

The Paradoxes of Affirmation: Joy, the Dream work, Culture Consumption and Politics  
in Latin America and the Caribbean

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The Paradoxes of Affirmation: Joy, the Dream-Work, Culture Consumption, and Politics  
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This dissertation identifies and examines some aporiae that have historically conditioned the most salient specificities of literary narrations of Hispanic Caribbean and Latin American realities. These can be verified as inflecting distinct national traditions, through which consumption, taken as one of the earliest organizing tropes of modernity, can be ultimately elucidated in its ambiguous and complex connection with culture, neo-colonialism and capitalism.

In the first two chapters I discuss some emblematic short stories and novels by Gabriel García Márquez and Fernando Vallejo's novel *La Virgen de los Sicarios*. Since I am especially interested in the constraining niche that the Latin American writer was forced to occupy as a specialized producer of goods within the international division of cultural labor, I illuminate the instances in which this double gesture is present in these texts.

My aim in the next two chapters is to enable a reading of Argentinean fiction as a particularly fertile area to illuminate how the spectral recurrence of the aporetic knot civilization/barbarism operates, by focusing on the works of Jorge Luis Borges and Alan Pauls. Culture, being a transcendental epistemological category of European Modernity,

is also the space where the aporetic trace of this binary is introjected into the Self as wondrous and projected on the Other as terrifying.

In the fifth and sixth chapters I read the Cuban Neo-Baroque in Severo Sarduy's *Cobra* and the oft-termed constrained style of Virgilio Piñera's *La carne de René*, as two indexes of the corporeal paradox. While knowledge is yet another transcendent category of Modernity, its constitutive moment relies on a fetishistic denial of the experience of the bodily as a symptomatic kernel that is asymptotic with respect to practices of epistemic mapping.

The fourth part is titled *The Paradox of Enjoyment*, and it considers two of the most canonical narratives of Puerto Rican contemporary reality, as prominent sites for the imaginary reproduction of the cannibalistic feast that recurs throughout the Island's lettered tradition.

### Biographical Sketch

Ricardo Arribas was born in Puerto Rico. He studied Comparative Literature and Law in the University of Puerto Rico. As a doctoral student in the Comparative Literature Department at Cornell University, Ricardo has focused on Latin American and Hispanic Caribbean fiction.

*A mis dos viejos soles, José L. Arribas y Miriam V. Rivera*

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The Paradoxes of Affirmation: Joy, the Dream Work, Culture Consumption and Politics in Latin American and Caribbean Literature

Every epoch dreams with the next, and in dreaming it, precipitates its arrival.  
- Walter Benjamin, *Passagenwerken*.

Equally strange to thought is the cultural idea, the sociological and clumsy idea of the multiple in fixed compartments, and of the respectability of cultures. The thing itself, in politics, is a-cultural, as any thought and any truth are. Comic, merely comic, is the theme of a cultural politics, as comic is the idea of a political culture. Contrary to the other, the same, in its sameness, *does not have to be cultivated*.

- Alain Badiou, *Conditions*.

## Introduction

This dissertation began with a rather naïve set of questions: Why has *joy*, in the most corporeal of meanings one can attribute to this word, become so suspect amongst both Marxist and Psychoanalytic traditions of cultural critique in Latin America, so it is impossible to retrieve the concept of *joy* from the history of abuses and manipulations by the political Right? Why does the political Right, in Latin America and elsewhere have a monopoly on the particular relation we entertain within the sphere of experience this word delineates? In short, how has *joy* become a sign of the unthinkable as an experience and as an impossible thought within these two critical traditions? In this dissertation I attempt, through a comparative critical assessment of the ways the Marxist concept of symptom intersects with its Freudian version, various literary traditions in Latin America and the Caribbean, in order to approach theoretically the concept of *joy* as a signifier around which the experience of a human's synaesthetic opening up can be imagined. As such, my concern with this word lies in what I consider to be an ethical duty, finding the breaking point where the alienation of the modern subject can finally be overcome.

I take *joy* as the main category through which the division between the political and the aesthetic can be, at the same time, preserved and overcome. Joy, and not *just* justice, equality, or truth, is the true sign of a human capacity for overcoming self-debasement, and as such, it should figure as a central category in any cultural critique that claims to have a political pertinence. The first scene that comes to mind is Zarathustra's conversation with his animal interlocutors in the forest. This scene invokes two seemingly disparate realms of experience. The ecstatic experience of jubilation, the way it is taken up by the famous Nietzschean 'yeah' saying, the

joyous overcoming of all metaphysical presuppositions, in the name of a sacred relationship with the earth, of human beings in constant, joyful dialogue with the infinity that simmers beneath their indeterminate essence, as consisting in the gift of no-thing, except in what it *can* infinitely be, reveals itself fully as a valid ethical category. When someone *exists in relation* with someone or something else, particularly when it takes place between two highly cultured intellectuals about some literary or philosophical matter, they are also in constant dialogue with the myriad components of their *own* animality. And this animality is *legion*, a multitude. Impinging on a question of the sheer instinct for self-preservation, where aesthetic fruition has become a matter of political (or even ethical) intervention, and where political intervention has become a matter of re-instituting the will to materialize in this world the need for the sacred beauty, the aura, not of a particular object, but of the entire world, joy can be considered a task worth being undertaken by a literary critic.

How can the question of joy in literature, and the relation it entertains with consumption and *jouissance* be given some theoretical weight? In order to provide the reader with a map and a compass, I would like to lay out, in as schematic, generic and succinct a way as possible, the conceptual narrative that subtends my overarching argument along the four parts of this dissertation.

It is a relatively standard procedure to come upon a psychoanalytical narrative of the ways cultural consumption in its many manifestations reflects the deadlocked automatisms of a consumptive subject, consuming itself in the process of consuming the object. It is equally an established practice to articulate a critique of cultural consumption from the Marxist tradition.

Both traditions posited themselves as attempts to answer the question as to “why human labor has to be expressed in the commodity fetish?” What is not altogether evident is the kind of reading that ensues when the same question is examined in the excess of meaning that plays out at the supplemental space unfolding between the fundamental antinomies that separate one from the other.

Karl Marx stressed in the first pages of the *Grundrisse* that a mode of consumption is already implicit in the mode through which a product comes into being. Since consumption already presupposes a certain mode of production (the act of consuming a product implicates a whole array implied in the mechanisms and modes of relation that makes it impossible for the consumer *literally* to identify her/himself with its producer), and as much as production is always already a consumption of the means of production, of which the body of the worker can be conceived as being one more gear, then how could this moment of ex-change between the producer and the producer be captured in literary production? Although there is much cultural critique in the Marxist tradition that suggests that production and consumption are at the intersection between culture and politics, and even if lucid readings have already been conveyed at the intersection between psychoanalysis and Marxism, in order to make intelligible the historical indexes of the textual realities in question, Latin American cultural critique has not always been fully aware of the consequences. This is true with respect to the future forms of both cultural consumption and production, of reading the same phenomena - the rituals associated with the celebration and condemnation, of the spectacle of alternative canonizations and ex-communications- as one intricately ingrained into the rituals of cultural parricide and resuscitations that unfold in a writing tradition, that is, of reading cultural consumption *and*

production as phenomena that involve one and the same transcendental, or (trans-)historical subject. Literary criticism tends to see itself as a different moment, a secondary moment, outside the processes of production of its objects of study. The extent to which the 'object' becomes 'an object of study' is also the extent to which the new subject also emerges as such. The same is equally true on the side of the cultural scene, where the writer is not always fully aware of the degree to which his/her production, and hence the product, is over-determined by the specific, concrete form of consumption that his final product will have. The writer/reader dichotomy is another form in which the alienated subject of modernity betrays its self-division, while it largely remains oblivious to it. To the degree that this is the case, the cultural scene starts to resemble a parade of wonders and curiosities, where one 'new' movement or mode of writing is trumpeted as a definitive moment of transcendence from the one that preceded it.

One of the fundamental insights upon which my analysis hinges is the idea that the impasses that riddled the Latin American lettered class are *also* those of the Western modern subject, that the Latin American lettered subject's failed attempts at reaching the moment of modernity's self realization were also the symptoms of modernity's project of philosophically accounting for the experience of its own historical unfolding. When we consider such blind-spots from the point of view of the riddle posed to the *letrado* by the impasses with regards to the aspirations of actualization of what Jean-François Lyotard has termed modernity's meta-narratives, we find the political and the epistemological impasse are connatural to the same phenomenon, when viewed from the irreducible otherness that modernity's construction of the colonial Other left outside the historical itinerary of its symbolic purview. In what I think is both an affirmation through a negation of Octavio Paz's famous dictum that, in Latin America, the

intellectual produces *culture*, but cannot produce *knowledge*, let alone *philosophical thought*, a foreseeable corollary of this would be that cultural production in the concerned region is the objective materialization of the epistemological impasses that have riddled modernity, which in itself entails the idea *that another kind of knowledge* has materialized.

In this sense, my fundamental perplexity revolves around the question that Karl Marx asked himself and tried to address in his *Capital*, namely the precise meaning of the fact that human labor is expressed in the value form of a commodity. In my opinion, this has the theoretical implication that *culture*, as an object of critique- the institutional mechanisms associated with the circulation of cultural goods- cannot be abstracted from its structural functionality with respect to the capitalist nation state. Walter Benjamin's rescue of the concept of *aura* already presupposes an answer to the question of cultural exchange-value, since his subjective positioning with respect to *aura* is analogous: first, to Marx's critique of surplus-value which interacts with production and consumption; second, to Kant's critique of the transcendental subject with respect to rationalism and empirism; and finally, to Freud's subversion of the unconscious with respect to his early concept of the 'dream-work' and 'screen memories,' and the relation of these concepts to the pleasure principle and the possibility of its transcending. As Miriam Bratu Hansen and Susan Buck-Morss have stressed in similar, though admittedly not identical contexts, Benjamin took equal distance from the purely occultist, Theosophic stance with respect to *aura*, as from the purely materialist stance, but only in order to *preserve* its utopian, political value. For Benjamin, everything had an *aura*, not just aesthetic objects, thereby hinting at a critique of the division between manual and intellectual labor, and therefore at a critique of the absorption of the political *by* the cultural, but only a critique that is fully accomplished from within the aesthetic realm, where the *singularity* that is sought as the

grounding for ethical *universality* comes into view. It is as if Benjamin wanted to explode the aesthetic object's enslavement to its auratic prison, only to liberate *aura* from its imprisonment by the commodity fetish. I argue that the use-value of cultural production in Latin America is materialized by a particular formal instrumentalization of a knowledge that was more often than not imported from Europe. It is that mechanism of an anesthetic, numbing, reactive, shock-shielding function - which in Europe was assumed by technological apparatus, and which Benjamin saw with a mixture of horror and wonder-, that was imposed by Latin American writers on European knowledge, as the techno-aesthetic apparatus for the creation of another kind of *fantasmagoria*. In the transatlantic passage from the purely economic to the aesthetic, exchange-value does not disappear but only changes in nature. In other words, there is, also, a *cultural form* of the category of use- and exchange-value,<sup>1</sup> and it is just as much an illusion, a *transcendental illusion*, as money, in the sense that Karatani gives to this term.<sup>2</sup> Only when one does not deem an artwork interesting do knowledge and cultural unconscious enter into a crisis. In a similar fashion, a cultural crisis, as when a cultural movement loses its *credit*, is the way culture has of renovating itself. The epiphanies that punctuate the subsequent 'hysterias' of culture are the ways that capital (in the form of knowledge) has had of embodying itself. Insofar as this analogy holds, this dissertation is my attempt to come to grips with the mechanisms of cultural production in overcoming its own limits, of recognizing modern culture's very limits in its transatlantic articulation with politics in the region, and in taking 'culture from behind,' as it were, by articulating a critique of culture on its own terms.

