

**ARGUEDAS AND THE LITERATURE OF ALTERITY:  
A VOICE TO SUCCEED THE POSTMODERN?<sup>1</sup>**

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**ARGUEDAS AND THE LITERATURE OF ALTERITY:  
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The present *Zeitgeist*, our own fin de siècle, is now referred to, even in the popular press, as "postmodern." Given our now general awareness that the connection between signified and signifier is arbitrary, it is necessary for us to clarify our usage of such terms as best we can, even while bearing in mind the impossibility of absolute understanding between human beings ever being achieved, as denoted by that same arbitrary connection. Chris Horrocks and Zoran Jevtic (1996:171) have provided a description of postmodernism that I feel to be succinct and clear, always providing one presumes to have understood the way in which Horrocks and Jevtic, in turn, are using their terms.

Horrocks and Jevtic define postmodern theory as the one that puts "modernity" into question, and charts the "disappearance of the subject." It also stresses the impossibility of accepting authenticity as given; it foregrounds the problems of representation and sees "reality" as a mere effect of language. Society, as the postmodernist depicts it, is plural and/or fragmented. S/he is also acutely aware of the disappearance of "great narratives" (or "metanarratives"), the multiple, transcendent underpinnings that humanity, from time immemorial, has used to explain why things are as they are.

All contemporary academics work within western culture, however much that culture might find itself denigrated in texts by some of them, and a peculiarity of this

culture is its ubiquitous historicist bias. The Marxists are not alone in acknowledging this; if we function in western society, our thoughts are permeated by a historicist concept whether we recognize it or not. Richard Appignanesi and Chris Garratt (1995:8-9) point to the way in which we carve history up into conceptual periods, with time viewed as if it were a "periodic table" of antagonistic traditions, with what is happening at the present time being energized, as it were, by its combatting what went before.

The intellectual *Zeitgeist* immediately prior to the present one has come to be called that of the period of "modernity," and critics now date that period from the last decades of the nineteenth century and/or beginning of the twentieth, when a remarkable number of technological and scientific advances began to occur and revolutionary artistic experimentation to take place during a very short time frame (Appignanesi and Garratt 1996:11). Creative artists outside science and technology, however, proved remarkably unwilling to relinquish faith in transcendent truths, as was also the case with the most famous scientist of the time, Albert Einstein, but whereas Einstein died still searching for his unified field, the artist Cezanne insisted that he had found his in geometric shape, and that finding it enabled him to create in the way he did (16). Not all creators of the period surrendered their faith in the established western religions, either; others still believed in a Science that, since the Enlightenment, had become a metanarrative; others chose new prophets to follow) Marx or Freud, for example) or established new foundations of their own; still others resurrected ancient

mythological beliefs. All, however, had total faith in the privileged position of the artistic creator.

By mid-century the newer centers could not hold either, and an outlook we now call "postmodern" grew increasingly common in western thought until, as the millenium approaches, we now hear of a postmodern *Zeitgeist*, at least among intellectuals.

Critics such as J. Hillis Miller (1975:31) and John Kronik (1994), have made a compelling case for the postmodern spirit as a constant in literature, one that reflects a certain temperament, and there is evidence to support such a viewpoint) the work of Kafka, Borges, and Nabokov is postmodern but was written at the peak of the period of modernity, and centuries earlier a similar spirit informs *Don Quixote* (1605-15) and *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67). A character in the 1972 novel by Arthur Koestler, **The Call Girls**, states that Ecclesiastes fits into the postmodern category also, in spite of the fact that the Prophet "dates from the Bronze Age and God was still supposed to be alive then" (67).

