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A FEW NOTES ON RELIGIOUS DUALISM IN THE WORKS OF RAMÓN LÓPEZ VELARDE

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Abstract: *López Velarde (RLV) has long been regarded as Mexico's 'national poet'. Among other important themes, such as the idealization of the Mexican hinterland, his prose and verse are characterized by a very stark dualism: flesh and spirit, Catholic devotion and unabated lust. The first part of this article summarizes the most relevant biographical information. This places Ramón López Velarde in the Mexican context of the early XX Century. The second part of this article analyses the metaphoric representation of lust and desire as a religious experience, and vice versa. This accounts for his poetry to be symbolically represented as oscillation. This movement, however, seems to cease and —paradoxically— gain momentum, in his love and lust for women. Women thus become symbols of chastity and religious piety while remaining the object of unquenchable desire. Through his use of metaphor, López Velarde manages to marry flesh and spirit, sin and sainthood, in such an atrocious manner that an altar becomes a connubial bed and communion can be understood to stand for sexual intercourse. It is clear that his Catholicism is inextricably connected with his poetry, his views on aesthetics, and his general outlook on life. Several examples, both in prose and verse, are discussed in order to better appreciate the figurative language used by the poet and the contrast between opposites: sin and sanctity, love and religion, urban decay and provincial sacredness. The article also focuses on his unrelenting idolatry of the feminine, as a way to reconcile the many discordant voices that form his own poetic being.*

Despite being one of the most important figures of Mexican modernist poetry, indeed of Latin American poetry (he was praised, among others, by the likes of Pablo Neruda, Jorge Luis Borges and Octavio Paz), López Velarde is —for all intents and purposes— practically unknown outside the Spanish-speaking world.[1] This is—in no small measure—due to the fact that his poetic and linguistic idiosyncrasies pose a daunting challenge to the most skilled translators.[2] M. W. Jacobs (2014), in the introduction to his own translation of some of RLV's poems, says: "The difficult imagery, obscure references, invented words, conservatism,

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[1] M.W. Jacobs, in his preface to his own translation of some of López Velarde's poems, *Ramón López Velarde, Poems*, writes: "As an example of how unknown, the other major Mexican poets (and even some minor ones) are in *The Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry*, but not López Velarde. Why is a poet who garners the highest praise from the best poets ignored?"

[2] Notwithstanding the many difficulties, we have attempted to render his very personal idiom into English. We hasten to say, however, that if Frost's dictum that poetry is what gets lost in translation was ever true, it is precisely here. Despite our best efforts, we have admittedly lost much of what makes RLV's texts poetic.

religiosity, and romanticism, the emotional rawness, these might explain why RLV is not better known, but they also beg the question: is he worth the effort? Neruda, Borges, and Paz would resoundingly say yes".

Before discussing some examples of Velarde´s religious dualism, it is necessary to provide a brief introduction to his life and work. Before starting our discussion on the interplay of his Catholicism and his unabated obsession with, among other things, the female body, we shall briefly outline some important biographical facts.

A Few Biographical Notes

López Velarde was born in Jerez, in the state of Zacatecas, in 1988. Jerez was —still is— a rural backwater, where he learned to read and write, and unrequitedly fell in love with Josefa de los Ríos, whom he calls "Fuensanta", one of his recurring themes, and an iconic name in Mexican letters. Although often referred to as the finest singer of rural Mexico, he had a keen interest in his times and modernity. Despite Octavio Paz's opinion to the contrary,[3] López Velarde was indeed concerned with things other than the female body, Fuensanta, and the chastity of prime-and-proper Mexican *señoritas*. Indeed, he wrote about language, its limits and scope, thought and knowledge, and the dialogue between scientific progress and tradition. He also liked a flick or two, and was fascinated with the beauty of Mexico's silent-movie actresses. Later on in his life, our poet thought he was cut out for priesthood, but ended up a lawyer. He was also an active supporter of the democratic forces that put an end to Porfirio Diaz's 30-year-long dictatorship. Eventually, he moved to Mexico City, where his doomed relationship with Margarita Quijano would become one of the most powerful symbols of Eros and Thanatos in Mexican poetry.[4] He died at the age of 33, never married and —to the best of our knowledge— never fathered a child. With this quick biographical sketch, we can now look at the role that dualism plays in his poetry.