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<sup>1</sup> Although Marx collapsed this distinction, since in industrial capitalism, the only use-value of a commodity is its exchange value. See Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, 8.

<sup>2</sup> In the sense that "one can hardly escape the illusion."



Consequently I try to tackle the seeming discrepancy in the kind of usage that European knowledge is put to in Latin America, from the point of view of the antinomy that Marx found with respect to surplus value in industrial and mercantilist capital: the antinomy that [cultural] surplus value is not created in the process of production *itself*, nor in the process of circulation *in itself*. Surplus [cultural] value comes from the *difference* in [cultural] systems in the circulation process (for example, Latin America as compared with Europe/North America), and yet that difference is generated by [aesthetic (formal)] innovation in the production process (i.e., the *novela de la tierra* vs. magical realism). [Cultural] capital has to create this difference incessantly. This is, of course, with the corresponding substitutions, the same wording that Kojin Karatani uses to address the aforementioned antinomy in respect to capital in general.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the division between the use-value and cultural value of an object can be conceived of as the illusory effect of the very mechanisms of ‘displacement’ and ‘condensation’ at work in a dream. As Kojin Karatani notes, Marx’s emphasis was not in the production/consumption of a given commodity, but in its exchange and circulation. Marx himself notes on more than one occasion that a commodity ceases to exist as such, that is, it loses its capacity to generate surplus value through exchange, once it is taken out of the circulation of goods, just as a signifier in itself does not signify anything, except when it is put into an exchange relation with other signifiers. Similarly, there is nothing *intrinsically* valuable in a cultural object, since its value-form emerges only as the after-effect of its constant circulation. Cultural use-value is *performative*, in the double, and somewhat paradoxical sense that it is generated by the person’s rituals that are only retrospectively given a cultural meaning- very much contained in the Pascalian maxim ‘kneel down and pray, that faith will come by itself’-, and in the deeper Freudian sense that it is a *per-formation* (a *per-laboration*; *Durcharbeitung*) of the latent dream content, through which the

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<sup>3</sup> Karatani, *Transcritique*, 11.

subject can overcome the repression mechanisms (*Unterdrückung*; in French, *refoulements*) of its symptoms. It is in this double value of cultural production as the ‘dream-work’ of post-modernity- as means of self-enslavement, and as a way to go through this enslavement- that I want to address my enquiry into the Latin American and Caribbean literary arena.

In more than one way, I attempt to both investigate and question cultural consumption in Latin America and the Caribbean from the parallax standpoint of this constant oscillation between sacralization and profanation, and between one type of use-value to the other. What might have been my point of departure, but only came about at a relatively late stage during the process of writing, was already suggested by Kojin Karatani’s argument in his *Transcritique on Kant and Marx*, to the effect that Marx’s critique of religion in his youth, in spite of having the resonances of the Hegelian master/slave dialectics, is predicated on an inflection by the Kantian ethical imperative, and therefore the Kantian way, or method, which he termed as *parallax*, was also apposite to an approach to the Latin American cultural phenomenon that accounted for its transatlantic relationship with its global circulation and consumption.<sup>4</sup> If a slave only finds his/her means of deliverance through his/her work, this moment of creative *ex-stasis* comes at a price, literally of having to *buy* what he/she produces. In the same way that the different historical stages of capitalism produces the subject that will only consume the commodities that it produces, (that is how the ‘miracle’ of surplus-value happens), so it is that cultural production in Latin America also presupposes the subject that will have produced the subject of its

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<sup>4</sup> Karatani’s wager in his *Transcritique* is that “Marx’s communism cannot be considered merely as a necessity of natural history, but also as an ethical intervention” (130). This concept was later retaken by Slavoj Žižek in *The Parallax View*.

consumption.<sup>5</sup> This Latin American subject of consumption, without regard for any nationality, always perceives itself as ‘cosmopolitan,’ above and outside of any ‘stain’ of local determinations, whereas the producer is to some extent the harbinger of this cultural ‘stain’. I would therefore like to restate Karatani’s quotation of Marx’s key passage on religion, in order to recast the verve of the Kantian ethical imperative’s residual embeddedness within Marx’s critique of Capital, that is, against the light of Walter Benjamin’s [in my view also in the nature of parallax] theoretical revamping of *aura*, on the one hand, along the lines of what Susan Buck-Morss’s conception of a *synaesthetic* reformulation of the human perceptive-sensorial apparatus and, on the other, Sigmund Freud’s [also parallax] undertaking of broaching a route for the subject’s going ‘beyond’ the pleasure principle that, interestingly enough, is the finish line of a long detour that began with an examination of dream phenomena.

If one considers the fact that, when viewed as the space where questions regarding ‘matters of taste’ are elucidated, *culture* summons to the same field of experience and reflection considerations that touch both upon the libidinal and the aesthetic, then the emphasis that Karatani lays on the Kantian overtones in this passage reinstates the necessity of a critique of ideology. This creates the question as to the very religious role of culture in late modernity, as that of completing the closure of meaning around human self-debasement and alienation: The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that *man is the highest being for man*, hence with the *categorical imperative to overthrow all relations* in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being.”

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<sup>5</sup> “ Industrial capitalism earns surplus value by making workers work, but also by making them buy back- in totality- what they produce.”

This ‘categorical imperative’ requires some investigation for a proper understanding of the role of libidinal and therefore anesthetic homeostasis that culture as ‘mass deception’ has come to effect. How can culture, which has more often than not been charged with the task of staging the spectacle of human self-debasement and, in extreme cases, annihilation, be understood as the symptom of such debasement, without submitting it to relentless hermeneutics of suspicion (Adorno’s *Dialectics of Enlightenment*) that would only frustrate in advance any possibility of a joyful, synaesthetic relationship with the world? To the extent that Marx’s own words on religion resonate with Freud’s own critique of religion as an *illusion*, and with Benjamin’s double usage of *aura* as a dispositive to disjoint and subvert, both the anesthetic functionalization of culture and the fetishization of *aura*, and therefore of jolting back from its sensorial numbness of humans’ relation to the world, this dissertation represents different moments in reading Latin American literary production as an attempt to overcome the impasses that have constituted the political subject of modernity *qua* divided subject- which I term ideological, cultural, corporeal and libidinal- from the point of view of an enquiry into the nature of modern cultural consumption. As such, I presuppose a critique of culture, not so much a critique of singular cultural objects as being ‘bad’ (intrinsically negative) or ‘good’ (intrinsically affirmative) objects, but of the very idea of ‘culture’ as the only ‘opium of the masses’ that late modernity (finance capitalism) deserves.

This takes me to a crucial point: What is, or should be the function of cultural and literary critique that is congruent with a trans-historical dismantlement of the automatisms at play in cultural production and consumption? More crucially for me, to the extent that cultural critique in one way or another suggests ‘consumption,’ how should the ethical undergirdings of my

critical task be featured, so that my reading accounts for the preservation of the subject's perceptual-sensorial opening and deliverance to its in-division with respect to objective reality? Throughout the writing of this dissertation, I found myself haunted by the specters I purported to exorcise, since the conceptual tools at my disposal, in the enterprise of *instrumentalization of knowledge* at the level of culture that I, as a cultural critic, saw myself ineluctably fated to re-enact, can also become an imaginary place avoiding the same deadlocks, the disavowed pre-text of another closure upon the boundaries of my own world of meaning. In my more or less implicit recurrence to the term 'transcendental subject' in reference to the Latin American *letrado*, I therefore found myself looking for an employment of the word 'critique' along a line similar to Karatani's explanation of the ways Kant uses it in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, as *both* a negation *and* an affirmation of that which is critiqued, or rather, as Karatani says, 'an affirmation *through* a negation, and a negation *through* an affirmation'.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the form by virtue of which the content of an affirmation attains its concrete materialization throughout time is overdetermined by the "immune" reaction, the specific exclusions of the previous contents. The resulting form is like the 'negative' of its previous content, and as such, it is still related to it. The new contents, while being the negation of the previous one, replicates [repeats], its actualized form, in fact, it depends upon this replication to constitute (fold) it-self as a 'body,' or 'subject' with an interiority, in short an en-bodied subject. The correlative process is just as true: The process of self-evacuation of an established form, through which it becomes emptied out of any meaning and becomes a senseless repetition of the Same, is the moment when that very form has already become the form *of* something else, namely the opposite of its previous content. But both processes are one and the same process through which the modern subject constitutes itself as a historical subject, and they stand in 'parallax' relation to each other. This is therefore, another

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<sup>7</sup> Karatani, *Transcritique*.

axiomatic tenet that runs along the eight chapters of this dissertation: that the Hegelian unfolding of what Angel Rama terms *The Lettered City* describes precisely an automatism at the heart of the epistemological symptoms of Western Modernity. This absorption of the content of a previous form, under the guise of a new form, this evacuation of an old form, which, by virtue of its evacuation, always already contains something else, is, when viewed from a hermeneutical paradigm determined by the dialectics of the old and the new, as different phenomena. But the opposition between the old and the new, just as the one between form and content, is ultimately a false opposition, when it is posited as mere opposition, the terms in question act like the screen memories, the Lacanian ‘lamella,’ or the specific function of the organ called ‘libido,’ whereby one and the other are like the two opposing sides of a pleasure principle.

These phenomena of mutual evacuations and inundations between form and content can be seen in the case of cultural formations, as much as it is verified in political processes within the modern nation states. In fact they are different phenomena when looked at from the parallax effect that obtains in the cultural/political binary. But, if viewed from the perspective of them being like the ‘manifest content’ and the ‘latent content’ of each other, they are the ‘dream work’ of the same historical subject. The conception of historical time after which I model my analyses of the texts in question is therefore more akin to the *Geschichtsphilosophie* that Walter Benjamin tried to articulate in his *Passagenwerken*, rather than with any teleological conception of a Hegelian *Philosophy of History*, where history was the self-actualization of thought; or of a historical philosophy, where philosophy was just the expression of its historical becoming.<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>8</sup> The clarification provided by Susan Buck-Morss is pertinent here: “ If *Geschichtsphilosophie* is translated (as is usually the case) ‘philosophy of history,’ the implication is that history develops in a philosophically meaningful way, manifesting a teleological plan or goal. If it is translated ‘historical philosophy,’ the implication is that philosophy develops in a historically relative fashion, as the expression of an evolving *Zeitgeist*. Both ideas miss

true relationship between philosophy and history that Benjamin wanted to establish in his looking at what Susan Buck-Morss calls ‘the debris of mass culture’ as an allegory of modern history, conveys a suggestion of what remains outside of the realm of understanding comprehended within the dialectics between the philosophy of history and of historical philosophy.<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, I want to stand equidistant from the two types of critical reading that tend to predominate: the first, I would call the ‘erudite,’ or ‘encyclopedic’ one, in which a cultural object, for example a work of fiction, is seen from the way it illustrates, reflects, or even materializes a paradigm of thought, a style, or an aesthetic movement, whether this is called existentialism, phenomenology, the Caribbean neo-baroque, magical realism, dirty realism, the *sicaresque*, or even, and most particularly, Marxism or psychoanalysis. The second way of reading can be called the hysterical ‘quest for the New,’ where cultural objects are more or less viewed within pretty much the same concern as the latest fashionable car. As should be evident, just as a philosophy of history and a historical philosophy ultimately implicate each other; these two modes of reading culture also have their interconnection. They ultimately end up at either side of their opposite- as Borges’ tale *El Zahir* illustrates, the ripples of the latest literary event, after a moment of consumptive frenzy, will come to accumulate the debris of a library shelf. In short, I attempt a reading that is diagonal to the dialectics of the old and the new.

