

The XUL Reader
AN ANTHOLOGY OF ARGENTINE POETRY
1980-1996

XUL: VARIATIONS ON THE NAME OF A MAGAZINE

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1980. What might the date signify? That year the first issue of the magazine XUL appeared. So, suddenly, in Argentina, under exceptional historical circumstances—the country in the grips of a military dictatorship and a terrorist politics that annihilated its subversive adversaries, that spread throughout the population, and produced tens of thousands of victims—XUL. The word offers itself as a curse or benediction, but applied to the name of a magazine it hoped to be an incantation against the epoch. It's hard to imagine what it means to live in terror; it could be said that those who had to were able to do so only through some kind—or various kinds—of conjuring, and that to live in terror with the constant consciousness of terror is unbearable. Whatever the individual means of conjuring these circumstances, including evading or denying them, the politics of terror marked its contemporaries and decades later continues in part to explain Argentine behavior.

Specifically, there was a generalized attitude after the end of the dictatorship: because the memory of such intense terror had become unbearable, because to relive it even in memory was to relive tragedy, a process began that might be called “repression of the experience of terror”: the majority of Argentines, including intellectuals, involuntarily forgot this problem, leaving a recent part of history blank, and this particularly affected literature, criticism, and the teaching of literature, including, of course, the reading of the poems produced during that epoch (as well as the writing of those who came after).

Terror settles in people and affects them in unforeseen ways; in the case of Argentine poets, whatever they wrote about, even if they didn't intend to, they wrote about terror. Without the information, then, that certain poems were written during a regime of terror, a possible dimension of reading them is lost; if the fact that this experience existed and intersected the writing of the poems is repressed, access to multiple relations and a whole spectrum of interpretive paths is closed

off to the reader. Removing terror from the terrorized is liberating, a relief; removing it from the history of a country that suffered it, not only avoiding thinking about it but also “forgetting” its occurrence, is to affirm that its effects continue to be felt and that the best kind of spell to place on them is denial.

The magazine carried the name of XUL for various reasons, among which euphony was neither the first nor the last. XUL is a word or sound that is pleasing to the ear—at least to this ear. And in this case the euphonic is also the foreign: xul is a grouping of sounds whose categorization as a word is doubtful, and even if it is accepted as such, it certainly does not belong to the Spanish language. It’s a foreign sound in principle to almost all Spanish speakers, something that one doesn’t know what it is or what it means. Also a word whose exact pronunciation is not self-evident: Csul, Sul, Zul, Shul? A street vendor of newspapers and magazines pronounced it Kul (confusing the “x” with a “k”), which might be taken as a compliment: a “cool” magazine.

In any case, as much for sound as for sense, it’s a hard word to situate, and this is not foreign to a poetic proposition according to which the reader encounters the poem in a relationship of difficulty. In the first place, for the writer, deciding to write a poem and not another kind of writing is to embrace difficulty as one’s task. Second, for the reader, reading the poem must always be an extremely difficult task, even when the poem presents itself as “simple,” or especially in those cases—because simplicity is an appearance of the poem that is as complex as its opposite, or even more, especially when it manages, by hiding or negating the difficulty, to avoid its being read. On the other hand, it’s a fact that the difficulties of a poem can’t be established; they change even for a single reader through successive readings. This characteristic, once recognized, was deliberately used in poems, that is, incorporated as a feature of a poetics.

The design of the word XUL, written in capital letters, as in the magazine, also holds a programmatic interest: the X is a cross and also an enigma to discover; the U a line that returns on itself arriving at a new point, the L an abrupt swerve. In this name the sole manifesto of the magazine is drawn. The motto **Old and new sign**, for its part, expresses a way of looking at the sign that can become co-extensive with the poem and with literature, considering it old and new at the same time: supposing that in literature the new is always old and the old may be always new; postulating that there are no novelties and on the other hand that there never cease to be renovations. Inevitably everything was already made, and inevitably everything remakes itself, and is something else: any poetic return arrives at a new point, any repetition resists continuity, and any trajectory is in itself a change of direction.

To reclaim the old sign is also to reclaim tradition. The word “old” affirms something that cannot be appropriated, that time has made irreducibly foreign. The tradition itself cannot be appropriated, except partially, by means of a certain falsehood: the tradition that names itself is not the tradition, but only a kind of anthological edifice constructed with that which is continually under construction. And whether joining traditions or inventing their own, writers say to sustain these fictions that they need a game of antecedents who authorize their writings and allow them to be authority. This is a rhetorical task, which thus belongs in the realm of the persuasive: authors want to convince their virtual readers that their works are part of a certain legality: that they follow the norms—and even aim to be the paradigm—of an aesthetic code, ancient or new, but one with history, with antecedents of genius. What is certain, however, is that all these predecessors are posterior to the contemporaries, since these latter are the ones who invented them as predecessors. This is the paradox of literary tradition: for readers it’s a game with history, with the fiction of a past that hides its fictitious character; for writers it’s a futuristic game whose text presents itself temporally inverted.