A Plural Singularity, a Pendulum and Women

According to critics, like Guillermo Sheridan, his work coincides with the transition between the last moments of Modernism and the novelty of *avant-garde* movements (199). On account of his subjects—mainly his idealization of rural Mexico— he can be best defined as a "Postmodernist" poet.[5] By this, we mean that his poetry is less cosmopolitan than that of the early modernists, but also much more Catholic and provincial. He fears Protestantism and all kinds of foreign influences (Sheridan 271). His Catholicism is inextricably connected with his poetry, his views on aesthetics, and his general outlook on life.

[3] In a seminal essay on López Velarde, "El camino de la pasión" (which can be roughly translated as "The Road to Passion"), Paz states: "As a poet, his work is scarce, concentrated and complex…To these, another adjective should be added: limited. His subjects are few . . . the drama of knowledge is nowhere to be found among his subjects. . . . The relationships between dreaming and wakefulness, or between language and thought, consciousness and reality . . . are hardly important to him" (80).

[4] Octavio Paz rejects as too simplistic the sweeping generalization that summarily describes López Velarde as a "poet of eroticism and death". In Paz's words: "death is erotic". He believes the poet is, simultaneously, attracted to and scared by death (101).

[5] Thus defines him Le Corre (14).

His poetic territory is precariously located in the blurry interstice between flesh and spirit. In a most enlightening letter to his father, RLV states: "I partake in the double moral tendencies of this century; along with a disposition towards sin, I nonetheless experience the ecstasy of a saint" (Sheridan 212). It is precisely in this oscillatory motion that the poet himself tries to take his bearings and be faithful to his own being. Let us just remember one of his most famous lines, one that clearly explains his very personal way of understanding poetry: "Whoever is unable to take his own pulse, will do no other than scribble cant and pen second–rate verse" (CRI 528).[6]

Yet, it is far from easy to see how this aesthetic goal —the pursuit of precision and honest poetic expression— can be reached through a poetic idiom that emphasizes the effects of opposite forces. An explanation could be found in the reigning chaos that characterized Mexico in the first years of the last century. We must remember that very few years separate the period called *La Belle Époque* from *The Great War*. Add to this the "Death of God", a violent grassroots uprising in Mexico, the moving image, and a reinvigorated capacity for mass destruction. There is no system that can endure the ravages of these new times. In *Don de Febrero* (*Boon of February*), his collection of chronicles, we find "Dolor de inquietud", which can be roughly translated as "The Pain of Disquiet". Here the poet admits: "I suffer from the disease of my times: sinful disquiet" (DON 409). *Disquiet* was indeed a pervading feeling in the first decades of the last century, which makes it easier to see why López Velarde talks of a "subverted Eden" in describing Jerez, the God-forsaken hamlet where he was born.

As we know, one of his favourite themes is the charm and beauty of simple village girls as opposed to the sinful flowers of big cities. In his unrelenting idolatry of the feminine, he finds the way to reconcile the discordant voices of sin and sanctity:

> I know I am derided by those who reproach me for writing about women and nothing else. But, I am absolutely incapable of understanding or feeling anything unless it is through women. Because of them, and abiding by Gustavo Adolfo's verse, I have been able to believe in God; because of them, I have known the icy stab of atheism. Thus, my approach of even the most abstract of notions is always erotic. (MIN 316-317)

In women, he is perfectly capable of being a God-fearing atheist of sorts. If López Velarde refuses to write anything that does not come from his innards, "from the combustion of his bones" (DON 443), it is precisely because he is the first to admit the plurality of his singular being. He finds nothing unusual in being both a Pagan and a Catholic.[7] For instance, in "La Tónica Tibieza" ("The Tonic Warmth"), he describes himself in the following terms:

[6] The source of RLV's chronicles and other texts in prose is *Obras*, José Luis Martínez, eds. (1990), which, from this point on, is abbreviated as: DON, MIN, SON, ZOZ, SAN or CRI. The three-letter abbreviation refers to the name of each section in the edition: *Don de febrero*, *El minutero*, *El son del corazón*, *Zozobra*, *La sangre devota* and *Crítica literaria*. . The abbreviations are followed by the page number.

