

PRACTICAL KABBALA: A TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH OF
LEOPOLDO LUGONES'S 'KÁBALA PRÁCTICA' (1897)

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I

Do too many commentators on literature still think too much in terms of linguistic communities supplemented by a “foreign legion” of naturalised or assimilated translated literature? If they do, it may go some way to explaining the tendency outside the Spanish-speaking world to equate Hispanic fantastic fiction disproportionately, though not exclusively (*pace* Cortázar, García Márquez), with the work of Jorge Luis Borges. This predisposition holds true for a certain Anglophone community that, with a good measure of presumption, some might say, is the self-styled universal cradle of non-realist writing. It is not necessary to look far or hard to find examples of this persistent condition. The 2011 British Library exhibition *Science Fiction: but not as we know it*, deployed seminal international examples of Sci Fi writing in an abundance that should have been sufficient to convince any Anglophile, however radical, of the unreasonability of assuming majority shareholder status in the genre. Nevertheless, a review of this exhibition persistently accorded default “centre” status to Anglophone writing and “periphery” to the rest by foregrounding English-language examples.¹ This begs the question: how far can new cosmopolitanisms such as World Literature and the variety of new positions prefixed by “global” emanating predominantly from Anglophone epicentres be relied upon to put an end to more of *this* same? What is more, it is curious, and, for those familiar with literary culture of the Hispanic

¹ For a response to the Anglo-centrism of this review (Luckhurst 2011), see Hambrook (2001).

world, disappointing, to discover that the appearance of Borges on the world scene did not prompt more writers and critics from the non-Hispanic world to take an inquisitive stroll beyond the work of this undeniably exceptional Argentinean writer into his hinterland in search of Spanish-speaking precursors and descendants. Is not a “World” Borges that *still* dominates to such an extent the non-Hispanophone conception of the Hispanic non-realist literary tradition less an indication of the *seminality* and *perdurability* of Borges’s work than evidence of the transnational myopia of the non-Hispanic literary-critical systems that consecrate his work so preponderantly? As regards the aforementioned Anglophone community, dare one attribute this lack of prospector spirit – surely where *some* gold is found, there may be more – to, in no small measure, a prevalent *monolinguculturalism* that not merely prevents “English-only” readers from following up of their own volition interests in other literatures but also may even prevent it from occurring to them to do so? This gives grounds on which to speculate that *Anglomonoglossia* may be the thin end of a wedge at the thick extremity of which huddle the diverse guises in which the aforementioned intercultural myopia manifests itself. Not the least of these is the tendency to privilege unjustifiably the hegemonic language’s literatures: as Gregory Jusdanis laments, “nothing is more deplorable than Anglocentric critics who know no other language save the current lingua franca and who presume their experience of the literary to be universal” (Jusdanis 1992: 2-3). Could this also explain why the index of David Damrosch’s *How to Read World Literature* contains over sixty Anglophone examples of so-called World Literature, but only six Hispanic ones – a disparity that surely cannot be explained by the volume of printed works of literature in Spanish that merit inclusion in an international canon? If so, it casts doubt on the ability of Anglophone literary academia to assume a credible role in the genuine internationalisation of literary studies. Even gestures of goodwill in the direction of

transnationalism are tempered by evidence that Anglophone critics are, sometimes by their own admission, at best one-eyed monarchs in the land of the transculturally blind. Ian Mathews's acknowledgment of a long-established tradition of fantastic writing beyond the Anglophone world "that seems to have been more comfortably incorporated into mainstream literature" (Mathews 2002: 20) than in the UK/US, where, he claims, the fantastic emerged as a discrete mode of writing, is at first sight inter-culturally magnanimous. Yet it still privileges the UK/US by invoking exceptional circumstances (industrialisation and scientific development), which facilitates relegation of the rest of the world to the status of an undifferentiated, secondary *elsewhere*. The exceptional circumstances invoked are, however, demonstrably not exclusive to the UK/US. What is more, the fantastic tradition that Mathews identifies in non-Anglophone contexts arguably has, precisely by virtue of its "comfortable integration", a more legitimate and compelling claim to be considered the mainstream than does the substantial but generically ring-fenced corpus of the Anglo-American fantastic. Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James, for their part, diplomatically acknowledge the impression of Anglophone hegemony that the balance of their range of examples gives; but one may feel that their quasi-expiatory contextualisation – "For various cultural and economic reasons, very little translated fantasy enters the Anglo-American market, while [...] there is a great deal of translation from English into other languages, in Europe at least" (Mendlesohn and James 2009: 6) – is no less an identification of an intercultural deficit, of an imbalance to be redressed, than a justification. Must it therefore be down to agents for whom or which literatures other than Anglophone ones exist as fully stipulated cultural territories and not just the scholarly equivalent of holiday hotspots, to take appropriate action? For example, it was only thanks to the BBC's opportune recognition of the inclusive cosmopolitanism of the aforementioned *Science Fiction: but not as we know it*

