PERSISTENCE AND DENIAL OF CENTER: THE APPEARANCE OF THE PERUVIAN POSTMODERN NOVEL AND THE CONTINUING APPEAL OF MODERNITY

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While Postmodernism is being viewed increasingly in a historical time frame as the Zeitgeist of our time, starting around mid-century and intensifying as we reach the second millenium, John Kronik, Taft Speaker at the 14th Cincinnati Conference on Romance Languages and Literatures last year, made a compelling case for the postmodern spirit as a constant in literature, one reflecting a certain temperament, a view held by J. Hillis Miller (31), among others. The work of Kafka, Borges, and Nabokov was postmodern in the era of modernity; a similar spirit informs *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy*, and, as a character in a 1972 novel by Arthur Koestler insists, the words of Ecclesiastes, who "dates from the Bronze Age and God was still supposed to be alive then" (67).

The distinguishing features of the literatures of modernity and postmodernity have been outlined by numerous critics over the past decades, including John Barth (1967, 1980), Ihab Hassan (1972), Bradbury and McFarlane (1976), and Călinescu (1987); in Spanish, Octavio Paz's *Los hijos del limo* (1974) touches on a similar theme, but the first Latin American literary critic to pinpoint the change from modernity to postmodernity in the Latin American novel was, insofar as I have been able to ascertain, the Chilean José Promis in a 1977 essay berating critics of the sixties and seventies for speaking of a "new novel" of the sixties that introduces experimental thematic and textual techniques ("En torno" 16) when such texts had been written from the 1920s on by Borges, Bombal, Macedonio Fernández, Martín Adán, and many other Latin Americans, alongside Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Mann, Hemingway (17). New in the sixties, however, and similarly being overlooked, is the final collapse of the romantic faith in the transcendent power of artistic creation and of other new codes the writers of modernity had selected to replace the already eroded traditional underpinnings of society, such as religion and reason (19-22). Postmodernity faces a void, of which the whirlwind that ends García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* is emblemic (Promis "En torno," 26): God is dead, politics is not the answer, reason has let us down, historicism was a myth, science dooms us to chaos, and the only viable alternative to suicide is to face despair with laughter (Esslin 158).

I should like to propose that the spirit of modernity, and also of postmodernity, are literary constants reflecting a certain temperament, as well as being Zeitgeists. Two novels by Peruvians, *Un mundo para Julius* (*A World for Julius*) by Alfredo Bryce Echenique (1970) and *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (*The Fox from Above and the Fox from Below*) by José María Arguedas (1971), illustrate this thesis.

Bryce's *Un mundo para Julius*, Peru's first true postmodern work and one that is only recently beginning to achieve the wider acclaim it has long deserved, was initially taken to task by Marxist literary theorists as mild, flawed social criticism of the Peruvian oligarchy that was not critical enough (Escajadillo 144 Gutiérrez). The structuralist, Wolfgang Luchting, five years later read the text as a metaphysical denunciation of the inauthentic outlook of the upper classes, as opposed to the authentic view of the child and of the lower classes, with their awareness and acceptance of the human condition (42, 74-75), and he pointed out (19, 68-70) that the novel's ostensible realism hid the stream of consciousness passages and metafictionality of boom novels (*Julius* 74-75, 418-19, 452-57). Luchting did not, however, remark on the parodic nature of Bryce's presentation of these techniques, a feature that has come to be identified with postmodernity, which, as Kristéva pointed out in 1987, "lies closer to the human comedy" than the literature of modernity, which focuses on the "malady of pain" (151).

The novel baffled critics for many years, since its story line is unmitigatingly tragic, with young Julius, from a rich Lima family, experiencing the deaths of his father, his sister, two beloved elderly servants, and the cook's baby. His surrogate mother, an adored nanny, leaves after his elder brother attempts to rape her. Julius's brothers treat him brutally, his beautiful mother exists on caffeine, sleeping pills, and parties, while his stepfather sells out the country to the Americans on the golf course. Julius is systematically stripped of his illusions and is heartbroken when he learns his former nanny is now a prostitute. When the novel ends, circa 1960, he is eleven years old and understands his world very well.