Modernity and postmodernity, as the terms are now used, have been described by various critics from the '60s on, among them John Barth (1967, 1980), Ihab Hassan (1975), Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (1976), and Matei Calinescu (1987), while Octavio Paz's *Los hijos del limo* (1974) also touches on the subject of modernity as seen from within. The first Latin American literary critic to locate the change from modernity to postmodernity in the Latin American novel, however, was, insofar as I have been able to ascertain, the Chilean José Promis in a little known essay, written

now over twenty years ago (1977). Promis takes to task those critics who speak of a "new Latin American novel of the '60s," one that "introduces" *experimental* techniques that had, in fact, appeared since the 1920s in Latin American novels by the young Borges, Bombal, Macedonio Fernández, Martín Adán, and many others who should have long been recognized as counterparts of their older contemporaries Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Mann, Hemingway, etc. Latin American critics enamored of Zolan naturalism either ignored or underplayed the importance of such writers until mid-century, and it was thanks mainly to the proseletyzing of Alejo Carpentier, a writer of modernity in the 1950s, that Latin American critics belatedly realized what they had on hand, only shortly before another change was about to occur (16). New in the sixties, says Promis, and similarly being overlooked by critics, is a change of spirit, not of technique (19-22). The stylistic experimentation in the boom novels had been known since the twenties, but the way in which the boom novels reflect the collapse of romantic faith in the transcendent power of artistic creation dates from the 1960s, and since Promis wrote his essay it has become customary to view modernity as the last gasp of a romantic *Zeitgeist* lasting well over a century, in some countries even two.

Promis points out that the authors of the typical Latin American '60s novel face a void, of which the whirlwind that ends García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* can be seen as emblematic (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, as Martin Esslin said thirty years ago when

discussing the "theatre of the absurd" of Ionesco and Beckett (1969:158) that we now see as an early manifestation of postmodernism.

Just as Kronik and Hillis Miller propose the postmodern outlook as a constant, aspects of the spirit of modernity can also be viewed as existing in times other than the first half of the twentieth century, when it became so prevalent. Similarly, although modernistic and postmodern intellectuals have predominated at different times during this century, both can be found throughout western literature, and both can appear simultaneously in the same space, as happened with two Peruvian novels written at exactly the same time: *Un mundo para Julius* (*A World for Julius*) by Alfredo Bryce Echenique, first published in 1970, and *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (*The Fox from Above and the Fox from Below*) by José María Arguedas, published posthumously in 1971.

If we read Vargas Llosa's critical commentaries, at least until the present decade, (Harris 1966:445; Duncan 1980:135) as evidence of *unconscious* postmodernism in his own novels, Bryce's *Un mundo para Julius* can be seen as Peru's first truly conscious postmodern novel. When Bryce's novel appeared, it was read as flawed social criticism by Marxists (Escajadillo 1977:144; Gutiérrez 1971) and as a metaphysical critique of the inauthenticity with which the Peruvian upper classes view reality by a then structuralist who was the first to point out that the novel's ostensible realism hid the stylistic experimentation of other boom novels (Luchting 1975:68-70). The parodic nature of Bryce's presentation of these techniques, the feature now most

identified with postmodernity, passed unnoticed. As Kristéva pointed out in 1987, the postmodern text "lies closer to the human comedy" while the literature of modernity focuses on the "malady of pain" (151). More observant than their critics, Peruvian readers turned the novel into an immediate best seller whose popularity continues. From the start, they seemed to agree, as no critic mentioned, that the novel was extremely comical in spite of its unmitigatingly tragic story line that on the final page leaves a heartbroken eleven-year-old to face a pitiless world he understands only too well. The novel is, in fact, a virtual sampler of parodied experimental techniques (Bryce 1970:74-75, 178-79, 409, 411, 418-19, 421-23, 452-57, 559-65, etc.) outlined by John Barth in essays that are decades old (1967, 1980).

Bryce's first novel appeared only months before José María Arguedas's last, which has also delayed in reaching a broad reading public. From the time when Arguedas began to publish in 1931 to the appearance of his lyrical masterpiece *Los ríos profundos* (*Deep Rivers*) ([1959] 1964), he was critically classified as an *indigenista* writer of the Andean school of social realism born of Zolan naturalism, which in theory aims to produce a novel that is a socially objective "scientific" document. Although the dichotomy between the "aestheticist" writing of modernity and that of the scientific naturalists was never as total as critics and practitioners affirmed (Knapp 1975:41; Promis 1993:9-31), Arguedas's will to original literary expression places him clearly among the aesthetes from the start. His narratives reveal his long search to express, in Spanish, the words of Quechua speakers, and it passes through

complex experimental stages from text to text (Rowe, 1979:41-66; Beyersdorff 1986:31). The discovery of his own, recognizable, narrative voice, forms an exciting moment in the autobiographical *Los ríos profundos* (79).