exhibition's publicity for Enrique Gaspar's time-travel narrative *El anacronópete* (1887) that the English-speaking reading public received word that this Spanish novella preceded H. G. Wells's *Time Machine* by almost seven years, overturning thereby an assumption of the latter's antecedence sustained over decades.²

The dissemination of the work and reputation of Leopoldo Lugones (1874-1938), author of "Kábala práctica", in the Anglophone cultural domain provides further evidence of the role of sponsorship or intervention by professional Hispanists, translators, and informed Hispanic commentators – a crucial role if Hispanic literature is to play its part in a genuine and timely internationalisation of Anglophone literary consciousness.

II

Lugones's work entered the Anglophone literary system relatively recently in the guise of *Strange Forces* and *Selected Writings*, translations published in 2001 and 2008, the initiatives of an accomplished translator from Romance languages and a US Hispanic Studies professor respectively. Both translations foreground Lugones's achievement as an exponent of fantastic fiction, the former by providing an English-language version of *Las fuerzas extrañas* (1906), his first collection of stories of this kind, the latter by including not only a number of tales but also recording that Lugones is generally credited with initiating the fantastic short story in Latin America (Lugones 2008: xiv) – an accolade that carries by way of endorsement Borges's acknowledgement of this antecedence (Lugones 2008: v) – and being the precursor of Latin-American masters of the genre: Horacio Quiroga, Cortázar and Borges himself.

² See Kathryn Wescott, "H G Wells or Enrique Gaspar: Whose time machine was first?", *BBC News* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/world-europe-12900390> (accessed 17/10/2012)

Yet Lugones was for some time sitting only just outside the frame of an Anglophone snapshot of World Literature's assembled dignitaries before these translations appeared. A prominent literary figure throughout Latin America and one of the pillars of *modernismo*, the pan-Hispanic fin de siècle literary revival, Lugones's literary pre-eminence had already been acknowledged in the critical work of Hispanic writers – Octavio Paz and Borges himself – with whose work the English-speaking world had been acquainted for nearly half a century before the translations appeared. Paz acknowledged in 1974, in *Children of the Mire*, Lugones to be the initiator of the second phase of Spanish American *modernism* (Paz 1991: 96), and, more pertinently, aligned the Argentinian writer with the Hispanic tradition of the fantastic: “We know that the Spanish American Modernistas Darío, Lugones, Nervo and Tablada, were interested in Occultist writings” (Paz 1991: 95). Borges, for whom Lugones represented the Old Guard reviled by Argentina's Avant-Garde of *ultraístas* and whose condemnation of Lugones on occasions bordered on deprecation, nevertheless ultimately acknowledged Lugones's work to be a cornerstone of Argentinean literature (Borges 1955; Salazar Anglada 2000: 603 n5). Even so, references to Lugones in English-language sources by or about Borges remain scarce. There is only one allusion in Richard Burgin's *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* – an explanation of Borges's early decision not to write about Lugones (Burgin 1973: 33). Allusions to Lugones in English translations of Paz are similarly infrequent. Another stumbling block specific to the diffusion of Lugones's standing as an exponent of the fantastic is that Anglophone Hispanists have focused predominantly on his poetic output (Franco 1994: 43, 120, 124, 149, 154, 163-165, 171, 256, 257; Hart 1999: 81-82).

