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DISSIDENCES

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An excessive relation between knowledge and biological life is central to the narrations compiled in Leopoldo Lugones's Las fuerzas extrañas [Strange Forces, 1906]. This anthology would prove one of the most interesting and influential works by an author who occupied the center of the Argentinean literary scene during the turn of the twentieth century, and simultaneously built a polemical reputation through his alliances with the State administration, his aristocratic manners and his political metamorphoses. Las fuerzas extrañas consists of twelve short stories and a final "Ensayo de una cosmogonía en diez

lecciones” [“Essay for a Cosmogony in Ten Lessons”]. About the latter, Borges (72) speculated that it constituted Lugones’ shy attempt at formulating a cosmogony in its own right, a hypothesis that is not too bold if one considers the bold ambitions—in quantity, variety and intensity—of Lugones’ works, which include poetry, fiction, several biographies, a commission on the history of the Jesuitic Missions in Argentina, essays on literature, a series of studies on Ancient Greek culture, innumerable articles on national and international politics, and in the last years of his life, several meticulous, megalomaniac programmes for the national administration. In its ambiguous fictional status, the “Cosmogony” of Las fuerzas extrañas enunciates the metaphysics that underlies most of the narrations of the anthology, if not all of them.[1] Its main thesis is that all the manifestations of life are forms of thought, and therefore, all the physical and biological forces are intelligent beings:

Todas las manifestaciones de la vida son formas de pensamiento, puesto que lo son de la energía absoluta en su eterno doble trabajo de integrarse y desintegrarse; pero entonces, también, las fuerzas son seres inteligentes en proporción con su mayor vecindad a la energía de donde proceden. (207, My emphasis) [2]

I underline here the word “forces”—which from the title of the collection illuminates a path of reading for the short stories included in it—as an introduction to my major argument: that the hypothesis that physical and biological forces are intelligent beings is a literary preamble to Lugones’s late vitalist fascism.

In his late political essays, published during the 1920s and the early 1930s, Lugones will argue that life is so unequivocally identical with “a state of force,” that every juridical institution, every logical system, every political ideal that does not submit to those biological

imperatives constitutes a hindrance to life's proper dynamics. My claim is that these heterogeneous texts—the fantastic fictions compiled in 1906, on the one hand, and the philo-fascist essays published three decades later, on the other—intersect at their respective biopolitical imaginations. I argue that, through his borrowings from evolutionism, science and occultism, Lugones elaborates first a fantastic literature, and later a political position, both of which investigate the biopolitical characteristics and potentialities of the modern nation-State. These two moments of Lugones' writing simultaneously absorb some elements from, and propose a reflection on, a peculiar stage of development of the modern liberal State in which biological life as such becomes immediately political—it becomes, in fact, the very task of politics. This is, at least, how Michel Foucault (1976, 2003), Giorgio Agamben (1998) and Roberto Esposito (2005, 2008) have conceptualized the historical net that goes from the social Darwinist theories of degeneration of the late 19th century to the Nazi concentration camps of the mid 20th: as the result of a complete overlap between biological life and politics. The authors differ in the way they trace the origins of such phenomenon: Esposito situates in Hobbes' political philosophy the first significant interrelation between the notion of life and the definition of politics, whereas Foucault localizes in the 18th century a new awareness of humanity as a species that creates the conditions for biological life to become the main object of the political, and Agamben finds in the concept of homo sacer an articulation of the relation between life and politics as a historical continuum from antiquity to late modernity. Despite these and other differences that I cannot detail here, the three authors coincide in defining the emergence of eugenics that eventually produces the Nazi extermination camps as the culmination of a historical process of convergence between biological life and politics. In the words of Agamben (1998, 148):

The novelty of modern biopolitics lies in the fact that the biological given is as such immediately political, and the political is as such immediately the biological given. (...) The totalitarianism of our century has its grounds in this dynamic identity of life and politics, without which it remains incomprehensible.

Moreover, Agamben relates this politicization of life with the vertiginous passage from the first liberal democracies to the totalitarian states of the 20th century:

[Only] because biological life and its needs had become the politically decisive fact is it possible to understand the otherwise incomprehensible rapidity with which twentieth-century parliamentary democracies were able to turn into totalitarian states (...) [These] transformations were produced in a context in which for quite some time politics had already turned into biopolitics, and in which the only real question to be decided was which form of organization would be best suited to the task of assuring the care, control and use of bare life. (1998, 122)

