of the poem, the metal and fine *objets d'art* merge with the beloved in a spiritual and material *coniunctio*, expressing a universal harmony brought about by love.

With this alchemical interpretation, Casal's sonnet sheds light on Modernism's fascination with precious objects. Rather than express materialism, the focus on preciousness by Casal and other modernists connotes what Paz has called the "horror al vacío" (21) of modernity's spiritual poverty ("La actualidad, que a primera vista parece una plenitud de tiempos, se muestra como una carencia y un desamparo" [22]). The bronze, crystal, porcelain, stained glass, and tapestries are artfully fashioned materials which grow in an alchemical sense by virtue of their physical contact with the artisan. And this human touch, the life force, reaches out to embrace inanimate objects in the same way that it absorbs the exotic life force from "bellas castellanas," troubadours' and Germanic ballads, and Arabian stallions.

While the transition from inanimate objects to animate beings in the quartets serves as a stimulus to the narrator's emotion, his attraction to this finery focuses on abstractions in the first half of the poem. The *objets d'art* and exotic materials are just that, isolated materials, which do not achieve the union with life until the second half of the poem, when they are concretely and alchemically amalgamated with the beauty of the woman. The last stanza of the poem presents the final step in the conjoining of opposites as the abstract *oro*, *rojo*, and *negro*, combine with the vital force of the concrete *larga cabellera*, *labios temblorosos*, and *ojos centelleantes*.

Casal's use of color in the sonnet's final lines serves not only as the consummation of an erotic *coniunctio* but also reminds us of his magical purpose in composing "Mis amores." The gold, red, and black, are primary colors associated with the Magnum Opus which reveal the alchemical correspondences between elements of the universe and human emotion and sensation. These colors express three key moments in the alchemical process: gold corresponds to the culmination of the Great Work; red by its association with the planet Mars, connotes strength and passion, and by its association with the color of blood symbolizes vitality; and black corresponds to the *nigredo*, symbolizes the dissolution of matter in anticipation of its recombination and growth (Cirlot 146).

Silva's "Ars" reveals the alchemical workings of literature that mirrors Casal's treatment in "Mis amores." "Ars" is a quasi-scientific experiment in the tradition of the secret doctrine as Silva states on the tenth line, "cual de una ciencia ignota." On the first line, the narrator presents a hypothesis, "El verso es vaso santo," which he proves by the last line. In the poem itself the poet translates this abstract notion regarding the supernatural quality of poetry into concrete form. By the end of the poem, the narrator/chemist has brewed in his retorts a magical potion, a "supremo bálsamo," of which a mere droplet will provide restorative powers.

In keeping with goal of an alchemist's *coniunctio oppositorum*, the reagents of this experiment are both liquid and solid, pure liquid thoughts and "fleurs du mal," solid flowers that have survived the world's miserable struggle for life. Like the grandmother's sense of memory in Silva's "Los maderos de San Juan," the flowers preserve the past in such a way as to keep alive the "recuerdos deliciosos de tiempos que no vuelven."

The liquid and solid are distilled and neutralized so that all that is left are watery images boiling with magical golden bubbles. The fire of the poet's soul miraculously dissolves the reagents which recombine in the poet's symbolic forge as the experiment culminates. Thanks to the powers of gold in the opening lines of the poem, art now has redemptive values which illustrate the presence of alchemical theory in Modernism.

In their fiction as well as in poetry, the modernists used alchemical materials and doctrines to underscore their profound distrust of experimental science. Darío's "El rubí" refutes a scientific recipe for the creation of rubies which appear in the story: "fusión por veinte días de una mezcla de sílice y de aluminato de plomo; coloración con bicromato de potasa o con óxido de cobalto" (79) and substitutes the alchemical *coniunctio*, "¡Tierra! ¡Mujer!," the magical commingling of a woman's blood and diamonds, a synthesis of the animate and inanimate, which results in the gestation and birth of new life.

Alongside Modernism's creation of a new, spiritualist linguistic expression is its undermining of scientific discourse. To an extent this is a result of the *modernistas'* millennial fear of the future and its distrust of "progress" which Darío called the "enemigo del ensueño y del misterio, en cuanto a que se ha circunscrito a la idea de utilidad" (cited in Zavala, *Rubén Darío* 11). As a symptom of their apprehension of doom, the *modernistas* conjoined notions of utilitarianism, progress, industrialism, and North American domination as Zavala observes in *Colonialism and Culture. Hispanic Modernisms and the Social Imaginary*. Con-

sequently, for this generation of writers, the ethic of progress and its links to experimental science, capitalism and *yanqui* imperialism formed a catastrophic subtext which cast a pall on their vision of the future. In anticipation of the dark modern age to come, modernist writers sought to discredit experimental science, the principal source of the Apocalypse and a coded reference to capitalist imperialism, by revealing its practitioners' corruption of language as one of their tools of mass destruction. Modernism's spiritual goal, as Zavala notes, was to protect humanity from becoming "convertidos en instrumentos de la colonización o de las ideologías de la clase dominante" (*Rubén Darío* 10)

One of the masterpieces of modernist fiction which expresses the movement's concern with the evils of progress and the destructiveness of traditional scientific discourse serving an imperialist will to power is Leopoldo Lugones's "Yzur," published in his collection of alchemical and occultist short stories, *Las fuerzas extrañas* (1906). The story documents an experiment in which an investigator attempts to teach a chimpanzee to speak. A companion piece to his quartet of science fiction tales, "La fuerza omega," "La metamúsica," "Viola acherontia," and "El psychón," "Yzur" represents a milestone in Modernism's examination of the apocalyptic nature of experimental science and millennial fear of the future. As a metaphor of the movement's skepticism regarding the limitations of scientific discourse, the story outlines the course of the experiment which culminates in a pathetic scene with the eponymous chimpanzee who, dying, utters a cryptic message to his master: "Amo, agua, amo mi amo . . ." (126). With this enigmatic phrase, "Yzur" provides modern readers entrée into various turn-of-the-century notions regarding the nature of humankind's kinship with other primates, human language and the quest for domination.

Primatologist and cultural critic Donna Haraway has studied the passion for collecting wild animals amidst the search for human origins around the turn of the twenti-