Consequently, perhaps a third fundamental assumption is that culture, understood as the space of production, distribution, circulation, exchange and consumption of objects whose use value is solely anesthetic, responds to the same fundamental logic that drives ‘reason’ and

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Benjamin’s point, which was to construct, not a philosophy of history, but philosophy *out* of history, or (this amounts to the same thing) to reconstruct historical material as philosophy-indeed, ‘philosophical history’ might be a less misleading nomenclature.” Buck-Morss, Susan. *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, 55.

<sup>9</sup> Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*.

‘capital,’ namely the drive to overcome its own limits, or rather that it is yet another aspect of the same phenomenon called Modernity.

Summing up: The method and the unifying conceptual thread employed throughout the eight chapters of this dissertation will be to read literary and cultural texts as the ‘dream content’ of a transcendental, historical subject, wherewith one can reveal in them the return of the ‘real’ and the ‘automatisms of desire’ at play when looked at in the cultural history of the modern Latin American nations. In other words, one can see in them, simultaneously, the recursive impasses *and* the epochal nature of the consumptive logic that has over-determined the relationships of modern subjects with language and the world, and recognize those impasses and automatisms as the symptoms of the modern subject in its collective, historical dimension. Even when the ultimate goal is to find a plausible answer of what it means for the modern subject to institute a different sphere of relation with his *productive* essence, and what it means, for the purposes of the intersection between politics and culture, to elucidate the full meaning effects of this ‘diachronic synchronicity’- the paradox of articulating the historical meaning of a cultural tradition from the standpoint of a non-historical, structural logic of repetition-, or to read their co-temporaneousness, conversely, across the historical gap that separates them, in short to read them from the dialectical ‘interstices’ of historical (diachronic) and logical (synchronic) time, only then can one discover the ‘parallax view,’ the perplexity or *aporiae*, that will drive my comparative analyses in the ensuing pages of this dissertation.

In Colombia, the literary phenomenon known as Magical Realism was widely considered as an affirmative cultural instance in which the voice of Latin America could finally gain its



international expression, but it only did so ‘metaphorically,’ that is, as the result of a ‘reactive formation’. The mythical overlapping of the fantastic and the magical, the ‘dreamlike’ character of the realities depicted in Márquez’s fiction can be taken as another example of how a previous cultural embodiment (*la novela de la tierra*) was rejected to constitute the new contents, and its contents ‘introjected,’ in the process of their negation, onto the constitution of a new form. The ethnographic language, the rhetorical protocols, of the so-called ‘realist’ or ‘telluric’ novel, that is, the anthropological enclave of the Latin American Archive that González Echevarría has studied so well, became the object of negation (symbolic consumption; critical reading). But this negation was perceived as a negation of the contents, whereas this negation was actually done through a transcribing of the same protocols of the telluric novel at the ‘metaphorical level,’ where the underlying, disavowed division, the opposition constituting the subject of the telluric novel, was finally perceived as a coherent whole, only at the price that, in overcoming that division, the telluric novel overcame itself as that form, and became the form of something else. The journalistic, objective style of Márquez that is his trademark, also contains formal traces of the ethnographic and legal discourses, but what is important to stress is that this is the form through which fantastic events (what constitute the anthropological brute mass, the ‘primitive’ or ‘barbarous’ aspect of the nation) are given their concreteness as actualized content. What was perceived as the empty shell (the telluric novel) of an ‘old’ form, was also, ‘always already,’ the contents by which a new form will have been recognized retroactively as encasing- quilting- that lack of meaning. The forms of Magical Realism- the uncanny palimpsest of legal, scientific, ethnographic and journalistic discourses- is effectively the ‘true,’ ‘secret’ content of the late telluric novel,<sup>10</sup> which ‘returned’ as the ‘real thing’ in Colombian and Latin American letters,

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<sup>10</sup> Something similar could be asserted regarding the telluric novel and its relation to the urban chronicle, or of scientific, ethnographic, and mercantile voyages of previous centuries.

when the latter was starting to be viewed as an empty form, that is, as *dead letter*, when viewed from the perspective of its own contents. Without entering the question as to the historical status of the ‘magical’ in magical realism- Freud himself once asserted that parapsychology was the science of the future, and he can by no means be considered a charlatan-,<sup>11</sup> it could be nonetheless asked what is the meaning of considering something ‘magical,’ while retaining its status as ‘real,’ within the coordinates of meaning of this specific historical juncture in Colombia, where the *intelligentsia* of the hysterical left saw itself in dire retreat and defeat. After all, the traumatic kernel of this defeat is what was in this effect of ironic ‘zooming out’ in which the marriage between the magical and the real was effected- it has to be kept in mind that, for Benjamin, the aura was “ the strange weave of space and time”, or the “unique appearance [apparition, semblance] of a *distance*, however near it may be”-,<sup>13</sup> just as the forms of political silence and repression of the memory of collective trauma- the massacre of entire villages during night raids by left-wing guerrillas or right-wing paramilitaries, abductions of children destined for the international black market of organ trafficking, etc.- has been proven to re-emerge in ‘fantastic’ folktales that account for those events.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, what has been re-cognized, with more or less fanfare, as the arrival of a properly Latin American version of the North American Dirty Realism- part of the phenomenon known as the Crack generation- of the 80’s until today, is

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example Freud, Sigmund. "Determinism, Belief in Chance and Superstition: Some Points of View," in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 257.

<sup>13</sup> See Bratu-Hansen, Miriam. "Benjamin's Aura," in *Critical Inquiry*, 336-375. Note 5 is also worth mentioning: "The first definition—"ein sonderbares Gespinst von Raum und Zeit: einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag"—appears in Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" (1931), *SW*, 2:518; *GS*, 2:378. It is resumed almost verbatim in the artwork essay; see *SW*, 3:104; *GS*, 7:355. The parenthetical phrase—"however close the thing that calls it forth"—is from Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Tiedemann (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), p. 447; hereafter abbreviated *AP*. The second definition—" die Aura einer Erscheinung erfahren, heisst, sie mit dem Vermögen belehnen, den Blick aufzuschlagen"—is elaborated in Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1940), *SW*, 4:338; *GS*, 1:646." (339)

<sup>14</sup> See to that effect, Carlos Jáuregui's and Jean Franco's remarks, in *Canibalia* and *The Demise and Fall of the Lettered City*. For a relation between cannibalism, consumption and classical folktales, as well as more modern fairy tales, see Warner, Marina. "Fee, Fie, Fo, Fum: The Child in the Jaws of the Story," in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*.

to a great extent the 'empty form' of magical realism, when it has lost its 'aura,' when, in the movement of the full closure of its realization, it has become pure empty form. The forms of dirty realism, while being the natural reaction of the preceding 'marvelous' or 'magical' realism, should also be considered its terrorizing 'truth,' which returns as the instance of the logic of exception that is the proper function of any modern State. Until recently, the case of Vallejo stands as the latest instance of breakage, the latest novelty, while it remains uncertain that the repetitive structure that subtends this logic has been properly addressed. I argue that, rather than reading Fernando Vallejo's novel as an emblematic overcoming of the hegemony of magical realism in the Colombian cultural scene, it should be read as the result of yet another failure to come to terms with that which 'does not work' in the Colombian national tale, namely the function of the State. Both authors should be read as giving each other's supplemental truth, in the sense that the repressed, actual content of the highly aesthetized magical realism of Márquez, comes back with a vengeance, in the form of a love story in Vallejo's novel. The national symptom then becomes visible as 'ideological,' when it is seen from the perspective of the battleground unleashed between the movements of the 'Left' and the 'Right,' or more specifically between the different historical modes of Communism and Capitalism, which since the nineteenth century have in one way or another imparted their distinctive character to the cultural production of Latin American national literary traditions. This mechanism is what I try to map out in my discussion of Márquez and Fernando Vallejo, in the Colombian national tradition. In other words, this impasse is ideological, because the object of its lack is imaginary (Nation).

In the Argentine scene, I examine how the same symptom acquires significance when viewed from the vantage point of the deadlock that is conveyed in the relationship between barbarism and civilization. The same symptom is ‘cultural’ when the specter of the same division plays itself out from within the cultural scene, that is, when the *aporiae* at work in the dialectics between consumption and production are seen from within the framework of the scene of reading and writing that specifically determines the literary act as an encounter between the former and the latter. This question is basically “when, and how, does an object become (and for that matter when does it cease to be) visible as a culturally valuable thing?”, and tries to answer that question in tandem with the correlative question of “when (and how) does the subject become a lettered man?” I use selected short stories by Jorge Luis Borges, to answer the first set of questions. I then go into a close reading of Alain Paul’s *Historia del llanto*, to offer a contrasting view of the same structure. It is cultural, precisely because the object of its lack is symbolic (the State function). In Paul’s novel, ‘culture’ comes into being, then, as the result of this process of metaphorization, or ‘condensation,’ of this moment of metonymical displacement (or disavowal) between *Arielism* and *Calibanism*, when this cultural *aporiae*- the fact that the political Left in its historical beginnings was inevitably entangled in a travesty that frequently ended up re-enacting the political-theological structure that informs the body of its enemy- statist terror, persecution, ideological cleansings and self-immunizations.

The Cuban Neo-Baroque, I think, offers a good opportunity to illuminate the *queer*, *uncanny* aspect of cultural production, precisely because it is the pre-text through which the repressed truth of Communism- Capital as *death drive*-, becomes legible, both as a living body that was ostracized, persecuted, banished or jailed, that is, very much turned into ‘bare life,’ *and*

as a symbolic body that did not have any content, any use-value, except the secret of the Communist State. This is the logic that *La carne de René* allegorizes, in turn, where the same repressed consumptive drive becomes something of an imperative that permeates the whole story. The case of the Caribbean Neo-Baroque and the immunological reaction it provoked during the first years of the Cuban Revolution also has a special significance, when viewed from the perspective of how this spectral repetition of the form of capital betrays the theological-political overdeterminations in the constitution of the sovereign modern state. In chapters V and VI, I argue for an understanding of the Baroque as the representational projection of that process. The same symptom therefore comes into visibility as a ‘corporeal’ impasse, when seen from the very knot that forms the core of modern subjectivity as instrumentalized reason. It is corporeal, precisely because the object of its lack is real, which defines the instance of Capital in its double function of creating surplus of knowledge and surplus of bare life. The truth of Capital’s two bodies- knowledge and ‘bare’ life- becomes visible in the logic that structures the superego imperative of Communism to produce the ‘revolutionary subject’. This core defines the field that intersects the biological with the symbolic, namely, bio-politics. What *biopolitics* illuminates as the object of its disciplinary endeavors is specifically the corporeal symptom of modernity. The movement, by virtue of which Jacques Lacan describes the passage from the Master discourse to the discourse of the University, is the moment when the Master becomes invisible. Cuban Communism- just as its bigger Soviet brother- *repressed* Capital, that is, by internalizing it into the bureaucratic machinery of the State. In classical Communism, of which Cuba remains an example, the repressed truth of the State, and what structures its function as an over-accumulation of knowledge and misery, is Capital. The object of the State’s desire became the

Nation (*qua* Woman), on which all the death-driven imperative to produce (revolutionary knowledge, art) was projected.

Finally, this division becomes the matter of a paradoxical *jouissance*, when yet another displacement takes place regarding the object of the lack in the Latin American cultural subject. I analyze Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá's *Cortijo's Wake* and Luis Rafael Sánchez's *La Guaracha del Macho Camacho*, in order to see how *jouissance* becomes the conceptual pivot for an ambiguous and sometimes contradictory aesthetic representation of the *multitude* as uncanny harbinger of the same barbarous remainder. I engage my reading of both authors with what I consider to be a (trans-)historical palimpsest between the aporetic undergirdings of the early colonial ethnographic discourses when they are displaced towards the ambiguity inherent to the aesthetic investments of the nineteenth century *letrado* regarding his equivocal subjective positioning as *flâneur* and urban *chronicler*, regarding 'culture' as 'a question of taste'. I use *gaze* and *voice* as critical dispositives to make 'culture' visible as the intersecting blindspot that interlaces both discourses.