There’s also the possibility of a slightly more complicated game, which consists of considering that any poem, whatever its date of composition or publication, is contemporary. Gironde, Macedonio Fernández, Xul Solar, Borges, Juan L. Ortiz, Lamborghini, as synecdoches of their writings, are contemporary as long as they exist, because they are read and published and discussed in bars or on public transportation or in magazine articles, in present time. This list may be part of the tradition of XUL, of the framework of writings summarized and resumed in a peculiar way in the names of its authors: making tradition solely of contemporaneity, not fixing it in an institution or a monument, but rather unfastening it, considering it as something changing and alive.

Borges is contemporary with Perednik, not for Borges or Perednik, who encountered each other more than once in time and space, but for the others, who make them contemporary through their reading. Moreover, Borges is much more contemporary with Perednik for a single reader than Borges is with Borges for two extemporaneous readers, as he himself suggested in a famous story.

And here it seems fitting to mention one of the many contributions of Borges practiced by the poets who published in XUL: to show that everything, even the most complicated philosophical or literary problems, even biographies or politics, natural or exact sciences, plastic arts, film, publicity, psychology, social sciences, other texts, can, or better must, be treated literarily by writers. Everything may become part of literature because it is not a recipient but an attitude to which

in principle nothing can be foreign. This attitude allows the poet to reclaim the rigorous use of reason, but also of passion. A reason that leans toward risks, passionate, and a passion that doesn't lead one astray from reason.

XUL is also one of the months in the Mayan calendar, the month that signifies the end of one era and the beginning of another. During this month the Spaniards arrived, which marked the end of the world for native civilization. Something ending and something beginning: in contrast to the aboriginal experience, living under the military dictatorship, XUL—understood as the end of one epoch and the beginning of another—was welcome. There were also literary desires for XUL during this epoch—for changing the poetic airs that people were breathing. The dominant poetics of the 60s and the beginning of the 70s had a simplified vision of reality—dual, with good and evil schematically localized—and correspondingly they used poetic forms of alleged simplicity. They also proposed a theoretical division between form and content, coherent in a way with their vision of reality: form was ill-regarded, suspicious, and content “good” insofar as it coincided with their political position. The poem was considered a vehicle for communicating messages that had to bombard readers and “awaken” them politically. For many poets who began to publish after 1976, forms that affect simplicity—including the dual, manichean vision of the world, the forced division between form and content, or the possibility of communicating messages that this offers—became insufficient and even dishonest. The complexity of the poems' artistic propositions was a response to a more complex vision of the world. This refigures the role of the reader, who is no longer a receptor of messages and of a truth emitted by the author, but rather a protagonist of the poem through his reading. And the role of the author was reconceived, removing his authority to guide or change the consciousness of others and even removing his power to decide the truth of the poem.

Poetics can be explosive or implosive; the explosive, whose movement goes out from the poem, in search of an author or the propagation of a meaning, and the implosive, in which the outside is attracted by a centripetal force, where the reader implodes toward the poem. An explosive poetics is in some way an expansive, conquering poetics, and this is what dominated in the 60s and the beginning of the 70s, when the desire was to use poetry for a political cause. And a poetics that inserted itself in the play of the spectacle also attempted this. Conquering the people, conquering the market, conquering the attention of the critical establishment—these provoked the epigraph of an editorial in the magazine: “Enough conquests, we're tired of winning.” XUL is also the inversion of LUX, and we affirmed ourselves supporters of light against the long and terrible

night we were living in. The epigraph to the first editorial reads “Sirbenet ni xul,” which is “Lux in tenebris” backwards, or Latin for light in darkness. In relation to this it is also interesting to read the name XUL as a badly-written Roman numeral (XVL). The badly-written cipher breaks with any hope of cracking a code, a secure key for decipherment, and therefore discourages the hermetic expectations that may be placed in the poem. There’s nothing farther from hermeticism than the poetics published in the magazine, whose task or proposition is not to establish secret meanings and hide them, but on the contrary to make signification possible by offering the reader work with signs, a work of reading. That is, the task of writing for these poets is not focused on converting poems into repositories of mystery, which is the property of the author and of a circle of initiates, but rather in operating with signs, with language, believing that meanings are not contained under lock and key within writings, nor instituted by the author, but rather that they must be constructed by the reader from texts and from language. On the other hand, the erroneous cipher, the badly written “sefer” (or book), proposes a writing that in its moment presents itself as “bad,” of poor design, in the sense of separating itself from a dominant literary morality that likes to dictate what “the common good” is, or what is good. But there is no literary “good” or “bad.” The writers’ ethics are expressed in their writings and this is what sustains literature; this attitude of palming off an ethics onto literature itself, or onto poetry, of burying this text or that under “one can’t” or “one mustn’t,” reveals the behavior of poetics that cannot sustain themselves from within. The ethics of the writers who published in XUL was based in risk and responsibility, separated from the institutionalized poetic “good,” from that which was considered literarily “good,” which in reality is the security of that which is the norm, to forge without restrictions and starting from whatever realm the adequate hews of the poem.