The novel can be read as a sampler of the experimental innovations John Barth outlined as modernistic and later taken over by postmodernism, usually with parodic intent. In addition to stream of consciousness and metafictionality, the novel has the exaggerated prolepsis of *Cien años de soledad* (20-579), glossolalia (409, 411, 559-65), loss of the inquit, reference to popular culture, often, as Lance Olsen points out (93), alongside established literary icons (*Julius* 178-9, 187, 412, etc.), and validity of oneiric reality, which has Julius taking a

double dose of his mother's sleeping pills to ensure double validity of his dreams (421-23). Ludicity as life (O'Neill 70-72) appears throughout the text (57, 170, 208, 255, 388, 577, etc.). An incident involving a school photo has a small boy practicing masterful expressions for hours, only to appear "about to fart" in the photo (384), and while at one level this is farcical, at another it can be interpreted as parodying Sartre's theory of "lookism." The elevation, beloved of Proust and Joyce, of the artistic creator to god-like status is illustrated by a small boy renaming objects he pokes with a stick on a vacant lot and deciding there is no better word than *caca* for what it denotes (414). While some comedy is thematic, the comedy is mainly at textual level, where Borges insists all true literary effect is to be found (43-49), and the narrative "tonito de Bryce" (Bryce's tone), a parody of Lima upper class speech, is well known in Perú (Luchting 8; Rodríguez-Peralta 416; Duncan 120).

Bryce's first novel was succeeded almost immediately by José María Arguedas' last, posthumous *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (1971), which has also delayed in reaching a wide public, in this case the one enjoyed by Arguedas's other, more accessible work. For many years Arguedas was identified as belonging to the Indigenist school of Andean social realism born of Zolan naturalism, which purports to eschew artistic intent and produce a socially objective document. Artistic expression had been Arguedas' overriding interest and stated aim from the start of his career in 1931 (Beyersdorff 31). Although the dichotomy between the writing of novelists who adhered to the aestheticist tenets of modernity and that of the scientistic naturalists was never as total as critics and practitioners habitually affirmed (Knapp 41; Promis "La novela," 9-31), Arguedas's will to original literary expression places him clearly among the modernists, and his narrative prose is an extended search for a way to express in Spanish the words of Quechua speakers. It passes through complex experimental stages from text to text with a usage tried, abandoned, and on occasion modified and taken up again (Rowe *Mito* 41-66). Awareness of language and will to experiment formed Arguedas's recognizable, gentle onomatopeic voice, whose discovery he describes in his lyrical masterpiece, *Los ríos profundos* (*Deep Rivers*) (1959).

The action and tone of Arguedas' last novel differs from his previous work. It is set in Chimbote, the once quiet Pacific port that became the center of the fishmeal boom in the 1960s, and its protagonists range from displaced Indians working at the jobs the boom has created, not the least important being prostitution, to Peruvian and foreign capitalists who have turned the town into a

chaotic inferno. The protagonist foxes of the title are taken from the tricksters in a document published in Quechua during the colonial period and dealing with the myths of a highland locality inland from Lima. They appear in the novel and comment on it, with the fox from the coast performing acts of magic realism, such as a traditional scissors-dance to work the machinery in a fishmeal factory (130-34), and appear to symbolize Arguedas's faith in the indigenous population's ability to master Western technology and custom without sacrificing its own culture and magic. The Quechua, Arguedas felt, have over the centuries proven their capacity to prevail and take what they will from the environment forced upon them without relinquishing the qualities essential to their particular vision, and such is the theme both of his last novel and of the Quechua poetry he wrote during his last years (Murra xiii-xv; Rowe and Schelling 61).

Arguedas was a slow and careful writer who revised his work many times, and only a first, uncorrected draft of his last novel remained at his death in 1969. The jerky, impressionistic passages and the combination of styles and genres, however, more than comply with the eclectic stylistic and thematic techniques considered mandatory for a novel of the boom years and are entirely appropriate for depicting the reality of the chaotic boom town: they prove, as one critic remarked, that Arguedas was "an old dog with the adaptability to learn new tricks" (Higgins 211), but as the novelist reiterates throughout the "diaries" that begin, end, and interrupt the story line of his last novel, he can never come to terms with the postmodern outlook. For a start, he cannot view writing as a mere "profession," since for him, it is part of his being. The literary techniques of the boom in its postmodern phase are an effective tool for depicting the negative, man-made reality with which it goes hand in hand (209-210), but to be like "the Cortázars" (210), Arguedas feels, would have meant being a totally different person and leading a very different life (209-221). It is with the natural world that Arguedas identifies (24, 27, 96, 206-7), and literature is his way to communicate the love and sense of oneness with nature that he learned from the Quechua when he was a child "raised among don Felipe Maywa's folk, placed in the very *oqllo* [breast] of the Indians (20, 204, 210-211).