Thus, the expansion of political representation through universal suffrage, and later the first collapses of liberal democracies under the advance of militarized or totalitarian governments, are both at the heart of the biopolitical reconfiguration of the State. Lugones, for whom politics was always a primal concern, was very involved with both of those moments of the political history of Argentina. He was, early in his youth, a revolutionary socialist who despised the emergent institutions of liberal democracy—the Congress, the European Parliaments or universal suffrage—because of their inherently bourgeois character.[3] Soon afterward, Lugones became very close to the élite that governed Argentina, precisely during the decisive years in which this élite was losing some of its hegemonic power and debating the possibility of a transition toward a democratic system of representation based on

universal suffrage. Miguel Dalmaroni has rightly argued that, during this period between the early 1900s and 1920, literary modernization formed an alliance with State modernization in Argentina. Dalmaroni analyzes the prominent role played by Lugones in this connection; he claims that the State policies for the formation of citizenship gave Lugones a reason to see his own figure as a poet, and his own literature, as State affairs:

Así, ciertas políticas educativas, laborales y electorales del Estado le han dado a Lugones motivos para creerse él mismo, en tanto poeta, una razón de Estado, y sostener entonces, de un modo singular, que la literatura lo era. [4]

Lugones' identification with the nation-State, nevertheless, later effected in him a distancing from poetry and an increasingly active involvement with politics. Around the 1920s, a reactionary and philo-fascist Lugones became one of the most radical opponents of liberal democracy. He actively participated in the first military coup d'état in Argentina, and had the aspiration of performing the role of leading intellectual of the military government that came to power after that takeover, aspiration to which he devoted several books with detailed political reflections and programmes (Lugones 1930, 1930a, 1931, 1932). María Pía López (29-35) rightly remarks that this tendency to write regulations and programmes characterized Lugones as a State intellectual, and became particularly emphatic during his fascist period. It is thus clear that, despite his political mutations, Lugones was always intensely engaged in observing the development of the modern nation-State—with all its paradoxical, even terrifying consequences and potentials. Because of this reason, some of his literary and political pieces are rich voices of a dialogue that he sustained with his own historical time.

My claim is that the central topic of such conversation is the biopolitics of the modern nation-State.

There is a group of short stories in Las fuerzas extrañas that more specifically deal with the topic that, according to my hypothesis, connects the whole collection: the possibility of immediacy between biological life, the cosmos and the mind. This group includes “La fuerza Omega” [“The Omega Force”], “La metamúsica” [“Metamusic”], “Viola Acherontia,” “El Psychon” [“The Psychon”] and “El origen del diluvio” [“The Origin of the Flood”]. José María Naharro-Calderón has analyzed in three of these titles the same moment of absolute immediacy, of fleeting erasure of the symbolic order, that interests me here. Based on Rosemary Jackson’s study on the fantastic, Naharro-Calderón sees in that epiphanic kernel a subversive punctum of these short stories:

Con la presencia de estos inventores, los textos atentan contra el concepto ideológicamente unitario del personaje realista, contra la razón analítico-referencial y los modelos científico-literarios desarrollados por el naturalismo y posibilitados por el positivismo, los cuales defendían lo óptimo de la observación y la transparencia de los enunciados. (32) [5]

Although I find Naharro-Calderón’s analysis interesting and rigorous, the binary logic through which he opposes realist representation to the fantastic seems to me poor to think the complex relations between literary form and intellectual history. Moreover, I think that an analysis that contrasts Lugones’ fantastic narrative with other contemporary discourses, including Lugones’ political essays, may find less subversive and more reactionary potentials of that aspiration to immediacy between human thought and cosmos.

As its title suggests, “La fuerza Omega” entails a whole theory about the notion of force, hence offering a particularly rich ground to explore the relations between Lugones’ fantastic fictions and his late political essays. Indeed, “force” is the signifier that links and synthesizes Lugones’ trajectory from the fantastic short stories reunited in 1906 to the fascist political essays of the late 1920s and early 1930s. First, Lugones’ fictions speculate on a notion of life as a perpetual struggle of forces that become matter and vice versa; this hypothesis supposes that biological life is continuous with, if not identical to, thought and intelligence. Later, Lugones’ political essays will assert that the notion of force determines the continuity, if not the identity, of biological life with politics. For this vitalist Lugones, the legitimacy of the law depends exclusively on a state of force, which is in his viewpoint continuous with the struggles of biological life. Conversely, the political ideals that attempt to interrupt those allegedly biological tendencies are for the fascist Lugones a mystical fallacy. The notion of force is thus central to Lugones’ late political thought, since it provides a biological foundation to his rejection of liberal institutions. In 1925, for example, he asserts:

La armonía y la moral de la vida consisten en su propia función normal que es (...) un estado de fuerza. (...) En un estado de fuerza, la guerra es un episodio natural impuesto por el fatalismo de la vida: un desenlace entre tantos. Negar la fuerza es un desvarío místico que arrastra a la degradación y a la imbecilidad, porque es negar la vida en una de sus más elevadas manifestaciones. (1925, 12) [6]