Once, however, a bridge spans the Anglo-Hispanic literary divide, Lugones's credentials as a practitioner of the fantastic become increasingly evident and compelling, as Gaspar Pío del Corro

(1971), Pedro Luis Barcía (Lugones 1987) and Pampa O. Arán (2000), among others, have comprehensively demonstrated. In the introduction to his anthology of twenty one of Lugones's "fantastic" tales, Barcía claims that "[t]al vez no haya en la comunidad hispanohablante ninguna literatura que como la argentina pueda exhibir una tan firme tradición en el cultivo de la literatura fantástica" (possibly no literature from the Spanish-speaking world can demonstrate such a strong tradition of fantastic writing as Argentinian literature can) (Lugones 1987: 54).; within which tradition, Barcía affirms, Lugones "constituye un hito capital, pues mantuvo el ejercicio de ella durante toda su vida" (is a cornerstone, because he practiced this mode of writing throughout his life) (Lugones 1987: 54). These pronouncements elevate in effect "Kábala práctica" to a status of significant precursor. An eminently eligible candidate for *Las fuerzas extrañas* yet inexplicably excluded from the collection, this tale heralds nonetheless Lugones's florilegium of the fantastic almost nine years later.

III

"Kábala práctica" was published in the Buenos Aires-based review *El Tiempo* on 22 November 1897.³ Its publication coincided with the first phase of *Modernismo*.⁴ In many respects a product of its time, "Kábala práctica" exhibits the fin de siècle's characteristic cosmopolitanism. The Hispanic world is present in allusions to Spanish Golden Age dramatist Tirso de Molina and post-Romantic writer Bécquer, as well as to the Mexican poet Acuña, but these are by no means culturally particularised. The frame of reference derives rather from the international, still Eurocentric, cultural canon of the day: on the one hand, literary references to Büchner, Poe and

³ The version used for the translation is from Lugones 1987: 96-102.

⁴ Modernismo straddles, both chronologically and aesthetically, the movements that British criticism calls the Victorian fin de siècle and early Modernism, with its centre of gravity slightly more through the former than the latter.

particularly the French Parnassians and Francophone Symbolists (Villiers and Verhaeren), as befits the prevailing interest in French literature from Romanticism onwards; and on the other from an equally Eurocentric ideological perspective: the scientism (positivism, determinism), disseminated widely, particularly from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, throughout the European cultural world, that is evident in the young protagonist Eduardo's and the anonymous intradiegetic narrator's joint intellectual exploits (Lugones 1987: 97- 99); and the interest in the paranormal deriving from the contemporary interest in theosophy and neo-mysticism reflected in the concept of Kabbala.

The confluence in this story of science and spirituality, two epistemological and existential orientations that converge in the fin de siècle in couplings ranging from antagonism and mutually exclusivity to reconciliation and inter-penetration, justifies placing "Kábala práctica" in the context of the fantastic. As Barcía explains, "Lugones parece situarse a mitad de camino entre [...] la científica ortodoxa y la teosófica, con ese punto de contacto de zonas que es el carácter de iniciado del confidente y la condición de cultor de ciencias ocultas del investigador" (Lugones appears to place himself between orthodox science and theosophy, at a point where the privileged perspective of the confidant blends with the practitioner of occult sciences' intellectual curiosity) (Lugones 1987: 32).

The centrality of Kabbala to the tale is, then, far from gratuitous. The extent of Lugones's engagement with theosophy alone, the place of which in literature he explained in "Nuestras ideas estéticas" (My ideas on art), an article published in 1901 in *Philadelphia* (Lugones 1901), "el principal órgano difusor de las ideas teosóficas en Argentina" (the principal vehicle for the diffusion of theosophical ideas in Argentina) (Salazar Anglada 2000: 601), is demonstrated by the prominence to which he rose in theosophical circles in Buenos Aires, where by 1900 he was