Well before it became a globalized phenomenon, cultural musical formations that in the mid twentieth century evolved into urban rhythms (such as Salsa music, for example,) were initially born as a genuine, joyous response to the systematic marginalization of entire communities of African and, to a lesser extent, European descent. The process of urbanization and proletarianization of the Puerto Rican peasantry, and its eventual forced mobilization as a redundant workforce to Chicago, New York and Hawaii, during the first decades of the twentieth century, when the U.S had established a firm economic control of the island, were the objective conditions whereby a working-class consciousness among the members of those groups was

forged. Around Salsa culture during the sixties and seventies, entire communities of urbanized proletarians found the means of expression, a voice, through which they could *affirm* the desire of what was, oftentimes violently, *negated* from them (repressed) at the political level. But this affirmation already had the form of the contents that previously negated it (the racism, the chauvinism, the violence, the Christian proselitist religiosity, the homophobia, all the brutality of economic exploitation, etc.). While in terms of form- instrumentation and song structure- one can say that this was a truly affirmative endeavor, its effective contents were those of a lingering, unaddressed, historical violence. This became clear in what happened afterwards. Later, in the 80's and 90's, when it had already achieved its status outside of the island, as an established and respectable musical institution, Salsa underwent a process of swift censorship, depuration, self-evacuation, of the 'lurid' and 'lewd' contents that used to characterize it, while still preserving, albeit in an increasingly formulaic and rigid fashion, the basic forms that it had already acquired in the previous twenty years. In other words, Salsa music stopped evolving as a life cultural formation, and it increasingly became the vehicle of a bland message, which largely represented the taste and lifestyle of a different kind of social sector. Furthermore, now the transnational retail chains such as Wal-Mart play the Salsa hits of the sixties, seventies and eighties, while the financial sector works in unison with the government elites to convey the idea of a great puertorrican family through the elegiac and crepuscular appropriation of the genre.

Part I. The Ideological Paradox

... for the nation is rather shaped by 'literature,' or 'aesthetics.'  
Kojin Karatani, *Nationalism and Écriture*.

The nation is not a definition or a word, but a certain grammar, a syntax.  
Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.



## Chapter 1

### Inside, Outside, and Back Again . . .

They could speak, they had authority,  
because they were *above* and *outside*.

Julio Ramos, *Divergent Modernities*

Then history will stop.  
Time will no longer tear us  
apart. The kingdom of the present,  
of perpetual communion, will return;  
reality will throw off its masks and  
we will finally know it and know  
our fellow creatures.

Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*

#### I. *The Insidious (Un-)deadness of the Lettered City*

The fantastic proliferation of aesthetic movements and personal styles that gave the *Boom* generation its distinctive character, suggests that there was at its heart something in the order of a disavowal of a foundational impasse, regarding the ideological status- generally subsumable, however problematically, within the proverbial ‘Right’ vs. ‘Left’ binary- of their actors’ political agency within their respective national traditions. For reasons that I hope will become, if not altogether evident, at least minimally so, along the articulation of my argument in the following pages, the signifier “cultural consumption” will hover as the backdrop against which a long detour will take place to give substance to the query around a naïve question- why, whenever there is “culture consumption”, is there also a repetition compulsion, and therefore an automatism, hence a certain *undeadness*? I will treat the assemblage of concrete activities that have with more or less justice been placed under the term ‘cultural consumption’ as the locus of

this automatism. Instead of thinking the immense productivity of the *Boom* (but to some extent, also some of its *pre-* and its *post-Boom* activity), simply from the cosmopolitan or transnational standpoint- that is, as a finished product, the final result of an overcoming of those impasses-, I intend to argue that Latin American literary production and consumption, should be seen as the expedient through which the *Lettered City* disavowed the lingering contradictions inherent to the constitution of the nation, that is, to the ‘nation’ as a problem that is implicated as one term in the triad Capitalist Nation-State, when these contradictions are seen from the vantage point of a crisis relating to cultural capital’s exchange value. What is the nature of this impasse, around which all this excremental crust of symbolic layers form, and to which we attribute a *cultural value*? In more general terms, what *drives* cultural innovation at a given historical juncture? The history of the initial reception, the miracle of a *unique cultural event*, its subsequent consumption and eventual treatment as *dead letter*, of literary phenomena seems to punctuate, on the one hand, the mode through which culture *as* capital renovates itself in its ever-expansive movements. On the other hand, it is the very act by which the possibility of a critical reading of the formal repetition that confers to its contents a properly historical dimension is frustrated in advance since, in its singularity, such an event is always declared as offering something irreducibly *unprecedented*, and therefore non-repeatable in history. The event itself stands as the cipher of a forgetting, and it is the form of this very forgetting that takes place in the present.<sup>16</sup> My working premise along the pages of the following two chapters will therefore be that, when this cultural dreamscape is either taken at the level of its ‘manifest content’- the specific event, the wondrous novelty of a story told in a different and mysterious way- or the ‘latent-content’- the political metaphor, the ‘implicit’ message, the allegory, etc.-, what is lacking is an analysis at

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<sup>16</sup> The psychoanalytical relationship between memory and the compulsion to repeat (*Wiederholungszwang*) is established in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

the level of the ‘dream-work,’ the form through which the art-work is itself presented as a stable language, whose ‘syntax’ and ‘grammar’ is the very content of cultural production and consumption, that is, as the historical dream of the national subject.<sup>17</sup> If, as Ernest Renan argued, the nation is, over and above any geographic, linguistic, racial or religious determinant, essentially an *emotion*, hence the imaginary object of an aesthetic affect, and if a national literature represents the moment when the tension between the outer military forces of empire and the inner space of a colonized group, is *internalized* as the tension between *écriture* and *langue*, that is to say, projected *onto* literature, broadly understood, as the stable interior of a national language, or even the nation *as language* (where the ‘true’ voice of the nation is written), then it can be argued that this is also the place where the ideological impasses that fueled the political struggles within the Latin American nation-states during its roughly two hundred years of ‘independence’ becomes visible, as an incessant interplay between *écriture* and *langue*, around the nation as imagined community.<sup>18</sup> That this paradoxical place also becomes intelligible, at the same time, only as an alternation between being engulfed by or escaping from the discursive insides of this tension, betrays, I think, its imaginary coefficient.

As Jean Franco, Idelber Avelar and Alberto Moreiras suggest in different yet related contexts, during the years of the Cold War, the literary situation in Latin America was to a large extent the result of attempts at coming to terms with a political landscape that seemed to escape

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<sup>17</sup> See Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. (My argument regarding the precise relation, will follow along the path of the relation that Slavoj Žižek has already established between the Freudian concept of the dream-work and the Marxist concept of commodity-value, in his *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. See, Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. With respect to the distinction between *écriture*, and *langue* and its relation to the birth of nationalism as an aesthetic emotion, see, Karatani Kojin’s “Nationalism and *Écriture*,” *Surfaces*, Vol. 1.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to recall on this account, how for Benedict Anderson the emergence of modern nations in Latin America and elsewhere in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was crucially the result of the generalization of print, and specifically newspaper culture, the argument being at bottom very similar to that of Avelar’s usage of writing founding role in the imaginary self-constitution of a nation as unitary.

the means of representation at the disposal of its lettered class.<sup>19</sup> While global capitalism appeared to remain the common enemy within the ranks of the Latin American Left intelligentsia, there were internal divisions that betrayed the historical implication of this class with the structural conundrums and its series of resolutions that brought about the situation of neo-liberal immanentization they were confronted with, a situation that, on the other hand, signed the crisis of a subjectivity, of which they were their embodiment. Arguably because, on the global scale, the impasse of the Cold War eventually constellated a set of problems that always lay ‘elsewhere,’ in a typical alternating process of what Deleuze/Guattari would call deterritorialization and reterritorialization, a process that included the lettered class and the epistemic contents in which its practices of resistance and contestation were coded.<sup>20</sup> Whereas the publishing markets opened themselves to the individual pursuit of styles and ways of literary expression that conformed a cohesively national, narrative conglomerate of identities, ethnic particularities, instances of reinsertion and reassertion of archaic flavors and colors into the circulation of urban readership, the position of the modern political figure of the committed intellectual was relegated, because of this insertion, to that of a mere codifier of realities whose otherness would belong to the ranks of an easily digestible diversity.<sup>21</sup> In the ‘compensatory

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<sup>19</sup> Franco, *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City*. See for example, particularly in the chapters entitled “Killing them softly” and “Communist Manifestos”, Jean Franco’s relation of how the history of the divisions and subsequent defeats of the Left’s intelligentsia was already a symptom of the deadlocked position the intellectual class in Latin America occupied with respect to the impending threat of global capitalism. Probably because, when they embarked on a search for the voices in which their personal experiences of the trauma of political silencing was to become one with the reality in which this silencing took place, they were already a part of the immanent monstrosity by virtue of which this reality had become a fixed imaginary projection of their subjective inconsequence. Avelar makes a similar observation: “The boom attempted to come to terms with an opposite predicament: a fundamental impossibility for the elites, by virtue of modernization itself, to instrumentalize literature for social control. *The boom was nothing but mourning for that impossibility*, which is to say, mourning for the auratic. It was an incomplete process, one that did not- could not, for structural reasons- go beyond what Freud calls the triumphant phase of the mourning work.” Idelber Avelar, *The Untimely Present*, 30.

<sup>20</sup> Angel Rama’s narrative of the successive deaths and resurrections of the Latin American Lettered City throughout its history since Colonial America is important to mention in this account.

<sup>21</sup> Note, for example, Avelar’s remark that “at the very core of the dramatic need to cope with a sweeping modernization lay the loss of the auratic quality of the literary. Just as nineteenth-century art had sensed the threat

logics'<sup>22</sup> that this situation generated, the letter, that dangerous supplement to use Derrida's terminology, whether in the form of an essay, a novel or a poem, was the mediation the figure of the lettered man had to survive, by perishing. Even when many Latin American writers and intellectuals were not at all unfamiliar with the cultural atmosphere of post-war Europe, one can conceivably think that its figuration in Latin America and probably elsewhere still imagined itself as acting within the principles of a modernity that was on the other hand at the center of an impeachment, for it cannot be denied that, in general terms, it was in the pre-text of the 'basic universal principles' of such modernity- namely progress, justice, egalitarian democracy, freedom, the sacrosanct dignity of the individual, to mention just a few- where the legitimating thrust was found equally by champions of neo-liberalism *and* (at least) to a large degree by their contesters, to wage their battle against each other. That, as Lacan asserts, the nonetheless crucial difference implied in the fact that the first did it under the rubric of the *knave*, whereas the latter did it under the guise of the *fool*, does not make much difference, if one considers that both were engulfed in the same scene in which the King was absent and whose drama unfolded much in spite of them.<sup>23</sup> If, in Europe, the 'linguistic turn' was a phenomenon that only during the post-war years was beginning to be incorporated, albeit marginally and precariously, into the institutional organs of the State, if Lacanian psychoanalysis and so-called post-structuralist

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unleashed by the advent of reproductive techniques such as photography and 'reacted with the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*, that is, with a theology of art,' the boom perceived an analogous decay of the aura and responded with an aestheticization of politics or, more to the point, a substitution of aesthetics for politics." *The Untimely Present*, 29.