[7] Gabriel Zaid says that the poet's Catholicism made it difficult for him to gain admittance to Mexico´s literary establishment. The Jacobins thought he was one of those staunch Catholics. Ironically, the latter regarded him as a one of the former (230).

> I know not if my devotion
> Is a captive in the total insanity
> Of the first theologian
> Who first dreamt of the first maiden,
> Or if, atavistically, I am a carefree Arab,
> Eternally returning from the cruel abstinence
> Of deserts, who, in the midst of jubilant houris,
> Finds each of them pretty,
> And each of them his favourite. (SAN 168)

He confesses he is a sex-deprived Arab, yet elsewhere he wishes he could revert to his "chaste infancy". In coming to terms with this apparent contradiction, López Velarde has no qualms to admit that the only certainty he can aspire to is the inexactness of his being. Once more in "The Pain of Disquiet", he says: "we are drifters, confronted by the pull of contrary magnets. If candle wax leads us to ecstasy, it nonetheless sets us ablaze with sensual fire" (DON 410). These "contrary magnets" are the poetic groundwork that allows this poet to open, as he says, his "five vehement senses" to life, even if this leads to contradiction.

Let us, for the sake of discussion, accept that there are no lives worth living which are devoid of hills and ridges. If there were, they would be barren as experience convertible into great poetry. His is all-encompassing: "Undoubtedly, poetry can be likened to a garment; but it is, first and foremost, substance. At times, we are ethereal and heavenly, like a poem by Bécquer. At others, we are akin to sinful smouldering cigars. What accounts for the demise of Parnasse is its attempt at replacing the uneven human essences with the apparel of falsehood" (CRI 550).

It is safe to say that those "uneven human essences" are nothing but the seeming dispersion of contrasting views in a positivist world. If being human means being contradictory, the oft-quoted oscillation that characterizes López Velarde should not be regarded as some sort of obstinate dualism. If anything, it should be described as two happily-married opposites. In "Poplars and Ashes", he summarized his own existence as "a bitter clash between pessimism and Eve's charm" (MIN 285). This should be read with Heraclitus in mind. The clash of opposites is the life-sustaining harmony that exacerbates sensory perception. In another text, "The Last Arrow", he says the following:

> Perhaps, at the summit of life, the most powerful sensation we can experience is that of our own self divided into two separate firmaments: one made of glowing embers, the other with the radiance of an April chasuble. As we fear the imminent spread of fire from the former to the latter, we wish we could arrest the race of rein-less time, just as we would bridle a steed and tether him to a pole. We wish we could surrender to the stationary, to the anodyne or, at the very least, to take homeopathic doses of irony and excitement, of piousness and licentiousness. (MIN 287)

Elsewhere, López Velarde describes this embrace of "piousness and licentiousness" as his openness to the both "inner and outer magic". He is certain to be stronger than his faith and his scepticism, the sum of which, he says, "has the looks of a zero" (MIN 298), the round

face of all-inclusive potentiality. One of his critics, Carlos Monsiváis (693), once commented on this trait of López Velarde's poetry: "piousness and licentiousness… idolatry of erotic and mystic beasts. If this were to be interpreted as the clash of flesh and spirit, Velarde's poetry would be rendered meaningless. He is not at all about dichotomy, but integration".