Secretary General of the brotherhood that he had joined only two years previously (Salazar Anglada 2000: 602). He had, moreover, joined the national Theosophical society before moving in 1896 from the province of Córdoba (Salazar Anglada 2000: 604) to the capital. Here he met Rubén Darío, a founding father of *modernismo* who had developed a synthetic spirituality similar to Lugones's: “[Darío s]e informó bien de otras religiones, se interesó por el esoterismo, la teosofía, el ocultismo. Fundió y refundió fragmentos de la teología católica con cosmogonía orientales, la Cábala con el brahmanismo, las doctrinas gnósticas con el pitagorismo, el martinismo, el rosacrucismo y la masonería” (Darío acquired a comprehensive knowledge of other religions, he became interested in esoterism, theosophy and occultism. He blended and recast elements of Catholicism with Eastern belief systems, Kabbala with Brahmanism, Gnosticism and Pythagorism, Martinism, Rosicrucianism, and freemasonry) (Acereda 2010).

Lugones's knowledge of theosophy is reflected in his short stories (Salazar Anglada 2000: 606) and is associated with a reaction against the concept of progress deriving from scientific materialism (Salazar Anglada 2000: 609-610) that is characteristic of *modernista* spirituality:

[L]os postulados que defiende Lugones en sus escritos sobre estética [...] deben entenderse en el marco de la sensibilidad modernista que viene imponiéndose desde finales de siglo y que [...] redime en una de sus múltiples vertientes las filosofías orientales y el compendio de los saberes ocultos – magia, cábala, alquimia...– que preservan en secreto la mecánica ancestral del Universo. Imbuido de esta suerte de creencias que defienden la espiritualización de la materia, sublimando así la función artística, parece lógico que el escritor argentino rechace [...] la banalidad mimética y volitiva que, al decir de Lugones, se ha adueñado de toda forma de arte desde la segunda mitad el XIX (Salazar Anglada 2000: 616).

(The postulates defended by Lugones in his writings on aesthetics [...] are to be understood within the framework of the modernista sensibility that established itself from the turn of the century [...] one dimension of which lay store by those Eastern philosophies and the panoply of occult wisdom – magic, Kabbala, alchemy – that secretly preserve the timeless workings of the Universe. Thus imbued with beliefs that affirm the spiritualization of matter and so render the function of art sublime, Lugones understandably rejects as banal the will-driven realism that, in his view, had dominated every art form from the middle of the nineteenth century).

“Kábala práctica” begins with the acquisition of a young woman’s skeleton by Eduardo, the male narrator’s friend. This event prefaces narration of a mysterious occurrence involving Eduardo and the skeleton that the narrator makes known he recounted to Carmen, an alluring mutual friend of the young men. The narrator begins by elaborating the context of the events – the development of his teenage friendship with Eduardo and their shared intellectual curiosity, including acquisition of the skeleton – that led up to the occurrence in question, which took place after a particularly intense discussion between friends *chez* Eduardo on vampirism and mysticism. What happened after the gathering, the narrator explains, corresponds to Eduardo’s account of events when he remained alone. Eduardo resolved to bring back to life the young woman whose skeleton he possessed. Within half an hour he fell asleep, only to wake suddenly to find himself sitting at his desk in the company of an ethereal young woman who was speaking to him in a melancholy but strangely comforting voice. He noticed that the skeleton was missing from its display cabinet. He established that he was not dreaming. Then, the apparition led him to his bed, and glided back towards the display cabinet. Here Eduardo’s reported account ends with

an avowal of his surprise at not having been terrified by the experience, and the narrator resumes the account from his own point of view with his discovery of Eduardo the next day still fast asleep and the skeleton sitting in a chair – a situation that the disconcerted narrator attributes to a bout of craziness on his friend’s part. The bizarre episode is, however, only the prelude to this story’s climax: the narrator’s perplexity in recollection is transformed rapidly into surprise – an abrupt typographical transition announces this – at Carmen’s reaction to the conclusion of the strange tale: she struggles to maintain her customary composure – an expression via reflection of the narrator’s surprise – then faints. Carmen’s realization – either that *she* is the resurrected woman or that her cover disguising this has been blown – increases the level of narratively strategic disquiet through both an unexpected shift of character focus (Carmen usurps the narrator’s situation as repository of unease) and emotional augmentation (Carmen’s shock “trumps” the narrator’s mere bewilderment). This is a strategic manoeuvre, a feint or diversion, for Carmen’s return to consciousness and with it psychological anguish is recorded with cursory brevity as the narrative switches to dwell instead on the narrator’s horror and repulsion as it dawns on him that Carmen’s body lacks a skeleton. This intensification of narrated emotion in a character who, as the enunciating “I”, enacts the character-reader alignment characteristic of fantastic writing, allows the tale to culminate in a deftly managed generically-apposite *coup de theatre*.

