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## Cosmic Pessimism in “The Dead Man”

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### Abstract

This article proposes a reading of “El hombre muerto” (“The Dead Man”, 1907) by Leopoldo Lugones that shifts interpretations away from psychological fantasy toward an ontological and cosmological problem. In conceptual dialogue with Eugene Thacker’s notion of the world-without-us, it argues that the story configures an impersonal space in which life persists as a biological residue, stripped of symbolic and affective inscription. Within this framework, the well-known “thirst for nothingness” does not express a desire for death, but rather the impossibility of consummating it, the failure of death as a definitive limit. The pessimism that runs through the text is not psychological but cosmological, insofar as the universe appears indifferent not only to human life but also incapable of guaranteeing its annihilation. Thus, the story figures a central intuition of contemporary cosmic pessimism; the most radical experience is not death, but the persistence of a world less consciousness.

**Keywords:** Cosmic Pessimism, “The Dead Man”, Leopoldo Lugones, Eugene Thacker, Annihilation.

### Introduction:

In “El hombre muerto” (“The Dead Man”, 1907), Leopoldo Lugones constructs a narrative around a paradoxical figure; a subject who claims to have died decades earlier and whose tragedy does not lie in death itself, but in the impossibility of fully consummating it. The protagonist maintains that, although nature no longer recognizes him as a living being, his persistence in the world still depends on a minimal human adhesion; a single will capable of confirming his death. Suspended between being and nothingness, the character inhabits an endless state of wakefulness, condemned to a presence without existence, to a consciousness deprived of any stable ontological inscription. The narrative unfolds through the testimony of rational observers- surveyors, travelers, laborers- who attempt to classify his condition as madness, until a fortuitous act of collective belief triggers the denouement; once finally

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recognized as dead, the body empties instantaneously, revealing ancient bones where moments earlier there had been the appearance of life.

Although “El hombre muerto” was not included in *Las fuerzas extrañas* (1906) and was published a year later in the magazine “Caras y Caretas”, it can be read in close resonance with the short stories collected in that volume, which mark the celebrated moment of Lugones’s fantastic phase. Shaped by the scientific positivism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as by occultist currents and Theosophy, *Las fuerzas extrañas* explores inexplicable phenomena that challenge modern rationality; from ontological duplications in “Un fenómeno inexplicable” (“An Inexplicable Phenomenon”) to cosmic catastrophes in “La lluvia de fuego” (“The Rain of Fire”). “El hombre muerto” participates in this same conceptual horizon by fusing experimental science with metaphysical horror, reflecting the cultural context of the period- particularly the enthusiastic reception of Darwinism in Latin America, mediated by debates on human progress and epistemological colonialism. Lugones, as a multifaceted intellectual- poet, essayist, and early socialist- mobilizes these narrative experiments to question the hubris of positivist science, generating thematic and aesthetic concerns that resonate with authors such as Horacio Quiroga and Jorge Luis Borges.

Leopoldo Lugones’s short story “El hombre muerto” (1907) has repeatedly been read within the boundaries of the fantastic tale, whether as a modernist variation on madness, an exercise in scientific imagination, or an eccentric piece within the author’s broad narrative repertoire. From these approaches, emphasis tends to fall either on the psychological status of the character- his alleged insanity, his persistent delusion, his inability to conform to the community’s consensuses- or on the effect of estrangement produced by the story’s final resolution. However, an alternative reading of the text allows us to see that the central problem it formulates does not so much concern doubt, ambiguity, or the interpretive hesitation typical of classical fantastic literature, but rather a more radical unease; the possibility that death may not constitute a sufficient limit to bring experience to an end.

In this regard, it should be noted that a significant portion of the criticism has focused on the fantastic procedures and motifs that traverse Lugones’s work, emphasizing its affiliation with modernist or scientific traditions, as well as its contribution to the consolidation of the fantastic short story in Argentine literature (Zbudilová, 2007; Speck, 1976). Other approaches, by contrast, have highlighted the difficulties his narratives present when attempting to situate them securely within the field of “pure” fantasy, drawing attention to the tensions they establish with other discursive registers, particularly the essay or the scientific treatise (Scari, 1964; Martines, 2021). The present article, however, does not seek to resolve questions of generic classification or to delimit the text’s formal boundaries, but rather to shift the focus toward the ontological implications of the field of sense the story constructs; a world that continues to operate beyond the subject and beyond his death, in which annihilation ceases to function as the ontological limit of experience.

