WOMEN'S VIEW OF THEIR OWN HISTORY: ARGENTINA 1860-1910

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Although they could never forget their lack of opportunities, legal rights, or social status, the women of the Generation of 1880 nonetheless were convinced that they were witnessing the birth of a marvelous new era: the age of progress. The impact of the idea of progress on Argentine women's thinking can hardly be overstated; in fact, it is difficult to find a contemporary article about women's issues that does *not* mention progress or evolution. Rarely has a society had such a clear awareness of living between the end of one era and the beginning of a new one, but a survey of Argentine writing from 1870-1914 reveals that the belief in a new age of progress was accepted across boundaries of class, gender, and ideology.[1] In 1897, Elia Martínez summed up the exuberance of the times by describing the 1800s as "el siglo de la libertad, del progreso, de la gloria, de la electricidad."[2] Whether in matters of electricity or liberty, Martínez and other women viewed their century as revolutionary as well as evolutionary. Progress, they believed, would cure the ills of the past: tyranny, ignorance, poverty, and, significantly, the oppression of women. Electric illumination became more than a technological feat: it was a metaphor for the arrival of spiritual light.

Tangible evidence of progress was everywhere in late nineteenth-century Argentina, especially in Buenos Aires: railroads, trams, a new port, and the telegraph.[3] To the Argentines of the late 1800s, these material signs of progress were mere manifestations of the even greater evolution in knowledge and morals that would lead to a regeneration of humanity itself. The rapid advances in the sciences that characterized the nineteenth century were not seen as isolated incidents of human inventiveness, but rather as evidence of an evolutionary framework such as the one proposed by Charles Darwin. The theory of evolution sketched a mental image of forward movement; this mental framework was linear, inevitable, and tending ever toward a shining future. If such a powerful force was molding physical nature, was it not also at work in human nature? Raymunda Torres y Quiroga thought so; she was an eloquent advocate of this belief, in which scientific and spiritual values are intertwined:

> El Progreso es la eterna ley de los pueblos y a él tiende sin cesar la humanidad. La civilización es la antorcha que ilumina al mundo: donde no penetran sus vivificadores rayos no existe más que la ignorancia y el embrutecimiento… El siglo XIX sintetiza todo lo grande, resume en sí el saber, las ciencias de los siglos anteriores; ¡sintetiza el avance supremo de la inteligencia del hombre hacia lo divino, hacia lo supremo, hacia lo perfecto, hacia lo sublime![4]

Expressed in the image of light as enlightenment, the Romantic concepts of the sublime and human perfectability are here mixed with Positivist science and technology by means of Hegelian synthesis. The resulting ideas thrilled Quiroga y Torres and other women, who saw in them hope and optimism. Believers in progress could tolerate wrongs in the present, knowing that eventually and inevitably the future would make all wrongs right. The attraction of this world view for nineteenth-century women is obvious. No longer did they need to depend on the good will of men for reform of their roles; instead, they were confident that progress—which, being an historical force, could not be diverted—would make misogyny obsolete in the long run. Evolution toward human perfectibility could not turn and retreat into barbarism, that is, the oppression of women.

The optimism of inevitable progress was reinforced by North American women's advances, which were widely publicized in Argentina's press:

> Llegará, no hay que desesperar, el progreso civilizador a Sud América, haciéndose extensivo hasta el ser débil que todavía gime bajo injusta suerte; y tendremos el mismo derecho que nuestras compañeras del Norte, porque la corriente del progreso en el cauce de la luz va sin detenerse.[5]

The image of progress as a river current—evoking a vivid feeling of rapid, unstoppable change—handily recognizes that Argentine women's current state is barbaric while simultaneously offering assurance that the situation is only temporary. Indeed, the women of the late 1800s were convinced that they would be lifted from backwardness toward a new state of civilization which, they believed, was already observable in France, England, and, most notably, in the United States.