The node of the tale – the possibility that Kabbalistic resuscitation has been enacted – sees the convergence of the theosophical, neo-mystical dimension of its author’s aesthetic and the formal characteristics and conditions that theoreticians of the fantastic in literature attribute to this mode of writing. Measurement of the tale against just one set of theoretical criteria – Todorov’s – suffices to demonstrate this. Lugones has recourse to *pan-déterminisme*, that is, “everything [...]

must have its cause, in the full sense of the word, even if this cause can only be of a supernatural order” (Todorov 1973; 110): Eduardo’s visitation is configured as the result of his determination to bring back to life the young female “owner” of the skeleton. The unimpeded evolution of events from intention – mental – to outcome – physical – (of which the tale’s title, “*Kábala práctica*” [my emphasis] is a synthesis) conforms to Todorov’s affirmation that “pan-determinism signifies that the limit between the physical and the mental, between matter and spirit, ceases to be impervious” (Todorov 1973: 113). What is more, the metamorphosis of the “dead” skeleton into the “living” Carmen corresponds to Todorov’s functional interpretation of metamorphosis in fantastic writing: “The metamorphoses too [...] constitute a transgression of the separation between matter and mind as it is generally conceived” (Todorov 1973: 113). Both pan-determinism and metamorphosis, therefore, tend to “the collapse [...] of the limit between matter and mind” (Todorov 1973: 114) and underpin the premise that “*the transition from mind to matter has become possible*” (Todorov 1973: 114). The interpenetration of Eduardo’s scientific ambition and his desire – the narrator makes a point of noting his friend’s insistence that the skeleton is that of a young woman, and records Eduardo’s avowed intention to ask for her hand in marriage after he has brought her back to life – corresponds to what Todorov terms *necrophilia*, “[c]et amour pour la morte” (this love for a dead woman) (Todorov 1970: 144), “love [...] with the dead who have returned among the living” (Todorov 1973: 137).⁵ However, this is a “benign” necrophilia, since it constitutes “the ideal love [...] sought in vain among earthly women” (Todorov 1973: 138).

⁵ In the first of these two references the French original has been cited because literally it is not “love for death” – *la mort* – (Todorov 1973: 133) but love for a dead woman: *la morte* (Todorov 1970: 144), a crucial distinction. Similarly, in the second quotation, the term “consummated” (Todorov 1973: 137) has been omitted using ellipsis because there is no such implication in the French original.

However, possibly the most intriguing alignment of Lugones's tale with Todorov's criteria comes in the form of what the latter refers to as the fantastic's "incorporation of the reader into the world of the characters" (Todorov 1973: 31). Todorov considers this to be an optional but nonetheless predominant characteristic of fantastic tales, not least because it is the reader (understood as a function of the text rather than an "actual", particular reader) who shares with the character(s) the *hesitation* between explanations of events that is Todorov's primary characteristic of the fantastic (Todorov 1973: 33). The reader-character convergence is facilitated by the predominantly first-person narration of fantastic tales, "I" being a universally applicable and therefore incorporative transdiscursive self-designation (Todorov 1973: 83-84). Lugones's tale complies perfectly: not only does the narrator's anonymity render the transferable personal pronoun his sole designation, but he remains consistently intra-diegetic and endowed with a steady rationalism that provides a fitting counterpoint to his chilling discovery in the tale's final paragraph. In "Kábala práctica", however, the narrator "devolves" occupancy of the discursive space of the Todorovian hesitation, sharing it with other characters: firstly Eduardo, the last reference to whom describes him in a state of perplexity following the visitation, the full nature and consequences of which remain, of strategic necessity, unstipulated; and secondly Carmen, whose reaction to the conclusion of the narrator's story implies an explanation – that she is the subject of the resurrection – without – of strategic necessity – confirmation or deploying alternatives. The additional, also necessary but unspoken condition of this scenario, Todorov explains, is that *all* of the characters to whom the reader is pegged are intradiegetic and so only able to know what the counterfactual background of the tale allows them to know. They are.