In “La fuerza Omega,” the narrator tells us about his friend, an obscure and poor scientist, not related with any academic environment and devoted to manufacture “little industrial inventions” (97) that he sells for little money and despises as what he does “[just] to earn a

living.” (98) The narrator explains that their friendship originated in the discovery of a common fascination for the occult sciences. In the context of such a friendship, the scientist habitually comments his intuition that there is “a tremendous force” soon to be discovered, a force that he describes as belonging to the “inter-ethereal forces.” The scientist expects that this event will “modify the most solid concepts of science,” since the aforementioned forces, he affirms, “in accordance with the assertions of occult knowledge, more and more depend on the human intellect.” (98) A certain force is thus expected to revolutionize the knowledge established by positive science and to justify a basic assumption of occultism that, in the narration, the scientist describes as “the identity of the mind with the directional forces of the Cosmos;” or “the identity between the laws that rule human thought and the universe.” (98) The assumption of such an identity, the scientist explains, implies the expectation that one day every kind of mediation between the mind and “the original forces” will be eliminated; machines and matter should hence, he points out, tend to be suppressed.

Over the course of the plot, the scientist in effect detects a force that he describes as “the mechanical power of sound” [“la potencia mecánica del sonido,” 100], and whose discovery is the consequence of his hypothesis that sound is matter. Interestingly enough, the character asserts that his find was stimulated by the ideas that involuntarily came to his mind while “modifying phonographic discs.” (101) In Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, Friedrich Kittler argues that the age inaugurated around 1880 is marked by the technological differentiation of optics, acoustics and writing, thus exploding what until then was “Gutenberg’s writing monopoly.” (16) According to Kittler, these new machines “take over functions of the central nervous system, and no longer, as in times past, merely those of muscles.” (16) Technological differentiation is hence correlative—and sometimes consecutive—to the

scientific research on the physiology of eyes, ears and brain inaugurated towards the end of the nineteenth century as well; and it entails, according to Kittler, “a clear division between matter and information” that is necessarily accompanied by a split up of the human being into physiology and information technology (16). My claim is that, in spite of the mystical halo that surrounds the theories of the scientist in “La fuerza Omega,” at stake in the experiments described in Lugones’ short story is precisely the division between matter and information described by Kittler. The scientist’s attempt to prove the identity between the mind and “the original forces” that rule the movement of the universe, as well as his endeavor to grasp one of such original forces, are both an effect of and a response to the divisions—the reduction of bodies and individuals to formulas—that, according to Kittler, occur as part of the process of technological differentiation initiated around 1880.

Thus Kittler claims that, by the end of the nineteenth century, science and technology are at the center of a radical transformation of long Western traditions: whereas technology operates a segmentation of optics, acoustics and writing, science reformulates the notion of “soul” into the physiology of the nervous system. The media technology emergent by the fin-de-siècle consisted precisely in an implementation of the functions of the nervous system: “A telegraph as an artificial mouth, a telephone as an artificial ear—the stage was set for the phonograph,” (28) Kittler remarks. According to the reflections that it elicited by the time of its invention, the phonograph made particularly apparent the kind of interactions between science and technology that were at stake in its design. This is the case, for example, of an essay by the philosopher Jean-Marie Guyau, which compares the anatomy of the human brain and the functioning of memory with the mechanism of the phonograph. Hence, Kittler points out, not only the development of media technology had required new

scientific research on the nervous system, but also vice versa, neurophysiology after Broca and Wernicke's theories modeled itself on the phonograph: "Records turn and turn until phonographic inscriptions inscribe themselves into brain physiology," (80) Kittler asserts. But this is not all. A second hypothesis of Kittler's study considers the close interactions between the development of media and war technologies, particularly during World Wars I and II. Although Lugones's Las fuerzas extrañas was published some years earlier than the main developments in war technology that Kittler deals with, that second aspect of the latter's essay is nevertheless relevant with regard to Lugones' short story—and particularly pertinent to my analysis of it as a preamble to this author's late reflections on war and (or rather, as) politics.