<sup>22</sup> Avelar, *The Untimely Present*, 31. More precisely, Avelar talks about a 'structure of compensation' that rules processes of mourning, translated it to the phenomenon of the Latin American intellectual's loss of its aura of universal depositary and overseer of culture: "The structure of compensation was thus determined by constraints emerging from a shift in literature's relationship to modernization. The compensatory mode, although more immediately visible in the critico-theoretical writings of boom authors, was not any less operative in their novels. [ . . . ] Franco's demonstration of how novels as dissimilar as those of Gabriel García Márquez, Alejo Carpentier, and Mario Vargas Llosa, all converge in systematically presenting 'allegories of an author doubled in the foundational character, who appear without predecessors and often operate outside the system of change, hierarchy, and power.'" That is, this denial of tradition, this breaking away with what Avelar considers the ineluctable persistence of tradition in Latin America, symptomatizes a desire for a "return to a pristine moment when writing inaugurated history."

<sup>23</sup> See Lacan, Jacques, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 182-183.

philosophy, not to talk about its reception among circles of writers and artists, were in many ways late-comers in the intellectual respiration of the Cold War period, maybe this assertion is doubly true for Latin American intellectuals, who were in their majority either the banished visitors from a country already ravaged by the savage prelude to the no-man's land of post-dictatorial neo-liberalism, or who more or less inadvertently bought into the U.S. Government's schemes of cultural mapping and standarization, or both. This is what Avelar means when he asserts that the Boom writers "came too soon, because they were already too late."<sup>24</sup>

Why is it necessary to talk at all about this? Probably because, even when it is true that Latin American fiction writers were in many ways keen to assume and convey a new voice through which they could also immerse themselves in the ocean of Latin American particularities, and even if it becomes patently clear that they did so at the cost of an emptying out of their political pertinence, the ideological deadlock that this historical alternation connotes has not been understood as a phenomenon that is properly coterminous with the different movements of Capital, in its functional articulation with the other functions of the State and the Nation.<sup>25</sup> Said otherwise, Franco's and Avelar's (and to some extent Moreiras') argument regarding the demise of the Lettered Man seems to hinge upon the idea that the very antinomy

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<sup>24</sup> For example: "On the one hand, Latin American fiction was regarded as being centuries 'ahead' of an economically backward continent, but such precocious maturity could only blossom because literature, now autonomous and secular, had lost its functionality. Literature was ahead *because* it was behind. It was precocious *because* it was anachronistic vis-à-vis the continent's massive technologization. The celebratory tone of the period then sutured the fracture through a substitutive operation that attempted to compensate not only for social underdevelopment but also for the loss of the auratic status of the literary project." Avelar, *Untimely Present*, 31.

<sup>25</sup> Karatani, *Transcritique*. "The main target [ . . . ] is the trinity of Capital-Nation-State. [ . . . ] When facing this fearless trinity, undermining one or the other does not work. If one attempts to overthrow capitalism alone, one has to adapt to statism, or one is engulfed by nationalist empathy. [ . . . ] One frequently hears today that the nation-state will be gradually decomposed by the globalization of capitalism (neo-liberalism). This is impossible. When individual national economies are threatened by the global market, they demand the protection (redistribution) of the state and/or bloc economy, at the same time as appealing to national identity. The capitalist nation-state is fearless because of its makeup. The denial of one end up being reabsorbed into the ring of the trinity by the power of the other two. Counter-movements in the past [ . . . ] resulted in the perfection of the ring rather than its abolition." (15)

‘ideologue/intellectual’ determining these ideological evacuations, is only visible as two different, mutually excluding moments in time and space, figures that, even when *negating* each other, could *affirm* themselves independently from each other. Furthermore, this division, which is only the subjective aspect of what Moreiras terms ‘the international division of intellectual labor,’ is the same division that runs along the line that separates manual labor from intellectual labor, and this connection has not been properly articulated along the lines of the phenomenon of production of a cultural commodity. The separation between manual and intellectual labor cannot be addressed without at the same time addressing the gap between consumer and producer (reader/writer), and eventually the one between subject and object.

Karatani observes that Marx never denied that consumption only happens *after* production, that the consumption of a commodity only happens after it has been produced. But he also needed to take into account the fact that consumption and production as subjective acts always happen simultaneously and therefore that the production of the consumer and the consumption of the producer, were also happening ‘at the same time’.<sup>26</sup> In other words, he suggests that the historical trajectory of the production of a commodity is already part of the history of the constitution of the same (divided/alienated) subject, both as producer (writer) and consumer (reader), that both qualities were simultaneously present, just as the production/consumption of the commodity and the constitution/annihilation of the subject, are only two aspects of the same phenomenon. This is, I think, the true historical meaning of Marx’s assertion that “the person objectifies himself in production, [and that] the thing subjectifies itself

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<sup>26</sup> Karatani, *Transcritique*, 20. “Consumer’s movements are laborers’ movements in *transposition*, and are important only inasmuch as they are so. Conversely, the labor movement could go beyond the bounds of its ‘specificity’ and become universal inasmuch as it self-consciously acts as a consumers’ movement. [. . .] Marxists failed to grasp the transcritical moment where workers and consumer intersect.”

in the person [...]” (89) We should therefore frame our analysis within the context of what Karatani terms as the ‘discourses of despair’ that characterized what Jameson refers to as the ‘cultural turn’ in Marxist critique of Capitalism.<sup>27</sup> What this ‘cultural turn’ reveals is, following Karatani’s remarks, the lack of recognition of the potential for agency in the moment where the circuit that defines Capital’s drive (*Trieb*), comes full circle, namely when the waged laborer (who initially has only his body and skills to sell as commodity) becomes a consumer (that is, when he enters the moment of exchange-value).<sup>28</sup> And Karatani is also correct when he asserts that commodity exchange, being the aspect in which Marx was most interested in his *Capital*, is the moment when consumer and producer confront each other as distant, potential enemies, but also as possible allies, and therefore the moment when any chance of a truly political/ethical intervention that unhinged and unveiled in its fully spectral essence the holy trinity of the Capitalist Nation State was possible.<sup>29</sup> Just as Capital *qua* drive (*Trieb*) depends upon incessant technological innovation, and just as this innovation *presupposes* the subject of its consumption, by *creating* the markets as well as the channels of distribution and exchange through which this subject will consume what it produces, cultural production should be understood in the same deadlocked, self-perpetuating logic of automatism: that it depends, for its self-perpetuation, upon continuous formal innovation, and just as this innovation is predicated on a certain ideological positioning regarding the overlapping relationship that a cultural producer/consumer entertains with politics at any given historical juncture, the two moments- production and consumption- should be seen as inextricably intertwined.

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<sup>27</sup> Karatani, *Transcritique*, 21. “[Marxists] *believe* that the workers’ consciousness is reified by the commodity economy, and *their* task as the vanguard is to awaken workers from the daydream. *They believe* that reification is caused by the seduction of consumerist society and/or manipulation by cultural hegemony. Thus, to begin with, what *they* should and can do is the only business left for *them* today. What Fredric Jameson calls ‘the cultural turn’ is a form of ‘despair’ inherent in the Marxist practice. There are various forms of the despair, but they are, more or less, all the result of production-process centrism.”

<sup>28</sup> Karatani, *Transcritique*.

<sup>29</sup> Karatani.



In other words, what analyses like that of Franco and Avelar seem to pass over in their diagnoses of the decline and demise of the *Lettered City* during the second half of the twentieth century, is the structural effect that Angel Rama's account of these successive deaths and resurrections laid bare, namely, that this incessant ideological alternation and overlapping is *in the very essence of its survival and continuity*, that the lettered city is as much the structural effect of these discontinuities and interruptions, as much as it is the historical cause of such an effect. As Bret Levinson has implied regarding the phenomenon of "Boom literature as state apparatus", the *Lettered City* (the dialectical pair intellectual/ideologue as becoming inserted into the logic of proletarian specialization, wherein he/she had to sell his/her work as a commodity in a market whose conditions were determined by this innovation), created and imposed its own niche of exchange, its own camp of ideologues and intellectuals, one that befits the particular taste for its new cultural commodity. What is initially perceived as an overcoming and an end appears in retrospect as *transition*, and worse, a *transition of the transition*.<sup>30</sup> In other words, both figures should always be seen as an inseparable historical entity, as different embodiments of the same Subject/problem, precisely when they are *perceived*, within a specific juncture, as two separate entities. To sum up, the perception of the advent of the Latin American Boom as a *historical event*, should be seen as the effect of what Karatani (via Kant) terms an *a-perceptual transcendental illusion*, in which the 'miraculous' emergence of a cultural product is both the cause and effect of the same subjectivity, and that the demise (exhaustion/consumption) of the lettered man should be seen as its very resuscitation, when viewed from the perspective of this

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<sup>30</sup> See, Levinson, Brett. *The Ends of Literature: The Latin American "Boom" in the Neoliberal Marketplace..* For example: "An end is not only a conclusion but also, on the one hand, *an exposure to an outside*, to *transition*; and on the other hand, a *goal*. No scrutiny of the end of literature or the end of the state would be complete without an analysis of both the original telos (purpose) of these realms and the exterior into which, as frontier, they open. Toward what end or ends, hence toward what transition, are the state and literature headed?" (43)

new object. What is at stake is, or so I argue, the relationship that the concept of *cultural value* entertains at the intersection between the crisis of the modern State (subjective value as *auctoritas* and *legitimacy*) and a national crisis (objective value as *aesthesis*).

This is also, outside the Latin American context, what Karatani seems to suggest, when he stresses Marx's contention (in his *Grundrisse*) that production and consumption- and surplus value-, did not *only* happen at different chronological moments in the cycle M-C-M', but they were *also* logical moments of the same subject: that the producer was always already a consumer, and vice versa, that is, when looked at from the vantage point of *exchange*.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, if the *struggle to the death* that unfolds between the *intellectual qua alienated cultural laborer* and the *ideologue qua (equally alienated) cultural consumer* (or as the one occupying the privileged position of being pure exchange value), this analogy should be seen as entertaining *both* a temporal (diachronic) and a trans-temporal (synchronic) character, or rather, that the historical sequence described by the struggle between the two figures- figures that, in their functional aspect are far from being specific to the twentieth century-, only arises as historical because they have always been happening 'at the same time,' as it were. My contention is that this impasse is properly ideological, since it reveals its mechanism in the spatial metaphor of the inside/outside that defines the nation as the fantasy of a homogeneous territorial embodiment of a certain language. Furthermore, inasmuch as this is the case, what is at stake is the function of the Nation, as the metonymy of this spatial metaphor. The properly imaginary/aesthetic instance, of

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<sup>31</sup> Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, 89-94. For example: "Not only is production immediately consumption and consumption immediately production, not only is production a means for consumption and consumption the aim of production, i.e. each supplies the other with its object (production supplying the external object of consumption, consumption the conceived object of production); but also, each of them, apart from being immediately the other, and apart from mediating the other, in addition to this creates the other in completing itself, and creates itself as the other." (93)

which this ideological impasse between the Right and the (speculative) Left is the symbol, is the Nation.

Not all the voices of the Boom, original and innovative as they were, could escape the consumptive logics that this knotting institutes. Consumption here arguably becomes the blind spot where practices of representation, the umbilical dialectics that binds a reality principle with a pleasure principle, finds the legitimation of its logic. It is here, at the intersection of political commitment, literary creation, and the position and relevance therein of the lettered man, that one must situate the a transcendent questioning of consumption. If, in the course of this quest, we should always keep in mind that, in the lines of Louis Althusser, the constitutive ideological fantasy is the one in which one imagines that there is an outside from an ideological interiority wherefrom one can articulate a totalizing, universal narrative, this should not deter us from at least interrogating the impossibilities that its gridlocked interiority puts at work. Furthermore, even if in this first gesture I do not intend to suggest a definite direction, much less to articulate a possible answer to this problem, it would be a necessary step, however small, towards a cartography of the situation, in spite of, or maybe even because of the risk that this implies, for there is no possible outside from a problem than the one that is already implicit *within* the problem.<sup>33</sup> Immanuel Kant's assertion that Ideas are problematic does not have a meaning other than that.