IV

In conclusion, a translation of “Kábala práctica” fulfils opportunely several purposes. An early manifestation of an important precursor of Borges’s work and a textual ambassador for Hispanic fantastic writing, of which it is a textbook generic case, the tale is eminently suited to present the broader context of Borges’s work to an Anglophone readership, one whose relationship to the international in matters literary is, and should be, a matter for debate.

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PRACTICAL KABBALA

He knew the superintendent in charge of the cemetery so everything was arranged quite easily. My friend Eduardo was looking for a choice skeleton to enhance his collection of scientific exhibits. The two of them engaged – without qualms, for they both had a very matter-of-fact attitude to such matters – in a thorough search for a suitable specimen among the bodies that were stored in the ossuary before being incinerated – which, in accordance with local government regulations, took place every five years. Eventually they found one that, in Eduardo's opinion, was a truly admirable specimen.

“It belonged to a young woman”, my friend would announce in a tone of morbid delectation, reserved for close friends, that contrasted with the reserved, formal demeanour of an intellectual dandy that he habitually displayed to the outside world.

And so it came about that one night, in order to distract Carmen from her melancholic thoughts, I decided to tell her a strange tale concerning friend Eduardo. Let's keep his surname secret, because that's what they do in stories and besides, I do not wish to offend anyone.

Carmen was one of the loveliest people I ever had the pleasure to call a friend. But like every young woman of twenty who feels that not enough young men have fallen for her dark eyes, she was prone to sudden bouts of melancholy or of aggressive flirtatiousness. To say that her eyes were lovely is an understatement. Their depth and sparkle often reminded me of star-filled nights, and on the night in question they exuded an adorable languor. How we got around to

talking about Eduardo I simply cannot remember, but he was a frequent visitor to Carmen's house so it was probably through some trivial matter of mutual interest.

"You must be joking. Eduardo is so unemotional, so unmoved by things."

"Well, it's the absolute truth, I assure you. Bear with me. Even if you don't believe what I'm going to tell you, you might at least find it entertaining."

And while, in that spacious lounge, the others went on chatting loudly in the relaxed way that friends do in each other's company, I began to recount to Carmen the events that, however unbelievable they may sound, I hold to be true.

No sooner had the young scientist and I made each other's acquaintance, we became close friends. Our youth saved us from the wariness that those who meet for the first time in middle age display towards each other. At that time he was acquiring the first specimens in his scientific collection, and I was penning my first poems. It goes without saying that we were both materialists. Young minds can be pedantic and the first shot at wisdom consists of rejecting God and women. When one has just become a man the trace of the child that remains is an irritation. So one reads Buchner⁶ and converts to atheism. When love takes hold of a young man for the first time, invading his body and soul, inexperience gives rise to a sense of insecurity that makes every endeavour seem doomed to failure. So he writes soulful poems in the style of Bécquer.⁷

At twenty, one mistrusts above all priests and women. The awakening of the personality is a

⁶ Georg Büchner (1813-1837), German dramatist and novelist. He studied medicine in Strasbourg, completed a doctorate on the subject of the nervous system and was eventually appointed to a lectureship in anatomy at the University of Zurich. A political activist, he embraced the ideals of utopian communism, for which he was almost arrested and imprisoned in Germany. His advocacy of radical politics and his inclinations to scientific positivism explain his attraction to the young protagonists of this short story.

⁷ Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (1836-1870), Spanish poet and writer of fantastic tales (*Rimas y leyendas*) whose late Romantic literary style – his poetry was described as "suspirillos germánicos" (Germanic whisperings) after its proximity to the more intimate lyrical strand of German Romanticism – at once departs from the declamatory rhetoric reminiscent of Romantic poetry (in Spain as elsewhere) and prefigures the impressionistic poetry, such as that of Paul Verlaine, that was to set the standard of verse later in the century.

terribly egotistical process. A young man of twenty is quite capable of turning his back on his family and home.