In effect, in "La fuerza Omega" the scientist's work on phonographic discs "involuntarily" brings to his mind the idea that sound may be or become a mechanical force. From this hypothesis he draws the conclusion that, if addressed to the center of a body, such a mechanical force may be able to perforate it and even destroy it. With these ideas in mind, he manufactures a device whose small size disappoints the narrator, because of its contrast with the powerful forces suggested by his friend. But the scientist describes the small machine by analogy with several implements of war, thus implying its destructive power:

Los vacíos entre diapasón y diapasón, tanto como el espacio necesario para el juego de la cuerda que los roza, imponían al aparato este tamaño mínimo. Cuando ellos suenan, la cuádruple onda transformada en una, sale por la bocina microfónica como un verdadero proyectil etéreo. La descarga se repite cuantas veces aprieto el botón, pudiendo salir las ondas sin solución de continuidad

apreciable, es decir mucho más próximas que las balas de una ametralladora, y formar un verdadero chorro de éter dinámico cuya potencia es incalculable. (107. Italics are my emphasis) [7]

As soon as he described his invention, the scientist proceeds to a demonstration in which he destroys a massive object within his laboratory. The narrator and a third friend are astonished. But the most surprising detail of the little destructive device manufactured by the scientist is the fact that nobody but himself can make it work. This is, the scientist asserts, the mystery of “his” force, whose mechanism he does not fully understand: the machine depends on the scientist to work, because it partially is him, it is part of him. Some faculty “passes through him,” allowing the scientist to see, without materially perceiving it, the center of the body that he aims to disintegrate; this is how his “ether” is projected against the object in question. The device is therefore potentially a dangerous weapon, albeit one that is also attached to and dependent upon the scientist’s mind—or perhaps we should rather say to his brain, in spite of the scientist’s mystical desire to eliminate matter. The power to destroy belongs both to the machine and to the mental abilities of its inventor. Hence the force discovered by the scientist not only provides him with an enlarged capacity for destruction, but it also seems to emphasize his charisma. This possibility, nevertheless, is complicated by the conclusion of the story, in which the narrator relates how one day he and another friend encounter the scientist sitting dead on his chair. On the wall close to his head, they find a strange substance that—the necropsy confirms—turns out to be the scientist’s brain. The narrator explains:

Efectivamente, la cabeza de nuestro amigo estaba vacía, sin un átomo de sesos. El proyectil etéreo, quién sabe por qué rareza de dirección o por qué descuido, habíale desintegrado el cerebro, proyectándolo en explosión atómica a través de los poros de su cráneo. (109) [8]

Attached to the scientist's nervous system (eyes, ears, brain), the device—derived from the reflections on the destructive power of sound, elicited by the mechanism of a phonograph—threatens to become a weapon of mass destruction, but ends up destroying the mind in which it originated and exposing the brain to which its mechanism was attached. A self-destructive turn of the mind's power on itself: this is the paradoxical result of the identification between the intellect and the forces of the Universe. The mind disappears, leaving in its stead a flattened brain, and a destructive device that nobody knows how to use. The secret to control it has died with the occultist-scientist, who attempting to gain control of the forces of the universe was instead dominated by a new agreement between technology and his own nervous system. In the scientist's attempt to eliminate all mediation between his intellect and “the original forces of the Cosmos,” his own intellect becomes the undesired mediation between the nervous system and war technology, and is hence annihilated. Since mediation is precisely the dimension of humanity and of politics that modern biopolitics erodes: while biological life becomes immediately political, the nervous system becomes immediately attached to war technology. The scientist is hence exterminated by the life that his own theories and practices expose to both the exercise and the intervention of violence.

In spite (or rather, because) of its high degree of abstraction and its mystical character, “La fuerza Omega” announces many of the biopolitical aspects of Lugones' late political writings. Both the notion of a revolutionary “force” that is expected to annihilate all

established knowledge, and the notion that the forces of the universe are so identical with the human intellect that all mediation between them should be eliminated, may be considered a fictional preamble to Lugones's late political claims. These assert that, after World War I, the enlightened notions of law and politics have become obsolete. Instead, Lugones comes to argue that the forces displayed historically as violence—which are exemplarily condensed in the notion of war, and which are, according to him, continuous with the forces of biological life—rule the political. Curiously enough, in his political essays Lugones formulated his transition from socialism to fascism through a transformation in his conception of the limits between the human and the animal, a topic that his fictions had previously explored extensively.

Four of the short stories of Las fuerzas extrañas visibly investigate the relations between humans and animals—“Yzur,” “Un fenómeno inexplicable” [“An Inexplicable Phenomenon”], “Los caballos de Abdera” [“The Horses of Abdera”] and “El escuerzo” [“The Bloat-Toad”]. Through a reflection on the figure of the animal, these stories simultaneously rethink the boundaries of the political and the boundaries of humanity with regard to the rest of organic life. Indeed, one could say that any reflection on the limits that separate and unite humans and animals entails a consideration on the boundaries of the political space and life. Since the figure of the animal (not animals themselves) traditionally demarcates the limit of the political contract—hence, of the political order. If Las fuerzas extrañas literarily investigates the possibilities of a continuity between intellect, biological and cosmological life, the “stories with animals” within it address perhaps the most crucial aspect of that field of research: the one where a gap or a missing link between human and animal has historically been posited, questioned, argued for and against, placed and displaced in

order to trace the landmark that would hypothetically define humanity—and with it, the concept of the political, among others.