Arguedas is quite aware that in the search for new codes typical of modernity (Promis "En torno" 19-22) the views of native peoples have been taken over as a fashionable literary trend by sophisticated writers, one of whom he mentions by name (*Zorro* 17), but Arguedas differs from most writers of modernity in the fervor with which he insists on the validity of these beliefs. When he affirms his friendship

with a tree: "two yards from its powerful, blackened trunk one hears a sound, the typical sound that flows forth at the foot of those who stand alone" (206), the reader senses his insistence that this not be taken as fine writing but as what he truly feels.

William Rowe classifies Arguedas as a "translator" who attempts to present a base Weltanschauung to a reader whose target language is differently constituted (*Mito* 53). Arguedas's writing possesses a degree of lyrical clarity accessible, I believe, even when it is translated. One of his best known passages says:

> The rivers were always mine, the bushes growing on the slopes of the mountains, even the little villages and the houses with their red roofs streaked with lime, the blue fields of alfalfa, and my beloved plains of corn. But at nightfall, when I returned from that courtyard, the motherly glow of the world would melt before my eyes, and once it was dark my loneliness and isolation would grow. (*Ríos* 64)

In recent years Arguedas's increasing popularity with readers of different languages and cultures appears to substantiate the success of his literary endeavour; however, I do not believe his fervor in presenting the Quechua vision should be construed as proselytizing to those who might or might not understand. He was aware from the start that not all Quechua concepts will translate ("La novela y el problema"). According to John V. Murra (x-xi), Arguedas insisted that he originally wished all his writings to be in Quechua but was persuaded of the impracticality of the endeavor; then, as an established writer of Spanish, he returned to writing in his first language. His intended reader will sense the linguistic niceties and appreciate when he bears witness to authenticity of the Quechua vision. Nowadays, there is no shortage of such readers, and for many Peruvians, the first, or at most second, generation to attend school—Quechua speakers of children of Quechua speakers. Arguedas appears to speak to them personally, as witnessed in the comments of the exiled Ayacuchan journalist Magno Sosa Rojas (3).

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, the bilingual writer who has chosen to write poetry in the Irish tongue instead of English, echoes the sentiment behind Arguedas's work when she insists that she speaks not only for her own "defeated" language, but for others throughout the world, since she believes that such voices offer the only current viable alternative to the "originally Anglo American, but now . . . global . . . monoculture"

(28). Similarly, the voice of the Quechua in Arguedas's writings, as Julio Ortega has affirmed, not only show the awareness of Peru's misfortune but a dream of what might be (189).

Such dreams form an essential part of the other human constant that Dr. Kronik did not discuss last year, and it is not my intention here to argue for one trait over the other, either for the validity of the revelation of transcendence, such as Arguedas proposes, or for the skeptical outlook currently classified as "postmodern." The two Peruvian texts discussed demonstrate the unusual openness of mind that can be found in several works from this country. Arguedas is anxious to try the stylistic innovations he sees as part of a postmodernity he cannot believe in; Bryce's postmodernity speaks with the tolerant tones of Cervantene humor, not the harsh cynicism we find many postmodern writers such as Heller, Grass, Vonnegut, Cortázar, Puig, William Gass, to name only a few, and which we can perhaps read too in Ecclesiastes.

Efforts such as Arguedas' to communicate, despite the limitations of human language, a sense of human unicity with all that lives, constitute a constant that has informed religious art in one form or another, from even before the Bronze age, yet it is at our peril to ignore the postmodern voice that is ready to cut humanity down to size by mocking the vanity of its foibles, its pretensions and aspirations. A thought for the suffering during the course of human history caused through an equally human will to possess and retain power that plays such an important part in Julius' world and that has often been enforced by the power's institutionalizing the transcendent vision, reminds us of the importance of the world view Dr. Kronik chose to bring to our attention.

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