Accordingly, in the reading proposed here, far from being organized around uncertainty, “El hombre muerto” (1907) is built upon a reiterated affirmation sustained with remarkable discursive coherence; the character is not mad- he is dead. His account neither oscillates nor contradicts itself; on the contrary, it presents itself as a lucid, systematic, and stripped-down testimony whose insistence dismantles the usual strategies of psychologizing reduction. The final confirmation- when the body is revealed to be nothing more than an ossified remainder, “There, among the rags, lay, without the slightest trace of moisture, without the slightest particle of flesh, very ancient bones to which a dried skin still clung” (Lugones, 1907, p. 57)- does not introduce a surprise twist meant to restore narrative logic, but rather retrospectively ratifies what the text has asserted from the outset. In this sense, the story does not pose the question of the event’s veracity, but of its ontological status; what does it mean to be dead when the world does not recognize that death as such?

This displacement makes it possible to reconsider the place of “El hombre muerto” (1907) within Lugones’s work and, more broadly, within the critical traditions that have sought to classify his narrative production. Beyond readings that situate it within modernism, fin-de-siècle scientism, or the field of the fantastic tale, the text appears to stage a disturbing reflection on the persistence of life where the subject has lost all symbolic inscription. What is at stake here is not a fractured subjectivity in search of meaning, nor a tragic consciousness confronted with finitude, but rather a form of residual existence, exposed to a world that continues to function with complete indifference. From this perspective, the story can be productively read in dialogue with certain problematics of contemporary philosophy- not in terms of influence or doctrinal anticipation, but as a literary figuration of tensions that today find conceptual formulation. In particular, Eugene Thacker’s notion of the world-without-us proves useful for thinking about the space inhabited by the protagonist of “El hombre Muerto,” a domain in which life persists as biological residue, stripped of all symbolic, affective, and ontological inscription. The character no longer belongs to the human world- the world of recognition, meaning, and intersubjectivity- but neither does he gain access to the nothingness he desires. His existence unfolds in an impersonal zone, where consciousness subsists without a world.

Within this framework, the famous expression “The thirst for nothingness is a horrible thing” (Lugones, 1907, p. 57)- articulated as the protagonist’s lament- acquires a particular density. Far from expressing a desire for death or a nihilistic drive, this thirst signals the impossibility of consummating death as a definitive limit. The character’s torment lies not in having lost life, but in being unable to abandon it entirely, not in finitude, but in persistence. Death, rather than closing off experience, is revealed as an unfulfilled promise. The body remains there, consciousness stays awake, and the world continues to unfold with absolute indifference. This situation allows the story to be understood from the perspective of a pessimism that is neither psychological nor moral, but cosmological in nature. The problem is not subjective despair or the absence of meaning, but the very structure of the universe that the text allows us to glimpse; a cosmos that is not only indifferent to human life, but that seems incapable of guaranteeing its annihilation. At this point, “El hombre muerto” approaches a central intuition of cosmic pessimism (Thacker, 2017), according to which the most radical experience is not death, but the persistence of an ungrounded consciousness exposed to a world that continues without us. This article therefore advances a double hypothesis. On the one hand, it argues that “El hombre muerto” can be read as an early figuration of a *world-without-us*, in which life persists as an impersonal residue, devoid of any subjective status. On the other, it maintains that the pessimism that runs through the story is cosmological in nature; the impossibility of dying completely reveals a universe insufficient even to destroy us fully. Through this displacement, Lugones’s text ceases to be merely an exercise in fantastic imagination and becomes an unsettling exploration of the impersonal horror that emerges when death fails as an ontological limit.

### **The Ontological Status of “El hombre Muerto”**

One of the most persistent readings of “El hombre muerto” has consisted in reducing the conflict of the story to the psychological plane, interpreting the protagonist as an extreme case of alienation, delusion, or pathological denial of reality. From this perspective, the character’s insistence on his own death functions as a symptom of subjective disturbance, and the narrative is organized around the ambiguity between madness and truth, in line with certain classical models of the fantastic tale. However, an alternative reading of the text reveals that this interpretation is insufficient- not only because the story does not construct a sustained doubt, but because it actively works to dismantle any psychologistic reduction. First, the character himself explicitly and repeatedly insists on denying his madness. “But I am not mad,” he states with a calmness that contrasts sharply with the degraded image projected by his body. This denial is not framed as a desperate defense or an act of self-justification, but rather as a serene assertion accompanied by coherent and consistent reasoning. The dead man does not