In this sense, Derrida (51) has considered that human beings could be described as the “autobiographical animals,” in reference to the account of itself, the presentation of itself, the incessant autobiography that the human species has for centuries been writing and edifying. This narration of the self of humanity, both in a philosophical and in a common sense, is always founded on the thesis of a limit, rupture or abyss between those who call themselves “humans,” on the one side, and the entity that those who recognize themselves as humans call “the animal” or “animals,” on the other. Agamben (2004, 33-38) has similarly talked about an “anthropological machine,” of which the ancient version works mainly in the realm of metaphysics, whereas its modern version belongs to the field of natural sciences. In both cases, Agamben asserts, what is at stake in this machine is the production of “the human,” by means of a set of oppositions at whose center resides the distinction between human and animal, as well as the one between human and inhuman. Hence, Agamben concludes (37), this machine “necessarily functions by means of an exclusion (which is also always already a capturing) and an inclusion (which is also always already an exclusion).” In this game of exclusion-inclusion, what the machine actually produces, Agamben says, is a state of exception, a zone of indistinction where the human is animalized (and hence excluded) and the animal is humanized (and hence included). The concrete results of such an operation are a number of historical figures whose violence consists in both capturing and excluding its victims in a mortal state of indetermination: the Jew that anti-Semitism has seen as the non-human within humanity; the slave, the barbarian, the stranger, which the machine has constructed as an animal entity under a human form. Because it produces this zone of

indistinction, the anthropological machine is a bloody and mortal device, Agamben warns us, whose mechanism we must understand in order to be able to, eventually, stop it.

The figure of the animal functions thus as an inverted mirror of humanity whose images have crucial consequences. One of the innumerable symbolic effects of Darwin's theory of evolution, towards the end of the nineteenth century, was to ignite new questions about the limit between humanity and animality, about the possibility of scientifically tracing such a limit and its foundations, and even about the existence of the boundary at all. The fantastic narrative of Las fuerzas extrañas is in many senses propelled by this basic assumption of Darwin's theory of evolution: the common origins of all living forms. The anxiety generated by this new conception of the species was even formulated by Darwin himself at the end of The Descent of Man:

We must, however, acknowledge (...) that man with all his noble qualities, with sympathy which feels for the most debased, with benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living creature, with his god-like intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system (...)—Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin. (Appleman, 254)

Many of the narrations of Las fuerzas extrañas investigate the interrogatives opened by this premise of evolutionism, even when they manifestly attempt to negate its Darwinian formulation, or at least partially contradict it.

“Yzur,” for example, inquires into the possibility of a latent humanity of the animal, thus inverting the notion of a latent animality of the human entailed by evolutionism. With a

monkey as its protagonist, this narration alludes to the innumerable enterprises that by the late 19th century attempted to finally uncover the origin of the human being, how had the human evolved from the animal, and what exactly had the missing link between them looked like (Agamben 2004, 32). In effect, in “Yzur” the narrator tells us that, after having bought a monkey from a bankrupt circus, one afternoon he reads that the natives of Java considered that the monkeys’ lack of language was not due to incapacity, but to abstention: they do not speak, Javanese people would say, so that they are not forced to labor. The mention of Java seems an allusion to the discovery of some fossils made in that island in 1891; according to Agamben (2002, 34), Ernst Haeckel immediately deduced that those remainders pertained to the missing link on which he had previously speculated, which he had characterized as a monkey-man and named Pithekantropus Alalus, since the main difference between this creature and the human would have been the lack of language. The Javanese legend that the narrator of “Yzur” encounters is precisely a reformulation of Haeckel’s Pithekantropus Alalus, insofar as it complicates the notion that the ability of language defines the boundary between man and animal. From the Javanese hypothesis, the narrator draws his own: monkeys were once men that, for some reason, stopped talking, after which they effectively lost the phonic and mental ability of language; hence, those primitive men would have then regressed to their previous animal status. In order to prove his idea, and intuiting the latent and arrested humanity of his own chimpanzee, the narrator decides to teach Yzur how to speak, on the basis that there is no scientific reason for which monkeys would not be capable of acquiring language. Using as a model the methods for the teaching of language to deaf-mute people, the narrator decides to begin Yzur’s education by the development of his phonetic apparatus. At some point he mentions, nevertheless, a methodological procedure of his that surely differs from the methods applied with deaf-mute people; he describes that

he starts every lesson with two affirmations addressed to Yzur: “I am your Master,” first, and then “You are my monkey.” (207) He does so, the narrator explains, in order to bring to the monkey’s “spirit” the certitude of a total truth. Truth is then here defined as a hierarchical relation between human and animal, even when the lessons aim to prove that that specific animal is also human, that he once was and can potentially be a human being.