However, to admire women's moral and material evolution in the United States was to reject Argentina's cultural roots in Spain, a heritage that seemed by comparison anti-scientific, superstitious, and misogynistic:

> La América del Sur, descendiente de la raza española, la más ociosa, la más atrasada de todas, por ser allí donde se ha alimentado, crecido y vivido el catolicismo, el fanatismo y la supersición, no podía haber dado otra cosa que sus costumbres, fueros y preocupaciones sobre la Mujer.[6]

While this anti-Spanish, anti-Catholic diatribe is more vehement than most writers' opinions, it is representative of widespread questioning of the Hispanic tradition. The contrast between colonial powers seemed stark to Argentines: England left its American colony a heritage of self-sufficiency and prosperity, while Spain endowed its American colonies with internal dissention and a dependent economy. Women particularly focused on the roles of Anglo-American women, who enjoyed rights and freedoms unheard of in Spain. The preoccupation that many Argentine women had with the Anglo tradition signifies a radical critique of Argentine culture; its Spanish origins carry the fatal flaw of misogyny, and thus cannot be anything but "backward"—the ultimate insult in an age of progress.

Rejecting the nation's undeniably Hispanic past produced a dilemma for the writers of the Generation of 1880: how to eliminate the Spanish, Rosista elements of the past, while salvaging artifacts of progressive, European Liberalism? Women especially had difficulty with this scheme since evidence of Liberalism's benefits to women thus far was as scarce as in the Spanish tradition. Both traditions, as understood in Argentina, emphasized the necessity of keeping women in the home. The solution of women writers was to reinterpret evolutionary progress in terms of the polarity between Eve—symbolizing the Hispanic tradition of misogyny—and Mary, considered in light of Anglo-European models of ennobled, civic motherhood.

An historical model of evolutionary progress implies always begins with a state of past savagery, then goes on to a middle state of growing enlightenment, and finally points to a future Golden Age of civilization. For Argentine women, the first two stages were identified with the age of Eve and the era of Mary. Imagining the savage era of Eve was relatively easy—most Argentines believed that one identifying characteristic of savagery was a family in which the mother did not have authority and thus could not

practice the enlightened love of which she was uniquely capable. Lola Larrosa described this past state in an article that appeared on the front page of *La Prensa* in October of 1882:

> Entonces, la mujer, ese ángel custodio del hogar, no era reconocida como tal, sino que despreciada se le oprimía hasta el extremo de negarla los sagrados derechos que como madre tenía sobre sus hijos…Bajo ese yugo, los sentimientos bellos y humanitarios de la mujer, habían llegado a degenerar de sus principios augustos, enmudeciendo su corazón y acallando la voz de su alma generosa. No existía la unión y el amor de la familia, por que había sido arrojada del seno de ella, el alma que le alentaba y daba vida.[7]

The Marianic rhetoric of this quotation—women are "angel keepers of the house" with "sacred rights" over their children—casts this view of history in religious as well as temporal terms. The oppression of mothers, according to this viewpoint, is sinful, since it perverts their divinely-created nature. Thwarted in achieving her destiny as noble and respected nurturer, primitive woman became nothing more than a slavish child-bearer, giving birth out of man's lust rather than any sentiment of love. This vision of savage motherhood was so repugnant to women of the 1880s that Josefina Pelliza even renounced the Bible's version of Eve, because it did not sufficiently honor her sacred motherhood:

> La maternidad no fue un castigo, una maldición como lo cuenta la tradición en una fábula inventada por el catolicismo […] La mujer, compañera del hombre en el drama sagrado del Universo, queda deshonrada en la historia del mundo en el sueño primero de la vida.[8]

Most Argentines believed that women's salvation from this degraded state arrived in the form of Christianity, as Matilde Elena Wuili explains:

> El paganismo degradó a la mujer; el Cristianismo debía rehabilitarla, colocarla en su verdadero puesto, darle un esposo—no un tirano—y constituirla en única y absoluta Señora del hogar.[9]