## II. *Gabriel García Márquez, or the Solitude of the Lettered Man*

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<sup>33</sup> As asserted by Deleuze, "Kant never ceased to remind us that Ideas are essentially problematic. Conversely, problems are ideas. Undoubtedly, he shows that Ideas lead us into false problems. But this is not their most profound characteristic: if, according to Kant, reason does pose false problems and therefore itself gives rise to illusion, this is because in the first place it is the faculty of posing problems in general." Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*, 168.

The greater part of Gabriel García Márquez's fiction is more or less a conscious reflection on the problems being raised by these junctures, and the positing of a corresponding satisfactory answer to it. I leave aside, for the moment, the question of the meanings and standard definitions of Magical Realism, which themselves reveal this ideological impasse displaced as a dream-like amalgamation between the Old (as Primitive) and the New (as Modern).<sup>34</sup> The common denomination behind the definitions, this 'dream-like' conjunction between the fantastic and the real which seems to characterize all magical realisms despite their differences, is precisely this sophisticated overlapping between 'primitive,' or ethnographic conveyances of the 'pre-modern,' and rational modern discourses – but the meaning of the precise relation that this formal sophistication, as form, entertains with the pre-modern, is still a question of debate.<sup>35</sup> Despite the standard interpretations of Magical Realism as the final, achieved synthesis of the inconsistencies that riddled the previous hegemonic discourses in the region- ethnographic, legalistic, and naturalistic-, in terms of the historical itinerary of this ideological impasse that is symptomatized, precisely, as a more or less harmonious conjunction between dream and reality, what is not accounted for in these interpretations is the disavowal of the very enigmatic character implicit in the need to overcome this division through stylistic innovation. The denial of this failure to symbolize the very inconsistency upon which the nation

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<sup>34</sup> I nonetheless refer the reader to the canonical works in this regard. Franz Roh's *Magial Realism*, a 1930's text dealing mainly with German post-expressionism, and in particular with the 'metaphysical' and 'dream-like' quality of the pictorial work done by Giorgio di Chirico, is the seminal text. For a summary of canonical definitions and aesthetic formalizations of the phenomenon, see, Zamora, Louis P, and Wendy B. Faris. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*.

<sup>35</sup> For example: "A basic definition of magical realism, then, sees it as a mode of narration that naturalises or normalizes the supernatural; that is to say, a mode in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence. On the level of the text neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality." Christopher Warnes, 3. Also: "In Caymard-Freixas' account, magical realism is understood to be a sophisticated aesthetic expression of primitivism that served the yearnings of Latin American writers for identity and cultural emancipation." Warnes, Christopher. *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*.

is fantasized as a whole, was what sustained this formal synthesis between the ‘old’ and the ‘new,’ as well as the subtending asynchrony (an alternated sense of ‘belatedness’ and ‘prematurity’) that obtains between the reproduction of a given reality and its comprehension. If these two realms occur simultaneously in a magical realist text, this hole of meaning, as a question of ethical intervention, *must* mean something.

In the context of the Cold War, Márquez’s fiction seems to be marked by an obsessive complaint and preoccupation about money, exchange value, and the apparent inescapability of instances of culture- particularly literature- from the fate of being turned into another object of consumption, as well as the writer’s subaltern, alienated position in this state of affairs. As early as 1961, when *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba*, his second novel, was published, the preoccupation with symbolic/pecuniary exchange, its unsettling, ambiguous relation with supposedly intangible, monetarily untranslatable values, such as ideas of political justice and social vindication, is already at the center of Márquez’s writing; this is something that remained a constant topic, although admittedly with various degrees of intensity, throughout the whole of his fictional production.<sup>36</sup> Not surprisingly, such anxiety is intermingled with the position the writer occupies in this dilemma.

In this, his second novel, the problematic articulation of this concern takes the form, at a specific level of reading- that is, the one at which the open desert of the political intersects the sanctuary of aesthetical self-referentiality- of the absolute lack of equivalence, and the concomitant fear and hope of the possibility that this lack may finally be bridged, between

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<sup>36</sup> Márquez, Gabriel García. *No One Writes to the Colonel and Other Stories*. Unless otherwise stated, this is the translation I will refer to in all subsequent quotations.

ideological convictions and monetary interests, or even necessities. The main character, a retired colonel who served in Colombia's turn of the century civil war, the so-called *War of the Thousand Days* (1899-1902) between liberals and the centralist government headed by the conservative Manuel Antonio Sanclemente, everyday, for fifteen years, has been patiently awaiting the arrival of the mail riverboat that would bring him a first retirement paycheck in return for the services rendered to the then subversive revolutionary army which now occupies the seat of power. Besieged by poverty and hunger, the Colonel and his wife also have to deal with the phantom of an only son, lost to a revolutionary cause: he was killed by one of the soldiers of the regime against which the colonel fought forty years ago, during a cockfight, when carrying a clandestine message, a message that is ciphered with the language of the dead, for Agustín keeps sending clandestine messages even from the beyond, to be put into circulation in the world of the living (thus sending the implicit message that the cycle of successive civil wars, and particularly the cycle of rebellions against current regimes, takes place within a familial lineage, in which the subsequent divisions, a product of treason and murky negotiations, happen from within the same blood line). It is important to note here the succeeding elements that are crucial in the metaphorical economy of the text: after not succeeding in selling his clock (as if for him the metaphysical notion of subjective temporality was not worth being preserved), a picture (an allusion to aesthetic representation?), a mirror (his own inverted image, his narcissistic otherness), even the wedding rings (after all, the institution of marriage is also already part of the debt/creditor bondage); after much hesitation, after a failed attempt at selling the fighting cock to his *compadre*, Don Sabas, and after much pressure from his ailing wife, besieged by poverty and hunger, he finally sells it for *much less* than the original offer. Yet, in the very last moment he decides to return the money and keep the animal, a decision that entails a continued waiting for

the uncertain retirement check. The novel ends thus with this last decision, which is conveyed *as a triumph*:

- The rooster is not for sale [ . . . ] There are twenty-nine pesos to return to my friend Sabas,” he said. “ He’ll get the rest when the pension arrives.

- [ . . . ] We’re in no condition to do that- she said. “Just think how much four hundred pesos in one lump sum is. [ . . . ] An entire lifetime eating dirt just so that now it turns out that I deserve less consideration than a rooster. [ . . . ] It’s the same story as always. We put the hunger so others can eat. It’s been the same story for forty years. [ . . . ]

- He tried to keep his eyes open but sleep broke his resolve. He fell to the bottom of a substance without time and without space, where the words of his wife had a different significance. But a moment later he felt himself being shaken by the shoulder. [ . . . ] The women lost her patience.

- And meanwhile, what do we eat?

- It had taken the colonel seventy-five years- the seventy five years of his life, minute by minute- to reach this moment. He felt pure, explicit, invincible at the moment when he replied:

- -Shit. (Márquez, 77-83)

Don Sabas, arguably a former liberal who, after the war, managed to negotiate his life and stay in town during a period of after-war retaliations, the only man in town who, whatever his political positioning, might represent the type of opportunistic, dilettante entrepreneur, who prospers by aligning himself with whoever has the winning card in the pendulum of a nation’s political strife, starkly stands as the colonel’s intellectual, ethical, political and ideological other, effectively as the knave in relation to whom the colonel is the fool. Later on, the town’s doctor

tells the colonel that Don Sabas “is the only animal that feeds on human flesh,” and that he will resell the cock for nine hundred dollars, since it is a “deal as perfect as the famous patriotic pact he struck with the town’s mayor.”<sup>37</sup> In a discussion over their desperate situation, his wife reproaches him for not having a more practical mind:

– I’m fed up with resignation and dignity. [ . . . ] Twenty years of waiting for the little colored birds which they promised you after every election, and all we’ve got out of it is a dead son.

The colonel was used to that sort of recrimination.

- We did our duty.

- And they did theirs by making a thousand pesos a month in the Senate for twenty years, the woman answered. “There’s my friend Sabas with a two-story house that isn’t big enough to keep all his money in [ . . . ] (Márquez, 58)

After the colonel’s half serious, failed attempt to sell his only possession, the fighting cock- *an inheritance from his dead son-*, under his wife’s pressure and enticed by the suggestion of an attractive offer, he comes back from a degrading scene with Don Sabas, at the beginning of which the colonel has been put at the same level of a castrated animal (“Through the window the screams of the castrated animals reached Don Sabas’ office. ‘If he does not come in ten minutes, I’ll leave,’ he promised himself, after two hours of waiting. He waited twenty more minutes.”<sup>38</sup>), in the end being treated almost as a piece of furniture. Back home with his fighting cock, of which, later on, he will be told, that *it belongs to the whole town*,<sup>39</sup> his

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<sup>37</sup> Márquez, Gabriel G. *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Debolsillo: Barcelona, 2003. 80-81. (My translation.)

<sup>38</sup> Márquez, 71. (My translation.)

<sup>39</sup> Márquez, 91. (My translation.)



wife reminded him again of his lack of character, revealing instead, in the course of the conversation, the traits of a man of ponder:

- The trouble is you lack character, – she said. You present yourself as if you were begging for alms when you ought to go there with your head high and take our friend aside and say: ‘Friend, I’ve decided to sell you the rooster,’

- Life is a breeze the way you tell it, the colonel said. [ . . .]

She took a short siesta. When she got up, the colonel was sitting in the patio.

- Now what are you doing?, - she asked.

- I’m thinking, - the colonel said. (Márquez 63-64)

Maybe it is because of this mutual otherness in regard to the situation they represent, incarnated in the eternal conflict between philosophical pause and material urgency, that an undercurrent of antagonism is revealed underneath their apparent cordiality- a cordiality that signals a family alliance that varnishes their interlocution with feigned courtesy and affection, but which betrays the true, real, irreducible core of class struggle, a struggle that takes place by virtue of a differential power relation installed by an opposite relation around the same system of ideologemes, the same umbrella, even when they might appear to be different. Again, it is as if class struggle was presented here as overlapping familial divisions, an intermixture that acquires a somewhat grotesque dimension when one takes into account that Don Sabas, the pro-whatever-regime business man, is also supposed to be the godfather, that is the protector, of the Colonel’s son.

Another of Márquez’s recurring literary dispositives that organically intermingles with that of the umbrella, when a furious rain has started pouring on the town, and there is again a whole set of allusions that are activated by the differing positioning in regards to them. The rain- which brings echoes of crying

and mourning, but also and most importantly of the pervading violence, the white noise that blights the town, and which puts a brief but enormous pause in the colonel's waiting, a waiting that is usually expressed by a scorching drought- is experienced differently by the colonel and Don Sabas, as if indicating that the rain was for Don Sabas a matter of indifference, and for the colonel *it made all the difference*, since after each rain it was for him as if the town *was a different town*. The colonel is back from a funeral that reminds him of his murdered son, since it is the first natural death in a long time. He has already refused the offer of an umbrella from the owner of a pool bar, to accept just shortly Don Saba's offer:

A moment later he knew he was in the street because the drizzle hurt his eyelids, and someone seized him by the arm and said:

- Hurry up, friend, I was waiting for you."

It was Don Sabas, the godfather of his dead son, the only leader of his party who had escaped political persecution and had continued to live in town. (Márquez 16)

Rain, a funeral, an umbrella, the ghost of an un-mourned dead son . . . In effect, during his first appearances in the novel, an interesting language game between him and the colonel ensues, one that involves a curious exchange and partaking of an umbrella:

Don Sabas cleared his throat. He held the umbrella with *his left hand, the handle almost at the height of his head*, since *he was shorter* than the colonel (my emphasis).<sup>40</sup>

It is as if the umbrella signified, within the economy of meaning of the story, any ideological discourse, in fact any discourse whatever that is used as a pretext, an instrument, an alibi for personal benefit. In fact, the Colonel notices that Don Sabas has at least half a dozen umbrellas, and a woman's parasol, in his office's armoire, which *makes him think of the spoils of*

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<sup>40</sup> Márquez, *El coronel . . .*, 15. (My Translation; my emphasis.)

