

Evil, Good, Justice and Law



Leopoldo Lugones

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Leopoldo Lugones (Argentina, 1874-1938) was one of the acknowledged masters of Jorge Luis Borges, especially for his speculative tales collected in *Las fuerzas extrañas* (1906), translated into English as *Strange Forces* (Latin American Literary Review Press, 2001). Whereas some of those 'strange tales' are good examples of traditional fantastic literature, others are considered masterpieces of Latin American early science fiction, sometimes tinged with occultism. But Lugones produced stories in other modes within speculative fiction. Among his many stories published in the Argentinian press, one deserves to be translated due to its being one of the earliest Hispanic attempts at modern high fantasy, as well as one of the first masterpieces of this popular genre in the Spanish language, despite its brevity. Its original title is "El mal, el bien, la justicia y la ley," this is to say, "Evil, Good, Justice and Law," and it was offered to the wide readership of the popular journal *Caras y Caretas* ('Faces and Masks') in 1909¹. As its title suggests, it is a pessi-

mistic moral parable set in an unnamed but fully secondary world telling how evil prevailed over good and justice when someone first devised a way to respect human and divine laws while subverting their spirit and social function. Although the scheming character is finally deprived of his wealth acquired through fraud, his deceit brings about the end of the supernatural fire formerly guaranteeing truth. Thus, the God² who had bequeathed it to humankind is also defeated, and men must live from now on without a higher

² Although Lugones writes the first letter of 'God' in capital, this word does not refer to the unique divinity of Abrahamic religions, which is never used with article in Spanish and English as Lugones does in this story. In these two languages, the article is used with pagan gods, who are however not entitled to capital letters, be they the known deities of received mythologies or the invented ones from high fantasy, including the last God in this story. Lugones wished perhaps to conflate the ideas of the perfect goodness of the theological God and the closeness to us of human-like pagan gods. In any case, both the unquestionable past existence of these gods and the pre-technological way of life in the imagined kingdom, which is not to be found in any historical atlas of our planet, are distinguishing features of high fantasy secondary worlds.

¹ The translation that follows is based on this first edition: Leopoldo Lugones, "El mal, el bien, la justicia, la ley," *Caras y Caretas* (Buenos Aires), 12, 564 (24/7/1909), p. 64.



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power preventing law from being perverted. In a few, short paragraphs Lugones succeeds in conveying the passage from a mythical time where benevolent gods trod the world and supernatural gifts such as the fire of truth ensured the triumph of good to a human time where men are bereft of divine guidance and evil prevails,

even under the pretense of good. In this world of corruption and deception, no eucatastrophe is expected. This sobering conclusion is perhaps truer to our disenchanting reality than any consolatory triumph of good would be. Lugones' pioneering high fantasy story is anything but escapist.

Leopoldo Lugones

Evil, Good, Justice and Law

This is how evil overcame good, availing itself of fidelity, truth and good faith.

The last God to tread the world had given humankind a singular present —an eternal fire upon the votive column of a temple. This fire could discern between truth and lie. It incinerated with instant fury the liar who would touch it, yet it was tender caress to the truthful. It had burned thus for seven centuries.

One day, the region's king, who like any good tale's king had in mind his subjects' wellbeing, commissioned the compiling of the best laws from all countries so as to distill from among these, with the utmost care, a perfect code. Courts of law, which dealt justice, and property rights, inherent to all civilized societies, were thus established as foundations.

No sooner had the code entered into force than a sensational trial was conducted in the realm. An industrious merchant had gone on a business trip abroad leaving his wealth entrusted to the most virtuous person of the guild: a very religious man who also happened to be his brother-in-law.

Having failed in his business trip, the merchant returned penniless, yet relying on the capital he had so well entrusted. When he first asked for the money back, the man replied nonplussed he had already returned it to him entirely and to his satisfaction. He swore and, even more, claimed to have gone bankrupt managing the estate, until he was bereft of any possession save a dog privy to his worries.

The brother-in-law's house was registered, yet there were no valuables to be found, let alone riches as the merchant would claim. Months and years passed by and the perfect code failed miserably to provide a solution to this controversy, which seemed to have no end, until one day both parties agreed to subject themselves to the trial of the sacred fire.

It must be said the disloyal trustee had reduced to a single diamond the state he had unduly mismanaged and, before coming to the trial, had fed the precious stone, wrapped in meat, to his dog.

When the moment came, he pleaded to be the first to touch the flame and, handing his dog to his adversary, clambered the column.

The fire did not consume him, as it would have been the expected case, for the merchant was indeed again in possession of his fortune as soon as the dog was in his hands. However, the fire did not burn the merchant either when, after rendering the dog back to its owner, he protested it was not true that he had regained his property.

The sacred fire went out at once, distrust extinguished thenceforth all friendships, and the notorious code kept on preaching evil through fidelity, truth and good faith.

It ought to be known, however, that the disloyal trustee's offence did not go unpunished: an unknown thief stole the dog shortly after the event under cover of the ensuing confusion.