The model for this Lady of the house was Mary, whose motherhood was powerful and divinely decreed. By giving birth to Jesus (neatly engendered through the spirit, not by ordinary sexual intercourse), Mary provided the savior for all humankind. Her reward for this crucial role was authority over the family and an egalitarian relationship with her husband. Mary's redemptive motherhood marks the end of the

primitive era of Eve, whose motherhood signified sin and pain. Traditionally, Eve's fall provided patriarchal society with a justification for restricting women's freedom. Nineteenth-century ideas of progress, however, had the advantage of relegating Eve to the distant, primitive past, an era that the Generation of 1880 believed they had surpassed and abandoned. To women, Eve represented a primitive time when women's innate nobility was denied. This epoch, they believed, ended the day that Mary, the Lady Mother, gave birth. From that day onward, woman was restored to her true role: divine creator of life.

Once in her proper role, the Marianic lady mother organized the family in a way that permitted civilization to flourish:

> La cadena sagrada de la familia, destrozada por manos funestas, fue rehecha y la humanidad comenzó a elevarse sobre sus propios escombros. Y siguió avanzando la ola civilizadora, invadiéndolo todo, y las bárbaras costumbres de los remotos tiempos, iban desapareciendo ante los gigantescos esfuerzos de la nueva y venturosa época…La mujer, vuelta al dominio del hogar, convirtió a este en un oásis de venturas y de delicias infinitas.[10]

During the time that women's complementary role had been overwhelmed by male forces, men had created a barbaric society, but the new civilization created by women through the "oasis" of their homes was one of "happiness and delight." This is a crucial point that both emancipationists and anti-emancipationists held in common: if women could not create homes modeled on that of the Lady Mother, then all society would suffer. Throughout the nineteenth century in Argentina, there was widespread agreement that history had elevated the role of women from savagery to a noble, even divine place as the "angel in the house," the benevolent ruler of the family. Her role was critical in forming the Christian family, the building block of civilized society itself. Forces that thwarted her fulfillment of this destiny were, therefore, pagan, devolutionary, and destructive to society.

While it was relatively easy to construct a model of the past that could be widely agreed on, the future was another matter. Many Argentines—mostly men, but many women too—believed that civic motherhood was women's true *and only* destiny; thus, future evolutionary trends would be mere refinements of that already-existing state. Not everyone saw women's evolutionary future in these terms,

however. A growing number of women (and some men) believed that civic motherhood was flawed in its practice and that women's destiny could include more than just motherhood. Their beliefs came to be lumped under the words "emancipation" or "women's rights." Women's rights were no minor issue in the second half of the 1800s; newspapers and magazines frequently carried articles with titles like "The Emancipation of Women," "The Mission of Women," or simply, "La mujer." The discussion was not entirely about women nor about the rights of individuals. At stake was the concept of national identity; many historians, such as Francine Masiello, have pointed out that post-Independence political models in Latin America were simply the traditional, patriarchial family writ large.[11] To discuss changing the status of women was to propose fundamental alterations in society itself that potentially could unleash anarchy. It is no wonder that emancipationists were so cautious in their advocacy and anti-emancipationists so anxious in their opposition.

One emancipationist who had a clear vision of the future was María Eugenia Echenique. Some of her writings were literary in nature, but her growing reputation was based on her speculative essays, particularly the meditative series called *Cartas a Elena*. In *Cartas,* as in her other writings, Echenique shows herself to be a confirmed believer in an incipient Golden Age of progress, which she believed attainable through a combination of scientific, economic, and social advances. In a telling phrase, she described the nineteenth century as the "siglo de las luces, de la libertad, de la emancipación de la mujer y de las grandes maravillas."[12] For Echenique, the emancipation of women seemed as astonishing as the century's scientific revolution; her view of the future included far-fetched wonders such as space travel.[13] This vision of a glorious future made Echenique strain against the material and intellectual restrictions on women of her time. In particular, she was deeply concerned with women's lack of economic autonomy, which she regarded as key to personal and social integrity. She was a pioneer advocate for women's role in the national economy, criticizing, for example, the government's policy of attracting male immigrant labor when native-born women were unemployed.[14] For Echenique, the glorious future was a time when woman

> puede algún día no necesitar de nadie para vivir; puede levantarse como lo está haciendo ya, […] a ocupar un puesto digno de su misión, de su talento o de su virtud. [15]

Another vision of the future is found in Eduarda Mansilla's short story "El ramito de romero" (1883). Like Echenique, Mansilla foresaw future advances for women and was impatient with those who tried to deny an intellectual life to women. But Mansilla, a member of the most privileged class, feared many of the changes she foresaw, and "El ramito" reflects her ambivalence.