After three years of sustained effort, the monkey only learns to pronounce the vowels and a few consonants. Just when the narrator begins to feel resentment against Yzur because of the latter’s “rebellious muteness,” (206) he learns that the monkey effectively is able, but refuses, to speak. One night the narrator’s cook affirms that he found the monkey “speaking real words.” (206) The next day, when at the lesson Yzur only utters his usual limited sounds, the narrator, convinced of perceiving a gesture of irony in the monkey’s behavior, beats him. Yzur then falls ill, the narrator says, “of intelligence and sorrow.” (207) At this point of the story, the narrator completes the description of his initial speculation about the previously-human-life of monkeys. The curious detail is that now it becomes evident that his thesis—his primate-genealogy, his anthropo-primate-biography—reduplicates as history of a species—an animal-once-human species—the specific story that the narrator tells us about his own experience with Yzur. Mise-en-abyme, the narrator’s theory of the origin and decline of the primate-once-human species, that is simultaneously his theory of the origin of the human-all-too-human-species, both repeats and explains the story of the narrator’s relationship and experiment with Yzur. Or on the contrary, the narrator’s theory attempts to explain by repeating, by imagining an evolutionary mise-en-scène of his own master-slave relation with his monkey. Since his genealogy posits that some old anthropoids of the jungle, ancestors of today’s monkeys who at that moment possessed the ability of language, were

once forced to silence, and hence to an “intellectual suicide,” by a “barbarous injustice:” (207-8) they were violently dominated by—and thus became slaves to—stronger anthropoids, who were the ancestors of today’s human beings:

Infortunios del antropoide retrasado en la evolución cuya delantera tomaba el humano con un despotismo de sombría barbarie, habían, sin duda destronado a las grandes familias cuadrumanas del dominio arbóreo de sus primitivos edenes, raleando sus filas, cautivando sus hembras para organizar la esclavitud desde el propio vientre materno, hasta infundir a su impotencia de vencidas el acto de dignidad mortal que las llevaba a romper con el enemigo el vínculo superior también, pero infausto de la palabra, refugiándose como salvación suprema en la noche de la animalidad. (Lugones 1996, 208) [9]

In “Yzur” the humans’ fall into violence is correlative to their conquest of language: language and violence belong together since they together demarcate, in this speculative anthropology, the limit that distinguishes humans from animals. The narrator’s genealogy asserts that it was the ancestor of today’s human being who exercised despotic violence against the weaker anthropoids that later became monkeys. The latter would have thence renounced language, in order to break the “superior but ill-fated link of the word” (208) that would have related them with their human oppressors. These are the ones who become human beings, more or less as we know them today, whereas the weaker anthropoids regress into pure animality through their renunciation of language. Thus, the narrator’s theory states that the human becomes human through the exercise of violence against the weaker, to which he dominates and submits to slavery. Through such originary act of violence, humanity not only conquers a weaker biological variety, but it also conquers language as its exclusive ability, and with both, it conquers as well the status of species, its own foundation

as a separation from the weak. The latter, instead, regress into the muteness of animality, as a refusal to slavery and violence and a silent protest—indeed, a protest through silence—against the law of the strongest.

“Yzur” and “Los caballos de Abdera” are key short stories if one observes Lugones’ fantastic fiction from the viewpoint of his political essays. Miguel Dalmaroni has interestingly studied the political implications of both narrations, but differently from my analysis, Dalmaroni’s relates Lugones’ short stories to the author’s role as State intellectual during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Although there are coincidences in our viewpoints, I think that the allegorical tendencies in Dalmaroni’s reading obliterate the vitalist elements in Lugones’ narrative, which I not only consider crucial in Lugones’ fiction, but also see as resonances between the latter and his political positions. I analyzed how “Yzur” sets out a game of paradoxes that arise out of the relations between two sets of oppositions: on the one hand, the contrast between freedom and slavery; on the other hand, the contrast between human and animal life. Lugones’ political essays were often concerned with that same constellation; in fact, it is there where Lugones searched for a definition of the political. His turn from the left to the right political wings was precisely defined by an explicit reformulation of the relation between those two dichotomies. This shift is particularly visible when one contrasts two specific areas of Lugones’ political essays: on the one hand, the essays on World War I that he wrote between 1912 and 1917, and later compiled under the title Mi beligerancia [My Beligerance, 1917]; on the other hand, the political essays that he wrote during the 1920s, particularly from La organización de la paz [The Organization of Peace, 1925] onward. I will briefly exemplify this counterpoint.