It was during the early stage of our friendship that Eduardo acquired the aforementioned skeleton. Hanging in a shiny glass cabinet, it was the centrepiece of the scientific collection in his study. My friend's personal museum was made up of a few paleontological samples, some rare minerals including two delightful Uruguayan geodites, a test tube containing powdered lava from Mount Vesuvius, some stalactites from caves in the Cosquín region, a piece of a glyptodon's shell that sent our imaginations on daring expeditions into the most remote geological past: these were treasures of my friend's personal museum of science. That little study, to which I alone had the privilege to be admitted, was where we dreamt up and drafted our greatest plans. From there came two great achievements: an article on natural selection that earned Eduardo the commendation of a German friend of his father, a combination of astronomer and entomologist who, being a semi-illiterate shopkeeper, from that moment acquired a great respect for our wisdom; and a poem on the theme of fanaticism titled "the Conquests of Reason" that got me into deep trouble with our literature lecturer.

The skeleton in the cupboard, the "skeleton of a young woman", as Eduardo referred to it, was naturally a frequent subject of our discussions in which the quest for the truth was spiced with impious innuendo. Tirso's Stone Guest⁸ was often invoked to give resonance to our atheistic boastings, which were, of course, scientific to the point of exaggeration. And this is where the incident that I mentioned earlier begins. What follows is a true account of events.

⁸ Tirso de Molina, the *nom de plume* of Spanish playwright Fray Gabriel Téllez (1571-1648). The Stone Guest is the famous "convidado de piedra" who appears in - and gives the subtitle to - Tirso's play *El burlador de Sevilla*, from which most modern versions of Don Juan derive.

It was one of many nights when we got together in Eduardo's study to drink coffee and read the latest French poetry. The conversation somehow turned to vampires and the hallucinations that mystics and sorcerers experience in their delirium. Prompted by an astonishing book by Eliphas Lévi⁹ that we had just been reading – although at the time we barely appreciated its true significance – we started to reel off any literature that we could remember. Any verses, any prose whatever the quality, from Poe to Verhaeren and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam,¹⁰ that bore any relation to the theme, were summoned up for the occasion. It was already eleven before I took my leave. To conclude proceedings, Eduardo recited that well-known poem by Acuña the funereal irony of which, to be honest, had taken rather a toll on me.¹¹

What I am now about to relate was, as you will understand by the end of this story, told to me by Eduardo.

Eduardo went back into his study to put away the books that had been left spread across his writing desk. He was feeling relaxed, and his head was unusually clear (The attentive reader will

⁹ Pseudonym of Alphonse Louis Constant (1810-1875), a French occult writer associated with Rosicrucianism, Spiritualism, but above all theories of magic.

¹⁰ Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). American poet and literary theorist known for his short stories, tales and narratives in the fantastic mode. His modest fame in the English-speaking world was rapidly eclipsed by the extraordinary impact his work had in continental Europe, and France in particular, where translations of his tales by Baudelaire and his poetry by Mallarmé effectively placed his work within the European literary canon. The elements of mystery and the occult of paranormal in his work no doubt explain the references to Poe in this story. Emile Verhaeren (1855-1916), a Belgian poet writing in French, was a prominent member of the Symbolist movement – the movement in poetry that provided a yardstick for literary development in the Western world from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. His work, however, bore in many respects the aspects of Naturalism, an apparent contradiction that is reconciled if one recalls Verhaeren's interest in painting, in which the tenets of Impressionism act as a catalyst to blurring the distinction between 'esoteric' Symbolism and 'positivist' Naturalism.

Jean-Marie-Mathias-Philippe-Auguste, comte de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (1838-1889), a poet and prose writer associated with Symbolism largely on the basis of the sense of mystery, the supernatural and horror – here the influence of Poe is apparent – that pervades his work.