If it is certain that some poets placed the question of form and language at the center of their poetics, it is not because they wanted to, that is, a posteriori and by consequence of a programmatic decision, but rather because it was what they were able to do. One more time: the circumstances brought them to that point, to attempt poetic means that resisted the epoch. To coincide not in style but in the conviction that the means of resisting with art is through the how that the poems say: that in art what is said passes through the way of saying it. The poem is a significant form; in epochs of severe repression facility with the forms of saying permits escape from the vigilant gaze of the censor; as for interested readers, they become skilled: sharper, more critical. It can thus be concluded that the resistance of these poets was not the gesture of heroes, although a certain history might want

to present it that way, but rather that it was their response to being placed in an impossible situation. If the expression “they walked the razor’s edge” is appropriate, they created a poetry of boundaries, because they couldn’t do anything else—not falling into the abyss on the one hand, and the abyss was the threat of dying at the hands of the repression, which killed many thousands of opponents; and not accepting, on the other hand, the security of firm ground, that is, poetic renunciation or temptation to the various forms of complacency.

During its existence the magazine went through an interesting experience: on one side necessity and on the other the difficulty that others had in cataloging the nature of the poetics found in its pages. The way these others found of resolving this problem was to use known categories. XUL was considered an organ of Russian formalism, of structuralism, of concrete poetry, of *Tel Quel*, of postmodernism, etc. It was believed, to develop an interesting example, that the magazine was the organ of an avant-garde poetic group, even when an editorial ridiculed the idea of the vanguard, the possibility that in literature someone is ahead of the rest, guiding them, or that a history of poetic progress may be conceived, so that the latest expressions are superior to what preceded them. Moreover the distinctive characteristics of an artistic vanguard were missing: there were no poetic manifestos, no name in common, and there wasn’t even a group; on the contrary, there was a rejection of any idea of communal identification, and if there were concurrences in the writings of different poets, this was not owing to any agreement prior or exterior to the poems themselves, nor to a submission to an instituted poetic code; on the contrary, a common unity among poets was the cause of differing poetics, since writing is done by different individuals and since the poem does not deserve to be restricted by boundaries or classifications.

In reality, the concept of a vanguard, like so many other concepts, is not a stimulus or trigger but rather an imposition, because it is the fruit of a certain critical desperation. Whenever phenomena occur in the terrain of art that escape the predictability of a history of comfortable development, these all-encompassing critical sophistries appear. Concepts like the vanguard, postmodernism, etc., must be strong in order to hide their poverty, their incapacity. Since they are ill-adapted to explain that which is varied, complex, contradictory, and in no way a unique occurrence, these concepts superimpose on it a unitary hypothesis, a hypostasis that occupies its place with a generalized intention. The result goes against art: it erases the individuality of each act and its differences from the rest. For example, Bauhaus doesn’t have much to do with Dada, even though both are grouped under the same explanatory category. What does this process accomplish? —To tranquilize critical thinking, making it think that with this concept it

is becoming conscious of artistic reality. To tranquilize assuring that there's nothing more to think, that the thinkable has already been expressed.

What should have been first remains for the last: XUL, the name of the magazine, was an homage to Xul Solar, a singularly complex individual, writer among many other things, although he was known mainly as one of the principal plastic artists of Argentina. Borges said of Solar:

A man well-versed in all the disciplines, seeker after arcana, father of writings, of languages, of utopias, of mythologies, guest of hells and heavens, pan-chessplayer and astrologer, perfecter of indulgent irony and generous friendship, Xul Solar is, of our few events, one of the most singular. Xul believed that humans too have a mission to recreate. . . . In the face of silence or smiles, Xul embraced the destiny of proposing a system of universal reforms. He wanted to recreate the religions, astrology, math, society, numeration, writing, vocabulary, the arts, the musical instruments, and toys. He premeditated two languages. One, a creole, was American Spanish, quickened, exalted, and multiplied; the other, a pan-language, whose words had their own definitions according to the value of the letters, in the manner of the analytical language of John Wilkins. A similar idea to a semicircular keyboard, reducing the pianist's labor, and that always inconclusive and ever more complicated pan-game that, under the umbrella of chess, embraced many disciplines and could be played on various planes. All this in Buenos Aires, land of imitative innovators and reliable mirrors. Predictably the utopias of Xul Solar failed, but the failure is ours, not his. We didn't know how to deserve him.

The magazine XUL, in the manner of an inverted LUX, existed to illuminate a region of the stage that was there but that could not be seen. It published poetry, scandalous during its time, that nobody dared to publish, and unknown authors that would soon be considered the protagonists of their age. It believed that the strongest and most interesting voice in poetry is that which speaks by operating, and by being operated on, by, and with language. It discovered for its country's literature a new universe, and as with all discoveries, it invented it. To embody a time and space in Argentine poetry a simple recourse was enough: to give room to that chosen one that had no place.

This essay was written especially for this anthology.