Integration is what makes it possible for a brothel to stand next to a convent, for magic and science to be a lawfully-wedded couple. The other choice would be a world of glacial rigidity. He says: "I subscribe to both palmistry and vaccines" (DON 439). Yet, despite his quest for the integration of flesh and spirit, López Velarde fears the decay of the former. He trembles at the prospect of fathering a child. "Masterpiece", one of his most richly subjective poems in prose, consists of a dense purification, not unlike that of the Cathars, of his own self, and a total rejection of fatherhood:[8]

> Fatherhood is frightening because it implies never-ending responsibilities. With a child I would forever lose my peace of mind. Far be it from me to take a stand on this issue with arrogance or fatuousness. Who would be able to correct the spelling errors of fecundity? I tremble, as I hold this pencil, at the prospect of committing sacrilege . . . the law of ordinary life is one of misery and asphyxiation, yet the freedom not to give life is almost divine. (MIN 279)

"Meditation in the Poplar Grove" echoes the same refusal to fatherhood. Próspero Garduño, the character that meditates in the grove, unabashedly declares:

> I prefer having no descendants to prolonging corruption beyond our own self. Let not —just as Thales would have it— there be a lineage of ours. Why should we populate the graveyards? I shall live this time of melody, of calm and light, for me and for my descendants. I will thus live it with the same relentless intensity as that experienced by someone who wants to live through him alone the lives of all his kinsfolk. (MIN 299)

Without being integrated into a "system", López Velarde's aesthetic ideas constitute indeed a philosophy of sorts, one of whose tenets is an unflinching confidence in the poet's existence as an individual. This individuality is formed by the fusion of forces in direct opposition to each other. In one of his texts in prose, "Malos réprobos y peores bienaventurados", ("Bad reprobates and even worse saints"), he suggests:

> If, in a syncretic endeavour, we were to deem sacred the entirety of a human being, if we were to mix life's mysticism and flesh; if we were to erase the official labels of what is high and what is vile, thus integrating the most dissimilar palpitations into a single and ineffable one, our harmony, purity and resolve would be such, that even the tears of the woman we desire would be shed to no avail, unable to placate us. (DON 463)

This "syncretic endevour" translates into a seamless fusion of matter and spirit. There is no room for distinctions of any kind. It would be pointless to ask where our body

[8] Elvia Navarro says: "This can be explained as a consequence of his upbringing; he is a child of Christian dualism, always striving to master instinct, to keep control over the bodily, which refuses to confront, integrate and transform matter" (76).

ends or where our spirit starts. In "Todo" /"Everything") part of *Zozobra* (*Disquiet*), perhaps his best collection of poems, he categorically states:

> Whenever I say 'flesh' or 'spirit'
> It seems to me that the devil
> Sneers at those words;
> Yet my faith remained
> Unflagging whenever I said "I". (ZOZ 223)

The devil might deride the notions of *flesh* and *spirit*, López Velarde is fully aware of the singleness and entirety of his being. When he says *I*, he is in fact making a profession of faith. He is not blind to the conflicting needs of sinful flesh and the scruples of spirit; he simply embraces them both and, in so doing, admits that life is, after all, paradoxical. Again in "Todo" ("Everything"), he says:

> I am entirely male.
> I have suckled from Mohammed's
> Honeycomb and from the one
> That Rome so jealously guards
> On its Center Table. (ZOZ 223)

Having been breastfed by erotic love and chastity, he is understandably at home in the monastery that is Rome and in a harem of lust. Curiously enough, the Spanish language makes it possible to express *love* and *Rome* as a perfect palindrome: *Roma-Amor*. Neither a saint nor a sinner, he flatly refuses to follow one in order to neglect the other. In this syncretic religion of his, we dare say, to do so would be tantamount to apostasy. Also in "Todo" he says,

> I carry no badges of
> A freemason
> Nor those of the Knights of Columbus. (ZOZ 224)

He is therefore able to unashamedly describe himself as "saintly". He is a saint whenever he sails through the waters of piety or even when he runs aground in the islands of sin:

> My being is saintly
> In the simmering flame
> Glowing in an altar,
> And saintly it is
> In the remorse felt for
> Those days on which
> I did not officiate. (ZOZ 224)

It is pretty obvious here that, in saying "officiate", the poet has completely subverted the religion-sanctioned meaning of this verb. He feels remorse not for

surrendering to any base passion, but for not having had sex. Also, the expression "my being" is used here, in the singular, to emphasize the wholeness of a subjectivity, in which flesh and spirit are harmoniously fused into a unity. In one of his texts in prose, "La Guerra" ("War") he emphatically declares:

> If variegated numen and inspired guesses were suddenly curtailed, our sparks of joy and merriment would be extinguished. How desolate the planet would be if human flesh were quantity instead of individuality? The brows of those who still dream of transforming Heaven and Earth into two impervious spheres—relatively perfect and relatively hieratic—cannot have felt the flap of the gracious wings of chance, of absolute freedom, of what is personal. (DON 477)

For him, humankind is not simply a nameless uniform mass. The forceful eradication of what is different inexorably leads to atrocity. Yet there is comfort to be found in the balmy breeze of contingency, away from the stifling atmosphere of the clear and distinct. The poet is thus able to witness epiphanies at every turn.[9] In "Anna Pavlowa", a poem dedicated to that most celebrated of dancers, he says:

> Legs that are a dance of
> Theology, funerals
> And epiphany. (SON 248)

Also, while the Great War is roaring out there, he finds the joy of simple pleasures: "We take shelter from blood and mud in the multanimous nature of the soul, in disparity, the unexpected and luck" (DON 443). This "multanimous nature of the soul" allows the one to become the many. In another text "A Community Philosopher", the poet says:

> My spirit resembles those old fellows that look back on their licentiousness of yore, and, whenever they come to a village, suspect they have fathered each of the countless, dark-skinned, fair-skinned, silent, raucous, girls that jubilantly welcome them. (CRI 520)

His singularity makes it possible for him to identify with plurality. He can be, simultaneously, a lascivious ascetic or even an irrational Cartesian. These, far from being oxymora, are the admission that what is human is also paradoxical. Once more, in "Everything", he says:

> I live in me the formidable lives
> Of every man and every woman;
> In me there is a Pontiff
> That possesses all
> And casts his blessings upon everything. (ZOZ 224)

[9] Luis Noyola Vázquez says of this passage: "But in López Velarde, we notice that, to the bare properties of a metaphor, he adds a spatial projection, a leap from the trivial to the transcendent". In other words, we bear witness to a quantum leap of sorts (98).

We should point out that in Spanish, perhaps because of the influence of English, *poseer* (*possess*) can be used to mean sexual intercourse. Here, without blasphemy, he is the Pontiff of his very own brand of integrism, an all-embracing faith. Sheridan describes this as "pansexualism" (233). He is then capable of marrying everything, because everything can be turned into a wife. In a poem called "En mi pecho feliz" ("In my Happy Breast"), he goes on to say,

> In my happy breast there was never a thing,
> Made of glass, clay or wood,
> Which, in my arms,
> Did not have the human movements of a wife . . .
> Let us marry the simple ostrich,
> The hare, the squirrel. (SON 250-251)

Elsewhere he says: "Thus my spirit, when surrounded by a variegated choir of ideas, finds in each of them an extension of himself" (CRI 470). In "Song of the Heart", he describes himself in these terms:

> I am the speaking bough from which
> The fertile breast of a druidic bard sways to and fro
> With a jungle that is both a Goddess and a mistress.
> I am the luminous pool in whose waters
> Scheherezade bathes,
> Like a pearl under a lens.
> And I am yearning Christianism
> When I leaf through the blessedness
> Of the virgin who was my catechism. (SON 245)

I am, *I am*, the anaphor above emphasizes his absolute confidence in his varied individuality: he is a staunch Christian whose heart is the secret hideout of Scheherezade and Virgin Mary. In this same poem, he goes on to plead his soul to sing a polyphonic song,

> Oh, Psyche, oh my soul, sing a
> Modern song, a jungle song,
> An orgiastic song,
> A Marian song, the song of the heart! (SON 245)

To sum up, it should be said that, in this syncretic vision, the poet departs from himself only to arrive at himself. There is no other path open to one that strives to reconcile the various currents that form him as a man. López Velarde chases after and catches up with himself. His world is a perfect sphere that allows the traveler to retrace his own steps in any direction. There are, despite his apparent contradictions, no feuding opposites that cannot end up in each other's arms. López Velarde's dualism —religious or otherwise— culminates in what can be best described as all-encompassing whole, one that allows all kinds of opposites to harmoniously unite.

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