¹¹ Manuel Acuña Narro (1849-1873), a Mexican poet who came into prominence with the publication of an elegy on the death of his friend, Eduardo Alzúa (1868).

by and by appreciate the significance of these details). He picked up the lamp, and as he made his way into the adjacent room, which served as a bedroom, he paused for a moment before the skeleton, bowed low, and said, “*Mademoiselle Squelette*, you are about to become the subject of a most agreeable experiment. We propose to discover the *homunculus* of Albertus Magnus¹² by bringing your charming self back to life, after which I shall have the honour of asking for your hand in marriage.”

Evidently, he was still turning over in his mind recollections of Eliphas Lévi’s book, but without the slightest hint of unease. If anything, the opposite was true. He was having a joke with what for him was merely a set of remains that would be forever inanimate.

Within half an hour he had fallen asleep.

Suddenly, without quite knowing how, he found himself sitting at his desk. Bright light filled the whole room: the wick had been turned up on the lamp. Across the table from Eduardo, in the very seat that I had been occupying a few hours earlier, there sat a woman. She was looking at him. Young, attractive, yet mournful, she was wearing a long brown dress. As if by instinct, Eduardo glanced towards the display cabinet. The skeleton was missing. He felt a chill run down his spine. But then, the young woman began to speak in a voice that was so melodious, so gentle, that he immediately felt reassured. Her words, tinged with lament or reproach, seemed as if they were coming from very, very far away, like the tender sighs of a soul. What this melancholy apparition was saying Eduardo has never been able to recall. Her voice reminded him of a music

¹² 1206-1280. An early advocate of the peaceful coexistence of science and religion, alchemist, whose speculations included the possibility of creating life: the homunculus (‘little man’).

that recalled the harmony of those profound, serene thoughts that come in the night and evoke the rhythms of silence. Thus was the impression that this voice made on him. As the apparition spoke to him he felt cold, but a delicious cold, the incomparable softness of snow filtering through into his bones.

For a moment he was in a state of stupefaction. Then reason reaffirmed itself. He must be dreaming. He put his finger close to the glass of the lamp, and the heat made him draw it back sharply. He looked about him. Everything was as it usually was. Nothing fantastic; no trace of the strange decor that characterises dreams. He even heard the clock striking three. All this while the vision continued speaking to him in that sweet, musical voice that seemed to open before his mind the infinite panorama of the star-filled azure of an immense night. Then, with intangible majesty, she rose up from the chair. She took the lamp in her diaphanous hand and moved towards Eduardo's bedroom. Without thinking, not knowing what he was doing or why, he followed her. She placed the lamp on the bedside lamp holder, moved with adorable elegance towards the bed, which had its covers pulled back. Then, as my friend looked on in amazement, she gestured imperiously towards it, and returned mysteriously to the darkened study.

Eduardo had no idea how he been able to do her bidding without a hint of fear. But when I returned the next day about ten o'clock to ask him if he fancied having lunch together, I found him still in bed sleeping like a log.

“What's this?” – a cry of surprise escaped my lips as I noticed that the door of the study, which my friend always kept closed, was wide open.

Sitting in the chair that I had been sitting in the night before was the skeleton from the glass cabinet. “Well I never, Eduardo must have gone mad,” I chuckled to myself – but not without a shudder of unease.

No sooner had I finished my tale, than Carmen made to get up from her seat, smiling, with that rather hard smile she usually wore. But immediately, I saw the colour flee from her lips; she teetered as if about to fall. A cry echoed across the room. The other guests gathered round as I supported her in my arms. I struggled to lift her up – so profound was her swoon that she was as a dead weight – but we managed to get her to the adjacent room. It was an hour later when she came round, only to succumb immediately to a severe nervous crisis. But what I will never forget as long as I live is the sensation of holding her. It was horrifying. The body that collapsed into my arms was not that slender, elegant form that I had admired for so long, but a heavy, spongy mass, something like a generously stuffed pillow. And when my arms closed around her to stop her from falling, my fingers merely sunk into her body.

That body had no joints, it bent and folded everywhere, like a bag filled with water. My nerves grew taut with horror at the thought of it.

What I tell you is beyond all doubt: *there was not a single bone in that woman's body.*