hallucinate; he explains, elucidates, and argues. His discourse does not fragment or contradict itself; it maintains an internal logic that is difficult to reconcile with a reading based exclusively on mental pathology. Far from establishing an interpretive hesitation, the text constructs a voice that presents itself as fully conscious of its condition, even when that condition is radically unacceptable to others. This discursive coherence constitutes a central point of the narrative. The character not only claims to be dead but also develops a rudimentary ontology of his state; he distinguishes between being dead “in the eyes of nature” and being “humanly effective” as dead, underscoring the need for external recognition in order for death to be consummated. In this sense, his torment does not arise from inner confusion, but from a dislocation between his ontological condition and the social order that refuses to validate it. The problem is not that the subject fails to understand his situation, but that the world lacks the mechanisms to recognize it.

The ending of the story reinforces this reading; “There, among the rags, lay, without the slightest trace of moisture, without the smallest particle of flesh, very ancient bones to which a dried skin still clung” (Lugones, 1907, p. 57). The final revelation of the body as a skeletal remnant does not introduce an ambiguous twist nor restore a rational logic that had been momentarily suspended. On the contrary, it functions as a retrospective confirmation of what the narrative had already asserted from the outset. This is not a surprise designed to produce estrangement, but an ontological ratification; the man was dead. At this point, “El hombre muerto” decisively departs from the model of the fantastic defined by Tzvetan Todorov (1970), for whom the genre is grounded in hesitation between a natural and a supernatural explanation. Here there is no hesitation; the narrative does not doubt- it affirms. The question is not whether the event is true, but what its truth entails.

From this perspective, the story is not organized around ambiguity or interpretive conflict, but around a precise ontological problem. What is disturbing is not the possibility that the character might be mistaken about his condition, but the consequences of his being right. “El hombre muerto” does not interrogate the limits of perception or the fractures of subjectivity, but rather the very conditions under which death can function as an effective limit to experience. The problem the text formulates is not whether the man is dead, but what it means to be dead when the world- social, symbolic, and natural- does not recognize that death as such. This formulation displaces the narrative from the terrain of psychological fantasy toward a more radical zone, in which what is unsettling is not the fragility of human consciousness, but the insufficiency of the world to absorb, close off, or neutralize that which no longer fully belongs to it. In this sense, “El hombre muerto” does not propose a reflection on madness, but on a form of existence that persists beyond the subject, inaugurating a limit-experience that can be resolved neither by medical reason nor by the narrative logic of classical fantasy.

### **Residual Life and the World Without Us:**

To advance the proposed reading, it is productive to introduce- while observing the necessary methodological precautions- certain conceptual tools drawn from contemporary philosophy. This does not entail positing influences or retrospectively reading Lugones through categories foreign to his intellectual horizon but rather using specific concepts as analytical devices that allow us to name more precisely problems the text already articulates at the narrative level. In this sense, the notion of the ‘world-without-us’ developed by Eugene Thacker (2015) offers a particularly fertile framework for thinking about the status of existence staged in “El hombre Muerto.” Thacker (2015) schematically distinguishes between the ‘world-for-us’ (the world as we live it), the ‘world-in-itself’ (the world as it is in itself), and the ‘world-without-us,’ a domain in which the world continues to exist independently of human experience, and in which life appears stripped of all subjective centrality. Far from constituting an object of full knowledge, this world-without-us manifests as a limit of thought, an impersonal space that can only be approached indirectly, often in the form of horror or negativity. Used as a conceptual

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tool, this notion helps illuminate the ambiguous zone inhabited by the protagonist of “El hombre muerto”.

Indeed, the character no longer belongs to the human world, understood as the space of recognition, shared meaning, and symbolic inscription. He is expelled from that domain at the very moment his death ceases to be socially validated. Yet he does not gain access to the nothingness he longs for, nor to a definitive dissolution of existence. His condition is that of a life that persists residually, reduced to its most elementary dimension, yet accompanied by a consciousness that finds no place in which to be inscribed. This dislocation is articulated explicitly in one of the most disturbing statements of the story; “I, as a thinking being, I, as an entity, do not exist” (Lugones, 1907, p. 57). The paradox is evident; the character affirms his nonexistence as a subject while continuing to experience, perceive, and speak. This form of consciousness without status also manifests in the experience of eternal wakefulness. The dead man cannot sleep; he remains “awake for thirty years” (Lugones, 1907, p. 57), condemned to a continuous presence before things and before his own non-being. Wakefulness appears here not as an intensification of life, but as its degradation; a permanent exposure to a world that no longer offers symbolic mediations or possibilities of meaning. There is no sleep, but neither is there death; there is no human world, but neither is there nothingness. Consciousness persists as a remainder, stripped of any organizing function.

