LITERARY PORTRAYALS OF SCIENCE
AS A FUNCTION OF SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL RELATIONS
IN THE SPANISH-SPEAKING WORLD

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As Roslynn D. Haynes has detailed in From Faust to Strangelove: Representations of the Scientist in Western Literature, the representations that are the subject of her study reflect not the scientific merit of the objects of literary adulation or disparagement, but rather the social climate of the day. Sometimes literature vilifies science and scientists – as in the case of Dr Faustus, Dr Frankenstein, and Dr Strangelove, for example – and at other times it cannot praise science and scientists enough, as in Alexander Pope’s famous “God said, Let Newton be! and All was Light”. My goal in this essay is first of all to show that this same principle holds in literature written in Spanish – Haynes does not treat Hispanic literature – and secondly, and most importantly, to try to explain why this is so. Specifically, I will argue that the relations between society and its environment at a given moment in history dictate how science and scientists will be represented in the successful literature of that period. In essence, society uses science to control nature, and literature – and other social discourses – to control science.

To demonstrate the previous assertions, I wish to review the contrasting takes on science and scientists found in highly influential novels written in both Spain and Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s. This was a period that immediately followed important social, economic, political, and environmental changes on both sides of the Atlantic. In Spain, the right-wing dictator Francisco Franco had recently died and so Spain was moving from being a backward and isolated country on the fringes of European society to becoming a liberal,

democratic member of the European community. At the same time, Latin America was attempting to extricate itself from North American scientific, technological, and political control, all of which had produced results unfavourable for the majority of the population. In Spain, large sectors of the population regarded European techno-scientific advances as a positive force for a better future, and therefore saw progress in a positive light. At the same time, techno-scientific progress in Latin America had devastated both the environment and large sectors of the population, and so technological progress was seen as a menace imposed from without on a helpless citizenry.

In the Spain of that period, one novel, later made into a highly successful film, is particularly illustrative of the Spanish viewpoint on science, scientists, and the technological artefacts they produce. Eduardo Mendoza’s *La ciudad de los prodigios* (1986: *The City of Marvels*) is the story of Barcelona between the universal exhibitions held there in 1888 and 1929. In it, Mendoza argues for a positive view of techno-scientific progress. Essentially, he says that science, technology, and industry are the driving forces of social progress, and goes on to add that to oppose these is not only reactionary, anachronistic, and ultimately futile, but even fatal.

Latin American novels of roughly the same period such as García Márquez’s groundbreaking *Cien años de soledad* (1967: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*), Isabel Allende’s *La casa de los espíritus* (1982: *The House of the Spirits*), Laura Esquivel’s *Como agua para chocolate* (1989: *Like Water for Chocolate*), Rima de Vallbona’s *Los infiernos de la mujer y algo más* (1992: *Women’s Hells and Beyond*), and Fernando Contreras Castro’s *Los peor* (1995: *The Worst Family*) all offer the counterview so prevalent in Latin America at the time – that the future lies in a return to an Edenic past, a pristine time before eating from the tree of techno-scientific knowledge. Both the Spanish and the Latin American discourses offer a myth of origins and a Utopian future based on either embracing or rejecting science and technology. In order to see how the various social, scientific, environmental, and technological contexts play out in terms of literary production, let us first look at Mendoza’s novel and then compare it to the Latin American novels I have mentioned.

Mendoza takes as his point of departure the optimistic determinism of the nineteenth century: