

World Science Fiction Spring 2019

Cosmos Latinos

An Anthology of Science Fiction from Latin America and Spain

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Hugo Correa

CHILE

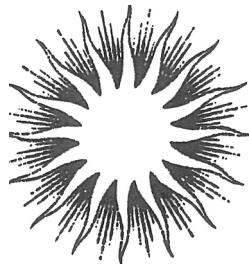
Hugo Correa (1926-) is the man widely credited with launching modern science fiction in Latin America. Indeed, the spark of life he gave the genre regionally was recognized by the Spanish sf magazine *Nueva Dimensión*, which honored his contributions to the field by dedicating an entire issue to him (no. 33, 1972).

Correa was born in the southern Chilean province of Talca. His long writing career—he is still active in the Chilean sf community—began, as is often the case in Latin America, in journalism, and from there branched out to include criticism, drama, and prose fiction. Although he has written realist works, his metier is sf, in which he first became interested after reading Bradbury, Simak, and Sturgeon. His early efforts in the genre met with considerable success: the novel *The Superior Ones* (*Los alfañicos*, 1959) and his novella *Someone Dwells within the Wind* (*Alguien mora en el viento*, also 1959) were immediate classics. *Someone Dwells within the Wind* was awarded the *Alerce* prize by the University of Chile and is representative of his best work. He went on to win other prizes for his short fiction, and in 1974 was awarded a grant through the University of Iowa's International Writing Program.

Correa has the distinction of being one of the first Latin American sf writers to have had his work published in the United States. He had sent one of his stories, "The Last Element" ("El ultimo elemento"), to Ray Bradbury, who liked it, suggested Correa submit it to the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and then dropped a note to the magazine's editors on Correa's behalf. The story was published in the April 1962 issue. Another story, "Alter Ego," was published by *MF&SF* in 1967 and was later reprinted in the textbook *Introductory Psychology through SF* (1974) and in *The Penguin World Omnibus of SF* (1986). As being published in the United States was the highest mark of success for Latin American sf writers at the time, Correa's accomplishments were greatly inspiring to contemporaries such as Elena Aldunate, author of the classic story "Juana and Cybernetics" ("Juana y la cibernetica," 1963). Correa continues to be recognized

and admired, and he is a source of inspiration and support to a new generation of Chilean sf writers.

The first-contact story we have included here, "When Pilate Said No," is taken from his eponymous 1971 anthology. A cautionary tale written in the midst of the cold war, it can be read as an indictment of the space race and of the hubris and bigotry that lead to genocide. The story also continues the debate, beloved by sf writers, over the comparative powers of religion and science.



When Pilate Said No

Cuando Pilato se opuso, 1971

by Hugo Correa

translated by Andrea Bell

The *Tierra*, tall as a forty-story skyscraper, rose up imposingly between the blue desert dunes. To the north a mountain range, whose sawtooth peaks split the sky, stretched the length of the horizon until its last hand-shaped foothills reached out into the sands like slumbering claws. To the west and south lay only wasteland, which gave off iridescent sparks in the sunlight.

Behind the mountain range and along its northern slopes lived the dumis, in caves whitewashed with sticky mud, their entrances hidden by dense forests. From the bridge beneath the ship's tapered prow, Captain Ortuzar-a short, burly man with bushy eyebrows and a choleric expression engraved on his face (without which his squashed features would have seemed altogether flat)-slouched in his chair and watched the television screen. It showed various scenes of the dumi settlements that the autoexplorer-a tiny teleguided helicopter-was capturing and transmitting to the rocket.

"What a bizarre mix of reptile and insect! We could never live with them."

"It's a social impossibility," agreed Murchinson, the spaceflight engineer.

"And on Earth they still dare speak of the incommunicability of the spirits. We should congratulate ourselves on our human condition."

"Well, I suppose the dumis would say the same thing, except in reverse."

"True, optimism is the essential quality of all life; still, I bet those bugs are ashamed of their appearance and habits. Rossi's investigations confirm that."

"Hmm. That remains to be seen, Captain. Their unexpected submissiveness could very well be a strategy. It strikes me as exaggerated."

For the dumis' reactions to the arrival of man were manifold and con-

tradictory. They began by murdering Veliz at close range: one of their poison spears pierced the radio operator, and his body, which swelled horrifically until exploding, was devoured in a tumult of wild rejoicing. Not satisfied with that, the dumis then hurled themselves at the rocket in an ill-conceived attack. The *Tierra-an* unassailable fortress whose defense systems automatically fired their weapons- repelled the attack, accompanied by the sizzle of leathery flesh and bursts of red smoke. All the dumis together would have been incapable of seizing the spaceship, even had they possessed some basic understanding of military organization.

And then the unexpected happened: the dumis laid down their arms and, with the most abject servility, offered the men the governance of their territories-thus did they acknowledge human superiority.

The explorers had to stay on the new world for thirty days before returning to Earth. The chance to seal their victory was what convinced Captain Ortuzar, as head of the expedition, to accept the dumis' offer-provided they maintained their distance from the *Tierra*, as their repulsive appearance and natural stench made them unwelcome neighbors. This condition was humbly accepted. From then on the men could circulate freely among those creatures and get help with their researches and investigations.

"A strategy? No, Murchinson. If that's your name for terror, then I'll agree with you. They're afraid of us, Murchinson. That's all. They can't forget that night when we roasted a hundred of them in the blink of an eye. Is any strategy a match for immensely superior technology? Multiply by a thousand the difference between the Spanish conquistadors and the American Indians; you wouldn't even come close to the human/dumi relationship."

The television focused on Rossi, the archaeologist, who stood in front of a building that resembled a truncated tower.

"Captain, this is a paradise of amorality: cannibalism, political anarchy, legalized theft, and other such things. And you know what? They're very happy this way. Only one aspect of human civilization has gotten their attention. You're gonna laugh: they're impressed by the story of Christ. They've never had a savior."

"Do you think they've needed one? That's one way their evolution hasn't been held back."

"But this is a very ancient people, Captain! And you can see their level of civilization is nil."

"OK, but it might just be there's a lot of congenital stupidity, right?"

"Maybe, although months before our arrival a prophet appeared."

"A prophet?"

"Yeah, he lives in the desert, says he's the son of a superior being. Some dumis gather around every day to listen to him. What do you think of that?"

Night fell, escorted by the shadows of nearby mountains, which crept across the dunes until touching the rocket. Millions of lights pierced the vastness: the *Tierra*, isolated citadel from another world, glinted metallically in the turquoise eve. One enormous star, which stood out clearly from its neighbors, poured forth its pale light from above.

"It's a nova, just as we thought. It appeared thirty years ago, on exactly the same night the prophet was born," Rossi reported from the bridge. A warm breeze, saturated with mineral emissions, blew across the desert. "That'd be the new Star of Bethlehem, Captain. That, too, is supposed to have been a nova."

"At least we're not the three wise men, eh, Rossi?" He added with indifference, "Do these monstrosities connect the appearance of the star with the prophet's arrival?"

The archaeologist continued to gaze at the shadowy, far-off mountains, the home of the dumis.

"They don't elaborate much on the subject. If they hadn't heard the story of Christ I bet they would've remained silent. Even so, they don't say much."

"Humans have nothing in common with those smelly vermin, Rossi. They're by-products of nature. Just as I've refused to show them the ship, I refuse to consider them to be like me."

"It is hard to believe, Captain," agreed Nasokov, the chief astrogator.

"And that prophecy, what effect has it had on these beasts?"

"Only anticipation, which was interrupted by our arrival."

The majority of the dumis found the story ridiculous. But since the electronic translator caught only half the sounds of their infernal language, what Rossi had been able to puzzle out-plus guesswork to fill in the blanks-made for a vague whole. The prophet's teachings were similar to the earthly Messiah's: love for one's neighbor, humility, rejection of material goods in favor of eternal life, etc. He also worked some wonders that could be considered miracles: he prophesied the arrival of the *Tierra* and opposed the attack on the rocket. That last one earned him the enmity of the majority: no one wanted anything to do with him now.

They even talked about sacrificing him for fear he would divide the dumis people.

"He has a few adherents, along with a group of disciples, but they're so apathetic I'm sure they'll abandon him at the first sign of trouble."

"No one can make those bugs understand, Rossi. Crackpots-people who believe they can fix the world-are everywhere, even on a planet inhabited by worms. But the dumis will never be able to understand even the most elementary principles of coexistence. They eat each other! "Yes," Rossi, "they resolve their misunderstandings through one- to- one combat, and the victor, after selecting the most appetizing morsels, leaves the rest to the collective and takes himself off for a solo feast." "They're

ignorant of law and politics." The captain punctuated his words with energetic movements of his short arms. "They only united to attack us, but without coming up with any sort of plan first, because

even that's beyond them".

"But on more than one occasion they've come to ask you for a judgment, Captain. That's something: they take their role as subjects seriously."

"Because they don't want to take on any sort of responsibility. We've replaced their rudimentary government in a way that benefits them: they still enjoy their freedom, committing all the depravities they care to, knowing we wouldn't intervene in their affairs even if they decided to devour each other in one big orgy. Which would be a splendid solution, don't you think? Because there's one thing I must tell you: when this planet is colonized, not a single dumis is going to be left alive. We're proceeding in a humanitarian manner because the time's not yet come to put things in their place. But when men come in search of the crucial space we're running out of on our world, the killing will begin. It's survival, boys, nothing more. Men aren't going to share this magnificent planet with the dumis when it can be colonized without resorting to ex-

pensive artificial methods."

The captain's words rebounded in a final echo. Just then one of the moons-huge as millwheels, their flat expanses festooned in red and gold, barren like Earth's satellite-rose above the sandy plains. Its iridescent light wrapped the *Tierra* in an icy blanket.

"What's happening?"

The face of one of the men on guard duty appeared on the television screen.

"The sentinel's spotted a group of dumis headed this way, Captain. What should we do?"

The captain appeared surprised.
"I'll speak to them."

In a few seconds the autoexplorer, powered by its silent rotor, halted above the dumis. A beam of light shone down on the monsters. They retreated, waving their multiple arms.

"What do you want? Don't come even a meter closer!"

The translator broadcast Ortuzar's words via the automatic loudspeaker. One of the dumis-indistinguishable from the rest-whistled its response, which was picked up by the helicopter's microphones.

"We have captured an individual who passes himself off as a prophet. As he has managed to beguile a part of the population, we wish you to authorize us to sacrifice him, because of the danger that he will divide the dumis people and start a war."

"Since when are they so fussy?" the captain asked Rossi. "Don't they kill each other for lunch on a daily basis without consulting us?"

"Only for personal reasons, or when they're very hungry, Captain. There's never been a war among the dumis."

"Aha, so they have their principles."

He thought for a few moments. The electronic eye focused on the motionless crowd awaiting the verdict.

"And if he really were the Redeemer?" exclaimed the archaeologist.
"So what?"

"Well, Captain, it would mean nothing more nor less than that you'd be playing the role of Pontius Pilate."

Ortuzar chewed his nails and looked at his men, who remained silent.
"And what of it, after all? They must know what they're doing."

"It's not that simple, Captain," replied Rossi. "Even though he may belong to a repulsive species, that prophet is trying to preach good things. His gospel might change these people. If I were you I wouldn't pass judgment lightly."

"Yeah, you're right. This is putting me in a tough spot."
"Tell them to wait a few minutes."

Captain Ortuzar, for the first time in his forty years of life, hesitated. But he decided to follow Rossi's advice. The dumis answered that they would wait there for his decision.

Ortuzar began to pace about the bridge. He looked at the shining instrument panel, the complicated dials, the multicolored levers and buttons, the radar and television screens, and all the marvelous instruments

capable of steering the spaceship across the cosmos without human intervention.

They're doomed. Whatever my decision is, it won't change their future. I'd be doing them a favor if I refused to allow the sacrifice of this prophet. If a spaceship had landed on Earth on the eve of Golgotha and its captain had prevented the Crucifixion, humanity wouldn't have had to wait so long for the advent of technology.

He stopped in front of the library and, pressing a button, whispered the name Pontius Pilate into the microphone. An impersonal voice summarized the tetrarch's lifestory.

What a fool! In order to evade responsibilities he lost the opportunity to become mankind's greatest benefactor. One washing of hands that submerged the world in fifteen centuries of darkness! That triggered an era of senseless religious wars in order to impose a bunch of abstractions, without achieving a single positive result.

He looked at the television: on the screen, the somber group.

There's no escape for you! In two centuries more you'll all be destroyed.

He peered out the window. The light, high on the horizon, insinuated an invisible curtain over the emerging stars, rendering them faint, almost imperceptible. Only the great star, the nova, sustained its radiant gleam. Very soon now the second satellite would make its appearance: on the horizon a reddish glow, like a gigantic transparent dome, heralded its ascent.

If God exists, no doubt he forgot the dumis. And if the one awaiting my judgment is his Son, he's clearly arrived too late. There's nothing he can do to save his people! Still, ...

The captain struck his forehead.

I almost forgot! I must not allow that prophet to die.

The archaeologist, Murchinson, and the two astrogators approached the captain.

"Gentlemen: I will oppose the sacrifice of that prophet."

A brief silence ensued, broken by Rossi.

"Are you sure about what you're doing, Captain?"

"Don't get suspicious, Rossi," the captain laughed. "Do you think I'm trying to make some subtle theological point? No. Above all, I'm practical: that prophet's doctrine would turn the dumis into meek, submissive beings. And there are still reactionary souls on Earth who, for that very reason, would be against exterminating them. It'd be fatal: eventually the

dumis, as native sons of this world, could assimilate our knowledge and subjugate humans, who, as transplants, would be at a disadvantage. Do you understand? Survival, gentlemen. We have to look further ahead, and not settle for being mere explorers. My decision will be pivotal for the human race, because we won't leave it any annoying problems."

Again it was the archaeologist who spoke up, in view of the others' silence.

"Don't you think your zeal is a bit extreme, captain?"

Murchinson spoke up. "I think the captain's right. It seems like an excellent idea to me."

"Me, too," said Nasokov.

The others all agreed in turn.

"And what do you plan to do with the prophet and his disciples?" asked Rossi.

"Simply lock them up in the hold and take them to Earth. They'll serve as field samples. It's the only way to guarantee their survival."

"It's just that on Earth they'll form an excellent impression of the dumis on the basis of those samples, Captain," Rossi hinted.

Ortuzar flew into a rage.

"I'm in charge here, Rossi! If need be I'll kill those buggers once we're in space just to avoid what you're saying. Or don't you think I'd foresee that?"

The captain turned to the television and spoke in a dry voice. "My verdict is this: You must turn the prophet over to immediately."

The response seemed one of irritation, though fearful.

"May we know the reasons for this decision?"

"No. It is my verdict and you must respect it."

"Sir, in this special case we believe you should explain to the dumis people the reasons which moved you to return that judgment."

"What's this?" The captain turned to his men, between amused and peeved. "Offer explanations to those freaks? They must be crazy!"

And turning back to the monsters, he added:

"In this special case, dear dumis, what I order shall be done. And I swear that if you do not obey I'll exterminate you all. Agreed?"

The dumis whispered among themselves. The captain didn't take his eyes off the prophet, who could be told from the others by an odd frill that rose from his large head.

"As you command, sir". The voice over the loudspeaker was colorless. "We believe this to be an arbitrary act, because ... "

"Enough!" roared the captain. "Have the prophet and his disciples come forward. And the rest of you, move back. Don't try anything treacherous!"

Unwillingly, the group parted to make way for the condemned.

"Hurry up! Before I change my mind!"

The fifteen dumis moved away from their captors and advanced in a disorderly throng toward the rocket.

"Captain," muttered Rossi, "belay your order. You're making a mistake . . ."

Rossi stumbled against something that protruded from the instrument panel and lost his balance. When he tried to regain it he gave the impression of attacking Ortuzar. Nasokov, who was closest, reacted in a flash: a sharp blow sounded and Rossi, punched on the chin, fell to the floor. He made a weak effort to stand up, and then collapsed again heavily.

"Leave him there," the captain ordered. And he ordered the men guarding the airlock, "Get ready to receive the Son of God. As soon as he's entered, bring him to me."

Turning to the others, he added:

"I'll try to suppress my disgust, considering who's visiting us."

The bulk of the crew slept. The monstrous creature came swaying into the airlock. It called to mind both spider and lizard. Large polyhedral head from which sprouted, on four sides, a cluster of multifaceted eyes and weird vibrating antennae. Numerous articulated tentacles jutted out from its misshapen body, ending in strange, pointy claws covered with bristles. Greenish drops gleamed between the quills like dew among the grass. Thin sheets of some extremely hard substance protected its sides, chest, and back like an insect's wing covers. It walked semierect, supported by a bunch of short, skinny legs. The monster's dark coloring heightened its ugliness.

The fourteen disciples entered the rocket in succession, and the Dantean group in the center of the airlock gave the impression of something that might have been called humility, had it been possible to draw parallels between their attitudes and those of humans. An acrid and revolting odor spread through the atmosphere, in spite of the air conditioning.

"Let the prophet, the one with the frills on his head, come up. The rest should wait there until further orders."

Rossi was dragged out of the navigation room: he was still uncon-

scious. The others kept their eyes fixed on the lift: the door opened and the dumí made his entrance. He advanced with a certain majesty, moving in that curious slanting manner of his kind. The men had to repress a shudder of fear. The captain warned him to stop at a prudent distance.

"Well, I imagine you're grateful to us for having saved you from certain death."

When he said this the captain winked quickly at Murchinson, saying under his breath:

"Will this vermin speak in parables?"

"To be sure," replied the prophet. That is, he emitted a series of whistles and squawks, mixed with a prolonged wail, which echoed in the corners of the room. The translator did its job in a fraction of a second, and a human voice, lifeless and metallic, retransmitted the answer: "We expected nothing less from human kindness."