The story's main character is Raimundo, a medical student. As the tale opens, he is a stereotypical Positivist and utilitarian who views women as barely human. Strolling to the medical school, Raimundo's thoughts on the triumph of materialism over the soul are interrupted by the memory of his encounter with his cousin Luisa. Raimundo is fond of Luisa, although he thinks she is ridiculous and particularly comic when she is serious or admonishing; he likes her best when she is deferent: "…nada hay que me encante como esa timidez respetuosa de la mujer, en presencia del hombre, homenaje tácito del débil ante el fuerte…"[16] When they meet, Luisa insists on giving Raimundo a sprig of rosemary—symbol of remembrance—which he sticks in his jacket pocket.

Once at the medical school, Raimundo is intrigued, then obsessed, by the cadaver of a beautiful woman. He lifts her arm to kiss it, and the dead woman embraces him and whispers enticements to join her in the realm of the dead. Raimundo's cadaverous temptress shows him the souls of deceased loved ones as well as those of famous men such as Aristotle. Then she shows him the history of existence, a vision that needs to be quoted at length in order to grasp its complexity:

> [V]eíase allí…el camino de la humanidad, en espirales ascendentes, obedeciendo a leyes tan inmutable, como lo son las de atracción y gravitación en el mundo físico, retrocediendo en apariencia durante siglos, pero avanzando siempre. Vi la ley del progreso humano, reducida a ecuación algebráica, vi el surco que dejaron tras de sí los pueblos esclavos, desde el origen del mundo conocido, marchando cual rebaño de ovejas al matadero sin murmurar ni esperar. Vi el despotismo, triunfante un día, convertirse luego bajo otra forma, en otro despotismo. Vi las santas aspiraciones de los creyentes, naufragar en mares de sangre y lágrimas, vi aparecer la era de la fraternidad, esa igualdad combatidas, sofocadas por aquellos mismos a quienes incumbía la misión de redimir. Vi a los enviados de paz y humildad, pactar con los soberbios poderosos, para oprimir al desvalido y quitarle hasta la esperanza, invocando una doctrina santa. Vi la

> incredulidad y el ateismo triunfantes olvidarlo todo, para no acariciar otra idea, otra esperanza, que el amor al dinero; vi la destrucción de la familia, tal cual hoy la conocemos; vi surgir nuevas leyes, nuevos derechos, y como el tiempo no existía para mí, vi la llegada triunfante de la humanidad a una zona luminosa y armónica, y la visión cambió.[17]

In some ways, this vision seems like a description of history as understood by the Generation of 1880: a barbaric past, uplifting through the "law" of progress, and finally, the triumph of humanity. The ambiguity of the last lines results from not knowing where Mansilla is inserting the present, that is, 1883. Did she view her era as the triumph of scepticism, atheism, and materialism? If so, she also was predicting the destruction of the traditional family, a bold prophecy indeed for the niece of the ultra-conservative Rosas. In any case, the shining future seemed very far away for Mansilla, since Raimundo requires the suspension of time and the loss of his soul to see it at all. The very distance of the future harmony casts a pessimistic pall over the prospects of the present and near future. Mansilla, like most of the women writers of the 1800s, was a member of the privileged classes. She was a beneficiary of the traditional, patriarchal way of life, yet she personally knew its limitations and exclusions for women. In Raimundo's dream, Mansilla is able to describe the past's abuses, but her fears about the inevitable future are evident in her inability to describe the Golden Age beyond a mere two adjectives: shining and harmonious. Women's future, for Mansilla, was glorious but troublingly unknown.

When Raimundo finally awakens from his vision, he realizes that it was a delirium induced by illness. He credits Luisa, who nursed him through the illness, for the talisman of rosemary that saved his life, and he claims to be a new man who recognizes the superhuman strength of good women who nurture their loved ones. As proof of his new attitude toward women, he marries Luisa in a happy, non-Positivist ending. All the men at the wedding wear rosemary in their lapels. If Mansilla was troubled about the future, she was clear on one thing: it would include more respect for women.

The arrival of World War I effectively ended the belief in inevitable progress. Was progress nothing more than a series of innovations in the technology of slaughter? Technological innovations, such as the electric illumination that had captured the imagination of the women writers of the 1800s, became ordinary, but also tainted by military applications. Twentieth-century writers could no longer call their

era—without irony—the "century of liberty, progress, glory, and electricity" as Elia Martínez had said of the nineteenth century. Yet, writers such as Martínez were able to accomplish a great deal through their evolutionary view of history: a powerful defense of motherhood, the linking of women's status with national progress, the insertion of women's issues into intellectual debates, and insistence on greater legal and economic rights. The 1900s brought new rhetorical systems and different views of history, but the 1800s contributed a historical legacy in which women took great steps toward progress.

[1]Hugo Biagini is the principal historian of the idea of progress in Argentina. See, for example, his "El progresismo argentino del Ochenta," *Inter-American Review of Bibliography* 28 (1978) 373-84; and *Cómo fue la generación del 80* (Buenos Aires: Plus Ultra, 1980). Also see Marcelo Montserrat's "La mentalidad evolucionista: una ideología del progreso," *La Argentina del Ochenta al Centenario*, eds. Gustavo Ferrari and Ezequiel Gallo (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1980) 785-818. Progressism outside Argentina is studied in, for example, W. Warren Wagar, *Good Tidings: The Belief in Progress from Darwin to Marcuse* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972); and R. Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

[2]Elia M. Martínez, "Reminiscencias patrióticas," *El Búcaro Americano* 15 May 1897: 217.

[3]For further discussion of material progress during this period, see, among others, James R. Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870-1910* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

[4]Raymunda Torres y Quiroga, "Progreso" *La Ondina del Plata* 15 October 1876: 497-8. Also see her "La mujer y la sociedad," *La Ondina del Plata* 26 March 1876: 147-9, especially the opening section, in which she calls progress "a second Nature."

[5]Eva Angelina [Zoila Aurora Cáceres], "La emancipación de la mujer," *El Búcaro Americano* 1 June 1896: 130.

[6]Agar Willianson, "La emancipación de la mujer," *La Alborada del Plata* 25 April 1880: 115.

[7]Lola Larrosa de Ansaldo, "La mision de la muger," *La Prensa* 21 Oct 1882: 1.

[8]Josefina Pelliza de Sagasta, *Conferencias* (Buenos Aires: Jeneral Lavalle, 1885) 46-7.

[9]Matilde Elena Wuili, "La gran causa del bello sexo: educación de la mujer," *El Album del Hogar* 23 Mar. 1879: 301. Josefina Pelliza, ever the unconventional, did point out, though, that "Si bien es cierto que el cristianismo salva a la mujer, también es cierto que la deja igualmente sujeta a la voluntad del marido…" *Conferencias* 29.

[10]Lola Larrosa, "La misión de la muger" 1.

[11]Francine Masiello offers a useful summary and study of this model in her *Between Civilization & Barbarism* 17-20.

[12]María Eugenia Echenique, "Carta IX (en una quebrada)" *La Ondina del Plata* 14 November 1875: 487.

[13]María Eugenia Echenique, "Carta VII (en la cima de una colina)" *La Ondina del Plata* 31 October 1875: 463.

[14]María Eugenia Echenique, "Necesidades de la mujer argentina," *La Ondina del Plata* 16 January 1876: 26.

[15]Echenique, *Colección literaria* 76.

[16]Eduarda Mansilla de García, "El ramito de romero," *Creaciones* (Buenos Aires: Juan A. Alsina, 1883) 64.

[17] Mansilla 75-6.