*a catastrophe*. In the opening pages, the significance of this metaphorical catalyst is already hinted at, when the colonel and his wife are reminiscing about their dead son Agustín:

He found an enormous old umbrella in the trunk. His wife had won it in a raffle held to collect funds for the colonel's party. The same night they had attended an outdoor show which was not interrupted despite the rain. The colonel, his wife, and their son, Agustín- who was then eight- watched the show until the end, seated under the umbrella: '- Look what's left of our circus clown's umbrella,' said the colonel with one of his old phrases. Above his head a mysterious system of little metal rods opened. 'The only thing it's good for now is to count stars.' (Márquez, 12)

Further ahead in the story, during another day of heavy rain, the colonel pays a visit to Don Sabas, for whom "rain is the same rain anywhere," whereas for the colonel, it always is "as if it was raining in *another* town"; he rejects Don Sabas' offer of his umbrella, saying that *he prefers to wait until it stops raining*, because, he tells Sabas' wife, "the umbrella has something to do with death."<sup>41</sup> Finally, after taking the animal back from the fighting ring, "The colonel remembered another epoch. He saw himself with his woman and his son assisting *under the umbrella to a spectacle that was not interrupted in spite of the rain.*"<sup>42</sup>

One of the features worth noticing in the story is the fact that, as will be customary in many of Márquez's succeeding novels, *nothing much seems to happen*, that is, the story takes place in a sort of a-historical immobility that leaves the reader waiting for something other than what does (not) happen in the story. After much waiting, a waiting that marks the suspension of

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<sup>41</sup> Márquez, 57-58. (My translation.)

<sup>42</sup> Márquez, 91. (My translation; my emphasis.)

the linear temporality of chronological narration- and conceivably of historical continuity-, in which the mechanics of symbolic translatability are brought to an arrest, the Colonel decides to keep on waiting longer for the paycheck, instead of following his wife's advice and sell the fighting cock, their only possession, for a good price. In this sense, this is a work of fiction that takes place in an epochal suspension, a suspension that in the end does not reach a closure, making of the present a stilled eternity, and possibly the future (of the colonel, of the country) as uncertain as the arrival of the letter. The novel can be understood both as a reflection on the incommensurability between an act done in a spirit of uninterested self-sacrifice, and its corresponding restitution, and on the possibility, however precarious, that that incommensurability is translated into a message, a clandestine message that involves, in its turn, the untranslatability of the world of the dead into the world of the living, but the need that this untranslatability be kept circulating, as the problematic element, the pseudo-object, the gift that transcends any logics of restitution and that binds, *by keeping them separate*, the two worlds. In fact, the fighting cock stands as this problematic element that resists any kind of exchange whatsoever, if it is not *to be given* (the colonel at one point offers it to Germán, the clock fixer, after he refuses any pay); the paradoxical object belonging to no-one and to everyone. Yet, there is in the story a debt that has not been redressed, a sort of payment, a message, in short an urgent answer to an urgent interpellation that has been protracted, and in whose protraction a symbolic void, the rain, has been opened.

It is not hard to conclude that the novel is a reflection of the consequences of that lack of interlocution, of that lack of response to the demand of an answer from the Other, an answer that must carry the message of its impossibility. If to this we add Lacan's assertion that "a letter

always reaches its destiny”, it is not hard to see that empirical violence is that kind of a consequence, that is, when its meaning is fully re-cognized from the standpoint of the subject’s process of historical transformation which only undergoes successive punctual re-embodiments.<sup>43</sup> The novel does not make an implicit call for restitutive equivalence, so much as a restitution that carries with it the sign of the impossibility of any equivalence. Writing, in effect, unfolds in a sort of in-betweenness that makes everything (un-)happen in a backdrop of violence (the reader is left with the impression that death has become so customary that funerals are assisted to with a sort of routine-like, ritualistic tedium, as the pouring rain itself). Waiting, possibly one of Marquez’s most important leitmotifs, assumes here the dimension of a collective waiting, as if there was the underlying commentary that, if as Avelar emphasizes paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, Justice is irreducible to the Law, it is nonetheless *that irreducibility* that needs to be addressed, remembered, in order for lawfulness to recover the trace of its founding principle.<sup>44</sup> While the waiting continues, while the hard core of class struggle is not kept as the random element that keeps the possibility of its return open, until reality is determined by the will to keep acting *as if* nothing was happening, phantoms will reign in reality, decomposing it into a still conglomerate of disconnected fragments, and there will be no possibility for any work of mourning to begin.

There is an interpretation that could be attributed to a way of reading all the elements present in the story that may conceivably have become traditional, one in which cock fighting is represented for the Other as being one more sign that inheres Latin America’s violent and

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<sup>43</sup> Here I take up the distinction that Derrida makes, following on Benjamin’s essay *On Violence* in his *Dissemination* and *On Grammatology*, between empirical, mythical and divine violence. For Lacan’s quote, see his Seminar on E.A. Poe’s Purloined Letter.

<sup>44</sup> See Avelar, *The Letter of Violence*, particularly in *Chapter II: Specters of Walter Benjamin*.

‘mythical’ backwardness, arguably a backwardness in turn romanticized and narrativized as one more trait inhering Latin American identitarian determinations. Under this perspective, the novel might be a commentary on the absurdity of the endless cycle of violence that, because of this senselessness, acquires mythic dimensions; thus, the Colonel stands, in contrast to his (nameless) wife’s reasonableness, her disposition to negotiate, as the chauvinistic perpetuator of an endless feud that submerges a whole nation in empirical violence, a violence whose longevity seems to obliterate and disqualify beforehand any attempt at an attribution of historical causes. The cock then represents, literally, even in the most vulgar way that the English translation allows, *his cock*, the sign of his masculinity that is put into question in the story, therefore his castration and oedipal complexes. But this is a reading that the novel ultimately does not support, since the fact must not be forgotten that the waiting of the colonel is itself the product of a negotiation, the price of which was surrendered in a *treasure chest* with much pains by the Colonel himself, being *the treasurer* of the revolution, the chest signifying a truce whose terms were honored by the colonel, but were not respected by his enemies. The fighting rooster, I believe, represents this problematic element, that object which, within the terms of a negotiation, a transaction, remains non-negotiable, not for the sake of personal pride, but because without this, the random, problematic, nomadic quasi-cause that makes (the very necessary illusion of) historical causality possible (represented here by the uncertain outcome of the impending cockfight; in fact there is a whole set of allusions to randomness and uncertainty weaved into the story), the chance of an outside from the violent immanence of that stilled present where class struggle is not acknowledged would be forever lost.

But again, here we can also perceive the anxiety of a lettered man who refuses to give up that which makes of his position an epistemically privileged one. What can be worse than a defeat and the erasure of its memory? The colonel's insistence is probably the lettered man's insistence on the mnemonic preservation of the remnants of that defeat. The 'triumphant' declaration of the colonel in the end can thus be understood as the refusal that that rendition and surrendering of the cause's treasure signifies a defeat, for within the meaning economy that the text seems to support, to keep on waiting for a retribution that will never come can only signify that it is only when that retribution comes that the defeat *will come to be recognized as defeat*. The colonel, the writer, prefers to wait, to prolong the waiting of a retribution that will never come, *precisely because it will never come, it must never come, it must always remain to come, so that the coming never stops*. It is the desire that the payment of the price for their defeat never arrives, is never paid- that is, given that it is a debt that *can* in fact be paid at all. Since it can be argued that much of Latin American writers' publishing success depended on the aestheticization of that refusal, or of the half mourned loss of their auratic status, it is interesting to perceive the paradoxical result of this at work in the novel, when not the refusal to circulate, but the representation of that refusal to circulate is ultimately what is put into circulation, becoming engulfed into one of the most successful discourses of representation for the Other of the Latin American experience of political defeat.<sup>45</sup> In the end, if the narration of how a writer becomes a more or less successful manufacturer of discourses that in their apparent totalizing narrative, become part and parcel of the logics of consumption, also this allegory becomes engulfed in the

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<sup>45</sup> This is something similar to what Daniel Noemi, retaking Eduardo Grüner's critique of Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, has said about this, in what he terms the *allegorical market*: "To some extent [...], 'it is not just that with the consolidation of capitalism every cultural work can potentially be transformed into merchandise (this process, after all, has been developing since the very beginnings of Modernity), but that now it is directly and since its origins conceived and produced under the logic of the merchandise.' Maybe this is why I prefer to talk about *allegorical market*: the set of its representations and visualizations." [My translation.]

same logic. What Daniel Noemi has called the allegorical market has also been absorbed into the market of cultural allegories.

#### IV. *The lettered man is dead, long live the lettered man!*

Márquez's diatribe about the Latin American writer's status as an exploited, alienated producer of cultural objects, or to use his own words in the published interview *El olor de la guayaba* (*The Scent of Guava*), as 'milking cows' (como vacas lecheras),<sup>46</sup> seems to blend all too easily with an anguished search for expressive originality, a quest for ways of literary representations of a properly Latin American *ethos*, arguably because the finding of a solution to the latter entails a reassurance of the traditionally privileged position much needed by the former. The historical evolution of modernity in Latin America besieged the writer and put him/her in a precarious position, much by virtue of the advent of the subject that its realization inevitably brought with it, that is, a new historical subject, a new class, in whose arrival was ciphered the actualization and the disappearance of the former.<sup>47</sup> It is as if his/her writings constituted at the same time the expression of the symptom of this anxiety (a transcendentalization, or its horizon) *and* an attempt at its dialectical sublation (an immanentization), a synthesis that most often acquires the form of the enacting of an intrinsic impossibility of the artist- as producer of otherwise politically relevant symbolic instances of 'cultural value'- to liberate him/herself from the asymmetrical dynamics that dictate Capitalist production. Márquez's much celebrated

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<sup>46</sup> See, González-Bermejo, Ernesto. "García Márquez: ahora doscientos años de soledad", en García Márquez, ed. Peter Earle (Madrid: Taurus, 1982), p. 258. Márquez, Gabriel García. *El olor de la Guayaba*, 43.

<sup>47</sup> Avelar, *The Untimely Present*, 70-83. The two figures I am talking about are, respectively, the lettered man, the modern version of the humanist, and what Idelber Avelar calls the proletarian technician. In Avelar's own terms: "The passage from State to Market brings about a fundamental shift. If the liberal-populist university could represent to the middle classes some realistic hope of social climbing and incorporation into the educated sector elites, today's university forms primarily a species that would have looked rather odd thirty years ago: the proletarian expert [ . . . ] in today's capitalism there remains little of the self-reflexivity that used to differentiate intellectual from manual labor. [ . . . ] Intellectual intervention now depended on competence and recognition within an institutionalized field of knowledge. The intellectual also had to be an expert."



solution to the impossibility of escaping from the vicissitudes of impending market logics of cultural consumption seems to be aligned with a disavowed declaration of a defeat that, at the level of representation, presents itself as a victory.<sup>48</sup> His narrative seems to be more consciously invested with a desire to evict that problem from its constitutive knot than to tackle it head-on- the knot being the inherent inconsistency between being the partaker of a lettered tradition that, since its inception was made to control and administer the *polis* in the newly conquered American territories, in other words, a class that was created to be put at the service of a nascent European mercantilist capitalistic machinery- or more precisely the trinity of the Capitalist Nation State.<sup>49</sup> Arguably because he forms part of a generation still infused with the aura of the modern, universalist man of letters, one in which a version of the myth of the self-made individual, a myth which we can relate to other similar concepts, such as ‘geniality,’ ‘authorship,’ the self-contained, self-referential, unique world of the author, the originality of his ideas, the institutional authority that this originality bestows upon him, etc. It is therefore not surprising that many of his stories not only constitute a commentary on this impossibility to represent, but moreover *they enact*, they in their turn *represent* this impossibility, and his characters become emblems and objects of economical transactions which invade the register of what was supposed to be, in order to enter the economy of another order of things, a non-economic encounter. Many of Márquez’s stories express, at the same time that they render inoperative, their problematic knot in a process of aesthetic inundation/evacuation, the co-

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<sup>48</sup> Avelar, *The Untimely Present*.