Arguedas's last novel combines personal reflections with a fictional story line set in Chimbote, the once quiet Pacific port that became the center of the fishmeal boom in the 1960s. 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 borrowed from a text that Arguedas translated from the Quechua, a colonial document on the myths of a highland locality inland from Lima. They comment on the text in postmodern style and one performs an act of magical realism by dancing to work the machinery in a fishmeal factory (1971:130-34). This act appears 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 take what they will from the environment forced upon them, without ever relinquishing the qualities essential to their particular vision; the same message is found in the Quechua poetry Arguedas wrote during his last years (Murra 1978:xiii-xv; Rowe and Schelling 1991:61).

Arguedas was a meticulous writer who always revised his work innumerable times, and since only an uncorrected draft of his last novel remained at his death, we will never know how he would have wanted it to read. The jerky, chaotic passages and



combination of styles and genres are in keeping with the stylistic and thematic techniques of a typical boom novel and prove extremely effective for depicting the boom town. The British critic James Higgins called Arguedas "an old dog with the adaptability to learn new tricks" (1987:211).

The novelist reiterates throughout the personal observations included in the text that he cannot accept what we now call the postmodern outlook, inasmuch as writing for him has never been a mere "profession" and he feels it to be part of his very being. To be like Cortázar, whom we now see as the epitome of the postmodern novelist, Arguedas feels, would have meant being a totally different person (1971:209-21). It is with the natural world that Arguedas identifies (24, 27, 96, 206-07), and he sees literature as his way to communicate the love and sense of oneness with nature that he learned from the Quechua as a child (20, 204, 210-11).

Arguedas mentions in the novel his awareness that the views of native peoples provided a new code for some sophisticated writers of modernity, one of whom he mentions unfavorably by name (17), even as he stresses the fervor with which he personally believes in the validity of these beliefs. William Rowe classifies Arguedas as a "translator" who attempts to present the indigenous world view to readers whose target language is differently constituted (1979:53), but this is only partly true, even though the Hispanic outlook is so far removed from the Quechua, as the anthropologist John V. Murra has pointed out (1978:xi). Arguedas's writing possesses a lyrical clarity wonderfully caught in Francis Horning Barraclough's English version of *Los ríos*

*profundos*, and northern European languages have a long pantheistic tradition to inspire appreciation of the Quechua outlook, but the fervor in Arguedas's presentation of the Quechua vision should not be construed, I believe, as proselytizing to readers of any other culture, including that of mainstream Peru. He felt that a true rendering of Quechua in Spanish was impossible. Arguedas told Murra (x-xi), that he would have liked all his writings to be in Quechua but was soon persuaded of the impracticality of the endeavor, but as an established writer of Spanish, he returned to writing in his first language. His intended reader appears to have always been one who can sense the Quechua niceties of his language and appreciate that he is bearing witness to the authenticity of the Quechua vision. Nowadays, he has found his readers, since there is no shortage of first or second generation literate Peruvians who are Quechua speakers or children of Quechua speakers (Cornejo Polar 1998:102, 107; Lienhard 282-84) and who feel, according to one, the Ayacuchan journalist Magno Sosa Rojas (1995:3), that Arguedas addresses them personally. We might look to Arguedas's intended readers for an outlook beyond the postmodern.

Another bilingual writer, who has chosen to write poetry in her first language, Irish Gaelic, is Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, and she echoes the sentiment behind Arguedas's work when she says that she speaks not only for her own "defeated" language, but for others throughout the world. She believes that these voices of alterity, of which Arguedas is a distinguished forerunner, now offer the only viable alternative to an "originally Anglo American, but now . . . global . . . monoculture" (1995:28).

It is not my intention here to argue for belief other than the skeptical, or vice versa, nor to advocate any specific vision of reality, but the transcendent has been expressed in literature for as long as literature itself has existed, and that "alterity" constitutes a majority of humanity in sheer numbers and forms the essential part of a human constant other than the one discussed by Kronik (1994) and Hillis Miller (1975), while the voice of the Quechua "other" in Arguedas's writings, as Julio Ortega has affirmed, not only shows awareness of Peru's misfortune, but is a dream for all humanity of what might be (1994:189).

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