During the period between 1912 and 1917, as he explains it repeatedly in his articles on World War I, Lugones' main contention against the German position in the conflict was that Germany's militarized intervention entailed a barbaric violation of the law through the imposition of its military force over international treaties. This is why he considered WWI a last and definitive confrontation between despotism and freedom. The triumph of the former would be catastrophic, Lugones argued, because it would entail the predominance of brute force over the law, a predominance that Lugones understands in this moment as the core of authoritarianism. The triumph of the political ideals of the Enlightenment would instead assert the predominance of the law over material force, which Lugones conceives as the main characteristic of the politics of freedom that he sees represented in Great Britain, France or the United States. In this sense, Lugones does not hesitate to make use of the polarity through which, a century before, Sarmiento had attempted to elucidate both the internal conflicts that defined the character of Argentina and his own political project: civilization and barbarism. In fact, Lugones dedicates to Sarmiento his first article on the situation that later led to the war, in 1912. Five years later, WWI is explained by Lugones as a confrontation between civilization, "which subordinates everything to the principle of equality," and barbarism, "which aspires to absolute dominion by means of force, constituting such dominion as its only moral sanction." (1917, 158) Of this series of oppositions between spirit and matter, law and force, freedom and despotism, reason and dogma, justice and power, through which he attempts to understand a conflict dominated by the escalation of violence—a conflict that he rightly perceives as a historical juncture—Lugones always adheres, in these articles written between 1912 and 1917, to the civilized terms and questions the irrationality and injustice of the barbarian ones. Moreover, he often poses that the thin line that divides one side from the other, and hence, according to his

diagnosis, two possible historico-political destinies of humanity, coincides precisely with the thin line that divides the human from the animal. Without justice and freedom, Lugones asserts in 1912, “the human condition is nothing but a zoological fact.” (1917, 22) And the war, caused by “the absolute predominance of selfish interests, which has reduced all the problems to a question of force,” (24) threatens to reinsert within humanity the law of the jungle, to regress humanity into its animal condition. Hence, Lugones would often equate Germany’s attitude in the conflict with animal behavior, because of its abuse of the rule of force and its disrespect for the law:

La necesidad no reconoce ley’, dijo el imperio. Pero, asegurar o mejorar la propia vida a costa de otra vida inocente, es el procedimiento característico de la fiera. Así procede el irracional, y con él se iguala el hombre cuando lo imita. (1917, 179) [10]

It is particularly in La organización de la paz (1925) when Lugones acknowledges a change in his political positions that affects his definition of the relation between law and force, humans and animals. The articles compiled in this book mostly deal with the aftermath of WWI—the international relations after the peace treatises and in the context of the formation of the League of Nations, whose aim was to bring peace to the world. In the preface that he added to introduce those articles, Lugones declares that his historical and political criterion has been radically altered by the war and its consequences. The war, he says, made him appreciate the fallacy of the ideology of democracy and pacifism; he argues that, based on a notion of indefinite progress that posits an ethical telos for human evolution, that ideology is a generous illusion that does not conform to reality and is hence dangerous to the young nations, since it can compromise their destinies. Nations as well as

individuals, he adds, have to live their lives in accordance with their possibilities and conveniences. He asserts now that the vital prosperity of nations justifies their enterprises because vital ethics are defined by the success of life. Every conflict between morality and life, Lugones claims now, is a mystical perversion, since morality is a teleological system elaborated by human reason, whereas life lacks any aim that can be appreciated by human beings. One lives as one can, as one is able to live, and this is the reason and dignity of force: this is, Lugones declares, the lesson that since 1914 history has been teaching us, and these are the foundations of his political essays from now on. “The principle of subordination of force to the law,” he affirms now, “expired with the war.” (65)

Thus, Lugones’ revised political positions are founded on a vitalist perspective. Politics becomes now for him, in direct contradiction with his previous positions, an experimental science that excludes as much metaphysics as emotion; on the contrary, Lugones now asserts that any sentimental abstraction applied to politics cannot but mean a hindrance to the victory of nations. In straight opposition to what he had asserted before, now Lugones affirms that humanity is not a political entity, but only a zoological species, foreign to all the artificial conceptions that we call politics or morality. (67) For the fascist Lugones, humanity only coincides with itself in its biological constitution: nothing else characterizes human beings as such, and they have nothing else in common. Thus, he argues that democracy and socialism, which now he considers inextricably linked with each other, promote a system of government that is contrary to the interests of nations, since those ideologies are based on the mistaken notion that humanity is a political entity, that its members share something else than their biological constitution. This idea is now for Lugones nothing but nihilist mysticism: an abstraction that, because of the ecumenical character that it assumes, negates

any possibility of durable aggregation among people. Geography, race, local convenience, history: all that constitutes nations, the late Lugones asserts, is contradicted by abstract notions of humanity that can only result in the dissolution of political entities. These abstractions are, in his viewpoint, not only mistaken in their definition of humanity, but they also pursue an impossible aim: the concord and peaceful coexistence of mankind through the abolition of fight and force. For the vitalist Lugones, on the contrary, life itself is a state of force, and this defines as much its biological quality as it determines its political potential. This is how he defines life at the beginning of his later, fascist period:

Estado ajeno a la razón y a la voluntad, porque es una resultante de actividades orgánicas cuya determinación ignoramos; con lo cual, incapaces de gobernarlas, tenemos que atenernos solamente a sus consecuencias, limitándonos a intentar entre estos últimos [sic] ensayos de relativo equilibrio por medio de la ciencia experimental llamada política. (1925, 11) [11]

It was only when Lugones renounced a definition of politics whose aim was freedom, that he committed himself to a politics defined as the law of the strongest. The first definition considered politics as a separation from the realm of mere survival; the second one made survival its only object, and the biological dimension of life its only task. As I hope to have demonstrated here, many of the materials of Lugones' political thought were already a central matter of reflection in his fantastic fiction of the early 1900s. The latter investigated the tensions between physical force and symbolic articulation, as well as the boundaries between human and animal; the former sought, within the same nets, a key for the definition of the nation-State.

Notes

[1] Arguing against allegorical or strongly referential readings, José María Naharro-Calderón has questioned critical analyses that, like mine, read in the “Cosmogony” a statement of principles that the fictions thematize. I will later explain with more detail how my argument differs from Naharro-Calderón’s.

[2] Unless otherwise noted, all the translations below are mine and their only purpose is clarification for non-bilingual readers: “All the manifestations of life are forms of thought, since they are forms of the absolute energy in its eternal and double work of integration and disintegration; but then, forces are also intelligent beings in proportion with their degree of proximity to the energy from which they proceed.”

[3] In the pages of *La Montaña*, the socialist magazine that he co-directed with José Ingegneros, one can find articles where Lugones declares (61-2): “Protestamos de todo el orden social existente: de la República, que es el Paraíso de los mediocres y de los serviles; de la Religión que ahorca las almas para pacificarlas; (...) del Estado que es la maquinaria de tortura bajo cuya presión debemos moldearnos como las fichas de una casa de juego (...)”

[4] “Thus, some State policies on education, labor and election have induced Lugones to think of himself, insofar as he was a poet, as a State affair, and hence assert—in a peculiar way—that literature was one as well.”

[5] “With the presence of these inventors, the texts threaten the ideologically unitary concept of realist character, the analytico-referential reason and the scientific-literary models developed by naturalism and originated in positivism, which defended the ideal of observation and the transparency of statements.”

[6] “The harmony and moral of life consist in its own normal function, which is (...) a state of force. (...) In a state of force, war is a natural episode imposed by fate: one outcome among many others. The disavowal of force is a mystical delirium that would drag us to degradation and stupidity, since it would entail to negate life in one of its noblest manifestations.”

[7] “The empty spaces between the bridges, as well as the necessary room for the movement of the string that touches them, made the small size of the device a requirement. When it sounds, the fourfold wave becomes one and emerges through the microphonic [sic] horn exactly like an ethereal missile. This discharge is repeated as many times as I press the key, which allows the waves to issue with no perceptible interruption—that is, with much more frequency than the bullets of a machine gun—and form a veritable stream of dynamic ether whose power is incalculable.”

[8] “In effect, the head of our friend was empty, without even an atom left of his brain. The ethereal missile, due to who knows what mystery—perhaps a mistake—had disintegrated his brain, spreading it out in an atomic explosion through the pores of his cranium.”

[9] “Misfortunes of the anthropoid that was falling behind in evolution, while the human was taking the lead with a despotism of somber barbarism, had doubtless dethroned the great quadrumanous families from the domain of the trees—their primitive Eden—decimating their population and capturing their females in order to enslave them from their mothers’ wombs. Impotent in the face of this defeat, they chose with mortal dignity to break away from the superior but ill-fated link of the word that connected them with their enemies, taking refuge in the night of animality, their supreme salvation.”

[10] “‘Necessity does not recognize any law,’ the empire said. But to secure or to improve one’s own life at the expense of other innocent life is the characteristic procedure of wild animals. This is how irrational beings proceed, and when man imitates such beings, he makes himself their equal.”

[11] “A state that is alien to reason and will, since it is the result of organic activities whose determination we ignore. Thus, since we are incapable of governing them, we only have to conform to their consequences. We have to limit ourselves to attempt among them some trials of a relative balance through the experimental science that we call politics.”

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