"Ah!" the captain exclaimed. Now electronic voices, capable of reproducing dumí phonetics with great accuracy, came from the loudspeaker. The grotesque creature comically twisted its head in order to hear better: "That means that my intercession didn't upset your plans."

"A thousand years ago," replied the dumí, "a prophecy was made about our people: that the dumís would be saved on the day beings arrived from afar. The first part of this prophecy has been fulfilled: men have come to our world."

"Did you know about this, Rossi?" asked the captain, looking around for the archaeologist. Only then did he remember he was asleep in his cabin. He made a gesture of annoyance, and went on interrogating the prophet.

"What else did the prophecy say?"

"That those beings, belonging to a superior and redeemed race, would land on our planet at the precise time when I would be preaching my gospel. This part has also come to pass."

The captain became nervous. Something wasn't going right. What was he doing chatting with this rancid bug? He'd already achieved his aim: he had him in his power.

"Lastly," continued the dumí, "that those beings would try to prevent our salvation, by opposing my sacrifice."

"Oliveira, Fresnay!" shouted the captain, assailed by a sudden suspicion.

He was unable to complete the order: the prophet threw himself at him. Ortuzar drew his gun and fired. The monster exploded in a cloud of

red smoke. The men coughed, choking on the sickening stench. They fell to the ground, where they remained motionless, their bodies blurred by the scarlet mist.

The captain came to: he was tied to a chair. Before his eyes, still fuzzy from the narcotic, one of the dumís took shape. He choked back a cry. Several monsters shuffled about in the huge room, curiously examining the instrument panel. They didn't touch it; they confined themselves to looking at it, exchanging muffled comments the electronic translator couldn't pick up. The smell of the vaporized dumí still hung in the atmosphere, although the air conditioner was working. A deformed claw, hairy and soaked with droplets, waved before his eyes. Ortuzar threw his head back to distance himself from the beast. Looking around in search of help, he could see his shipmates, also tied up, beginning to regain consciousness. But he didn't have time to keep looking around. Something grazed his body: a red lance, long as a fencing foil and protruding from one of the dumí's extremities, was aimed at his chest. He felt the sharpness of the point pressing softly against him. The monster's sibilant words echoed in his ears along with the metallic voice of the translator:

"Disconnect the alarms and open the doors."

The order permitted neither reply nor hesitation. Ortuzar turned to the control panel and moved a series of levers. Pressed to the back of his chair, he could feel the point of the lance. The ties allowed him to move his hands with some amount of freedom. The idea of starting up the reactors vaguely crossed his mind: the rocket's acceleration would render his captors powerless, although the men, too, would suffer the effects of inertia. But he realized that the lance would transfix him before the *Tierra*, propelled by the atomic blast, could begin to liftoff.

"Go back to your place," ordered the dumí.

Another dumí went to the window to inform those waiting outside that the hatches were open.

"You men have looked down upon the dumís," said the one who was acting as chief, the same one who had threatened the captain and was surely one of the apostles. "While it is true that we are ignorant of the scientific and technical secrets of humans, we are master psychologists. What better than to make you believe that the Son of God had come here to preach his gospel among us? Man would not waste the chance to laugh at God: in his twisted mind would be born the notion of refusing the sacrifice of the Savior. A demonstration that the Maker had been

bested! Because he whom you killed, Captain, was neither prophet nor Son of God, but just an ordinary dum. He and we, his 'disciples,' ingested certain plants that, were we to be vaporized by your vile weapons, would make our bodies emit a gas that would fully incapacitate you but not harm us. It succeeded far beyond our expectations: your ingenious ventilation systems quickly carried the gas throughout the entire rocket before decontaminating it, and the whole crew was brought to its knees in a matter of seconds. As you can see, he who died has saved us."

"Saved? What do you mean?" stammered the captain.

"He has saved us from you. Hear me: within two hundred Earth years, when men tire of your silence and arrive here, we will be ready for them. Because you *will* teach us everything you know: we will become a highly civilized people. And we shall prevent the human race from ever setting foot on our land."

"And the prophecy?"

"We knew neither prophets nor saviors. Come."

The group of prisoners was led to the observation window. Thousands of dumis-ferocious shadows moving under the polychromatic light of the moons-surrounded the *Tierra*; many were coming inside through the open hatches.

"Captain," Rossi said haltingly, "when Nasokov hit me I was trying to warn you about something."

"What?"

"According to biblical tradition, the redemption-because of its divine origin-cannot be prevented by anyone."

The great nova, descending now and darkened by the moons, glittered faintly across the desert.