The character’s body reinforces this logic of residuality. Although it has biologically ceased to function as a living organism, it continues to occupy space, remains visible, manipulable, even assisted by others. It is a body without status; neither fully alive nor fully dead, neither a medical object nor a recognized corpse. The final scene, in which the body is revealed as a set of dry bones, does not introduce a rupture with this condition but rather confirms it. The body was already a remainder before becoming a skeleton; its final transformation merely renders visible a truth that had been operative from the outset. From this perspective, “El hombre muerto” can be read as the figuration of a space that coincides neither with the human world nor with absolute nothingness. The character inhabits an impersonal zone in which life persists without a subject, sustained only as biological residue and as a disanchored consciousness. This space is not yet the world-without-us in a full sense, but it is no longer a world-for-us either; it is a zone of ontological transition in which the subject has been deactivated without the world itself ceasing to exist. In this uncertain fringe, Lugones’s story (1907) renders visible a limit experience that exceeds the habitual categories of life and death, anticipating a central intuition of contemporary thought concerning the impersonality of the world.

### **The Thirst for Nothingness:**

Among the most unsettling formulations in “El hombre muerto” is undoubtedly the expression “the thirst for nothingness” (Lugones, 1907, p. 57). Far from functioning as a rhetorical hyperbole or as a declaration of nihilism, this phrase condenses the conceptual core of the story and allows the protagonist’s experience to be articulated with a broader ontological problem. The thirst for nothingness does not name a desire for death, nor a self-destructive impulse aimed at the disappearance of the body, but something more radical; the longing for an ontological consummation that death, as it is presented in the narrative, proves incapable of guaranteeing. In Lugones’s narrative universe, nothingness does not appear as an immediate void or as a simple absence, but as a promise. Death should lead to it, closing off experience and definitively dissolving all forms of consciousness. Yet that promise is not fulfilled. The character is dead “before nature,” but fails to gain access to the nothingness that such death ought to entail. His thirst is not oriented toward destruction, but toward absolute impersonality; to cease being someone, to cease being an entity that experiences, perceives, and remembers. In this sense, the desire that runs through the story is not the desire to die, but the desire to stop persisting.

This impossibility of consummating death transforms nothingness into an unattainable horizon. What imposes itself is not the experience of emptiness, but that of an interminable exposure to a world that continues to exist with total indifference. Consciousness finds neither refuge nor rest; it remains awake, present, confronted with things and with its own non-being. The horror that emerges from this situation does not stem from fear of disappearance, but from the impossibility of disappearing completely. There is no anguish before finitude, but despair before persistence. At this point, the dialogue with certain intuitions of contemporary thought becomes particularly productive. In Eugene Thacker's work (2015), nothingness appears as one of the limits of thought; that which cannot be fully conceptualized or integrated into a horizon of meaning, yet whose presence manifests itself indirectly, often in the form of horror. In "El hombre muerto", this limit-nothingness does not present itself as an object of knowledge, but as an insistent absence, as that which should be there- as the result of death- and yet does not occur. Nothingness does not irrupt; it withdraws.

Thus, the horror articulated by the story is not psychological or emotional, but ontological. It is not a matter of fear of the unknown, nor of the threat of a supernatural force, but of radical exposure to a world that no longer needs the subject in order to exist. The dead man is condemned to witness a world that continues without him, yet from which he cannot fully withdraw. The thirst for nothingness thus expresses the extreme tension between a consciousness that persists and a world that has ceased to recognize it. From this perspective, death ceases to function as the ultimate limit of experience. Far from closing it off, death inaugurates a paradoxical form of existence in which consciousness subsists without subject and without a human world. The thirst for nothingness therefore names the failure of death as an ontological limit; that which was supposed to put an end to experience reveals itself to be incapable of doing so. In that failure lies the most unsettling core of the story, as well as the point of articulation between the notion of a world-without-us and the pessimism that runs through Lugones's text.

### **Cosmological Pessimism:**

The experience articulated in "El hombre muerto" cannot be adequately understood if it is reduced to a form of psychological, moral, or existential pessimism. The malaise that traverses the protagonist does not derive from a state of mind, an ethical conflict, or an anguished consciousness confronting finitude. Nor is it a tragic vision of human destiny or a denunciation of the world's cruelty. The pessimism at work in the story is of another order; it is not directed at the subject, but at the universe itself. First, the character's death is not ambiguous from a natural standpoint. Nature has already fulfilled its function; the body has been destroyed, reduced to a remainder, deprived of all significant organic vitality. There is no medical error here, no miraculous suspension of biological processes, no supernatural exception. In strictly physical terms, the man is dead. And yet that death is not sufficient to bring experience to a close. Nature kills, but it does not annihilate completely. To this natural death is added a second instance of failure; the human world does not ratify the character's death. There is no symbolic recognition, no ritual, no social inscription that would transform that body into a fully constituted dead person. The protagonist is not mourned, not named as dead, not integrated into any economy of grief or memory. His condition remains suspended in a zone without status; he no longer belongs to the world of the living, but neither does he gain access to a social death that would confer meaning or closure.

Finally, and more radically still, the cosmos does not intervene. There is no transcendent justice, no punishment, no redemption, not even an active indifference. The universe does not appear tragic or cruel, because it does not seem to operate according to any logic of compensation or necessity. It simply continues. The world goes on existing without needing this subject, but also without taking care to eliminate him completely. This triple failure-natural, symbolic, and cosmological- constitutes the core of the pessimism that runs through

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the story. In this sense, “El hombre muerto” does not propose a despairing vision of the world, but something more disturbing, an insufficient universe. Insufficient not in its ability to grant meaning, but insufficient even to destroy us entirely. Death, which should function as the ultimate limit, reveals itself as a defective mechanism. The cosmos guarantees neither the fullness of life nor the consummation of nothingness. Between the two, it allows residual forms of existence to persist- exposed, impersonal, without function or purpose.

This displacement makes it possible to establish a connection with certain formulations of contemporary cosmic pessimism, not in terms of direct influence or intellectual genealogy, but as a structural resonance. As in those currents, the problem is not the absence of meaning or human suffering, but the realization that the universe is not organized for us- not even to negate us definitively. The most disturbing experience is not death, but its inefficacy. From this perspective, Lugones’s story articulates a particularly radical intuition; horror does not arise from a hostile world, but from a world that does not quite expel us. A world that continues without us, but that also does not grant us the absolute exit of nothingness. In this insufficiency of the cosmos to bring experience to a close lie the deepest pessimism of the text, and also its most enduring philosophical power.

### Conclusion:

The trajectory proposed throughout this study has sought to shift the reading of “El hombre muerto” away from the traditional interpretive frameworks of psychological fantasy toward a problem of an ontological order. Rather than relying on ambiguity, interpretive hesitation, or doubt regarding the status of the event, the story is organized around a persistent assertion; the character is dead. The problem articulated by the text is therefore not narratological or clinical, but philosophical. It is not a matter of determining whether death has occurred, but of interrogating what it means to be dead when the world does not recognize that death as such. From this perspective, Lugones’s story configures a disturbing space in which life persists as a remainder, stripped of symbolic inscription and human status. Consciousness endures without a world, the body remains without function, and experience is prolonged without purpose. The introduction of the concept of the world-without-us, as developed by Eugene Thacker, has made it possible to think this situation not as a subjective anomaly, but as exposure to an impersonal zone in which the universe continues to operate independently of all human reference. This conceptual use does not seek to retrospectively inscribe Lugones within a contemporary philosophical tradition, but rather to offer a tool for naming an intuition that the literary text already stages.

Within this framework, the notion of “the thirst for nothingness” (Lugones, 1907, p. 57) occupies a central place. Far from expressing a desire for death, it signals the failure of death as an ontological limit. What the character longs for is not to cease living, but to cease persisting; what is at stake is not biological extinction, but the impossibility of consummating oneself as nothing. The horror that emerges from the story is not fear of disappearance, but exposure to an impersonal continuity that grants neither meaning nor annihilation. The contribution of this reading thus lies in showing that “El hombre muerto” not only puts pressure on the categories of the fantastic but also functions as an early archive of philosophical problems that today have specific conceptual formulations. The text does not anticipate theories nor propose doctrines, but it figures with remarkable precision a limit experience; that of a universe that does not guarantee the closure of human experience, not even in the form of death. In this sense, Lugones’s story does not narrate the end of a life, but the failure of the universe to bring it to a close.

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