<sup>49</sup> Rama, *La ciudad letrada*, 1-38. More precisely, the first paragraphs of the first two chapters, respectively condense the two main ideas: first, of how the Latin American city was, since its foundations, until the 1960’s, the result of a desire to realize the “most fabulous urban dream of which the American man has been capable”, a “birth of intelligence”; secondly, how the control and centralization of power in Latin American cities fell on the hands of “a specialized social group”, which was comparable, in the high ministerial responsibility it was to assume, to a “priestly caste”, to whom it fell the task to ordain the “universe of signs, to the service of the absolute monarchy from overseas.”

implication between the historical apex of the lettered city, its concomitant decline, and the writer's incapability to contemporize with that decline.

The finding of an expressive niche in which *I*, the lettered man as the carrier of the voice for the Other (the Reader), can institute a narrative haven in which political commentary, together with philosophical reflection, impregnates with virtuous complexity the otherwise artificially embellished quandaries and contradictions of Latin American realities, only serves as an alibi to cover up the unconscious retreats and implicit capitulations that the political events forced me into, whose symptomatic core, for structural reasons, escaped my comprehension - maybe because *my self* was, even if only partially, *that* symptom.

Reiterated modes of this co-implication one can see in almost every single piece of his narrative. In *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*, Pelayo, the father of a poor family in a community of fishermen, finds a winged man stranded on the beach. After an initial spell of wonder by the members of Pelayo's family and neighbors at the portent, the winged old man is soon after turned into an attraction, an entertainment prop serving the purpose of signifying a source of extra-income for the poor family. Soon afterwards, when everyone has gotten tired of the spectacle, in some version of what sociologists might call 'consumer exhaustion,' the old man is forgotten and soon becomes a nuisance, until one morning he spreads his wings and takes to the skies.<sup>50</sup> The winged old man, along with the marvelous event of his arrival that can only be contemplated, admired, and pondered upon, because it is, like art (or like a political ideal turned into an object of intellectual contemplation) *essentially useless*, is suddenly, in the name of the sensation that this new event provoked, inserted into the circuit of exchange; a surplus of

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<sup>50</sup> Márquez, *La historia de la Candida Eréndida* . . . , 11- 20.

enjoyment turned into surplus value, and back again- in other words the little fairy tale of representational thinking and the mechanisms of exploitation it institutes.

I propose that one should interpret this marvelous event from the vantage point of various registers: first, it can be read as the possibility of an event capable of exerting a break in the quotidian sordidness of a community stricken by misery and boredom. But this event, which is *inherent* to the community, is only accessible to those who *can* see it, and preserve it *as such*, that is, not as a mnemonic content susceptible of being retrievable and inserted into symbolic transaction, but rather the memory of that which is forever lost from memory, or as Lyotard would say, the memory of a in-memorable forgetting. This is something that obviously does not happen in the story. According to this level of reading, the *hybris* of the community is that it has not realized itself as inherently unique and magical, even when all this uniqueness has been univocally materialized in a magical creature, half angel, half human, that stays there, whose presence literally *takes place* signaling the mortal absence of symbolic attribution over which all symbolic exchange that constitutes a community unfolds. In a way, this is the story of a community that ontologically does not recognize itself as being founded on that which lacks foundation and therefore escapes any logic of exchange, that is, so to speak, a gift of whatever- a man with enormous wings, a woman turned into a spiderwoman, a bat-man . . . and probably, only when it has recognized itself as such, it is only as the indication that it has already ceased to be what it is. From a second vantage point that overlaps the first, it can be read as the implicit celebration of the hidden creator as a miracle worker, the cultural hero in his capacity of introducing the event of the New in the over-codified topography of a literary landscape, his intrinsic originality eventually becoming currency of common circulation in the community,

while the beautiful truth has been forever lost, together with his eventual flight into oblivion. This is the evanescent advent of the unexpected gift, which is itself the gift of literature. The ‘miracle’ of this gift, a new way of doing literature, is thereafter re-introjected into the circuit of symbolic/monetary exchange. This new way of symbolic transcendence, this new way of doing literature, an outside that propitiates a moment of narrative totalization of a historial situation, becomes eventually reintrojected into the symbolic exchange in which that situation is immersed. Subsequently, after the violence of this gift has been turned into a domestic use value, the old man comes to occupy just one more space in the backdrop of a re-instituted monotony. Here we can see a staging of the logic of consumption- in this sense, the story is a commentary and a critique of this logic. At this level of reading, this story is an uncanny reflection and premonition of the inexorable destiny of Magical Realism as a formal practice in the history of the publishing market in Latin America (as usually happens with any artistic movement). Yet, maybe a fourth register of reading, a register that somehow encompasses the preceding ones, is still possible. The old man, his absurdity, his uselessness, his isolation, could he not *also* represent both the writer, the lettered man, and his utter irrelevance and impotence with respect to the complex situation he faces, *and simultaneously*, the inherent defeat that implicates him being turned into the latest icon in the parade of rarities, singularities, that seemed to be exposed for the gaze from which the other could unconsciously reaffirm the center of its self-sameness, in short, of him being turned into a sort of anachronistic clown around whom a cynical circus of expenditure and profit is constructed?<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See, Herrero-Olaizola. Alejandro. “Se vende Colombia, un país de delirio: El Mercado literario global y la narrativa colombiana reciente.” *SYMPOSIUM*, Spring 2007. 43-56.

It is at this point that the aporia inherent in the subject of the lettered man is revealed: for the artist to preserve the auratic status of the lettered genius, the status conferred on him by all the metaphysical givens that he inherited from a long history of internal divisions and surmounted crises of the class to which he belonged, his absolute singularity *must* be preserved at all costs, precisely by not being recognized *as such* by the community on which he is nonetheless supposed to pour his cultural gift.<sup>52</sup> The cultural hero in this story is thus simultaneously presented in it and re-presented to the reader as a novelty, as an event for economical exploitation *and* as a museum piece- his eyes were those of “an antiquarian”-, a relic from a distant past whose irrelevance is the sole guarantor of the treasure’s promise that he signifies. I think this story is a perfect example, *avant la lettre* as it were, of what Avelar means that the boom writer was too premature, because he/she was already too late. In order to preserve, for the community, the privileged modern status of the cultural hero, he *must* have, by not being relevant at all, already have lost that status, and lost himself in that loss. My point is that, insofar as Levinson, Avelar, and Franco are to the point when they posit the analogy between the disappearance of the modern State and the demise of the Lettered City, these acts of flight or disappearance are the very means for their perpetuation.

#### *V. How the Cultural Object Becomes Magical: Or How the Master Becomes Bare Naked*

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<sup>52</sup> For a cogent explication of this long process in which the Latin America’s lettered class underwent the transformations that signified its survival, see Angel Rama’s *The Lettered City*.

A similar, yet crucially different logic of consumption is staged in *La prodigiosa tarde de Baltazar* (*Baltazar's Prodigious Afternoon*).<sup>53</sup> On this occasion, the main character, Baltazar, a poor artisan of birdcages who works by commission, builds, after seven days of hard work the most beautiful birdcage in the world for the son of the richest man in town, José Montiel. After undergoing several humiliations by Montiel- who, not being as rich as appearances hold, is nonetheless described as “being capable of anything in this world to become so”<sup>54</sup>-, at the end of the story Baltazar ends up lying on the sidewalk, drunk, his body filled with people’s spit and filth, but still desperately joyful, having fantastic dreams of a wealth accumulated by the selling of incredible birdcages. Again, the logics put at work here are very similar, with the only interesting twist that now, the birdcage, an inanimate object, but nonetheless a space made to harbor living beings, is the object of transaction, and that the artisan (the man of letters) simply constitutes one party in a pre-established contractual affair.<sup>55</sup> That is, the whole story unfolds within the context of a monetary transaction. Contrary to the preceding story, in which the worldly circuit of exchange irrupts suddenly into what was supposed to be a magical story, here, the monetary transaction is violently interrupted by Baltazar’s decision to give away the birdcage to Pepe Montiel after his father’s refusal to pay for it. The birdcage, the ‘most beautiful in the whole world,’ nonetheless partakes of the same aura of intangible materiality as that of the winged old man. The beautiful cage, the product of hard labor that, while also being a

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<sup>53</sup> *Los funerales de la Mamá Grande*. Barcelona: Plaza & Janés, 1974; Márquez, Gabriel G. *Collected Stories*. Unless otherwise stated, this is going to be the authorized text for the translated quotations from the short stories by Márquez analyzed in this section.

<sup>54</sup> Márquez, *Los funerales de mamá grande*, 63. (My translation.)

<sup>55</sup> In a somewhat marginal note: the first U.S. Congress envoy who came to Puerto Rico to survey and assess the situation of the island immediately after the invasion of the marine troops in 1898, when back in the U.S. Congress to deliver the results of his visit, made the following final remark, after incurring in a long exposition in which racist and ethnocentric commentaries were delivered, one can imagine, with a condescending tone: “in short, we want the birdcage, but not the birds.” See Berríos-Martínez, Rubén. “Puerto Rico’s Decolonialization,” *Foreign Affairs*, November-December, 1997

commodity, the product of a rich man's son's whim, *also* transcends mere use-value by virtue of this supplemental excess. It is also the nodal point around which class conflict, a conflict between the two sides of an unequal relation of representation, a representation that in fact depends on that inequality, coalesce.

The correlate to his incapacity to see the intangible beauty of the cage- his only response to it was a brutal "what is *this* thing?"<sup>56</sup>-, José Montiel's impotence in the presence of the transgressive scene of Baltazar's act of giving, seems to represent the archetype of the obsessive, for whom the an-economical instance of the gift cannot but be perceived as traumatic- here one can note in passing that he had just come out of the bathroom, where he had taken an "urgent friction with alcohol to see what was going on outside",<sup>57</sup> as if he wanted to hide away all his excremental excesses to the other, probably unable to realize that shit, art and money partake of the same nature. His violent reaction to Baltazar's gesture betrays his fear of the gift, his terror at the possibility of existence of forms of human relations that are not determined by the debtor/creditor differential. José Montiel, for whom the only objective reality can be that of pure exchange value, and for whom any excess cannot but constitute an anxious need for establishing an unequal human bondage based on debt, cannot bear the fact that the differential situation of power- probably his source of enjoyment, his symptom, the real that constitutes him as a subject- is subverted and done away with. Here one cannot but emphasize enough the absolute gratuity of Baltazar's gesture, which is a correlate to his incapacity to see in the process of constructing the birdcage an instance of self-realization, but just a joyful one, since that birdcage is one among millions that he can create, in the wretched infinitude of the creative process. Even when

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<sup>56</sup> Márquez, *Los funerales* . . . , 65. (My translation.)

<sup>57</sup> Márquez, *Los funerales* . . . , 65. (My translation.)

Baltazar could have taken the birdcage and sold it to the doctor, even when, from the moment he arrives at their house, the reader finds out that he was not unaware of the power relation that framed the whole transaction, even when the kid's tantrum did not seem to inspire or trick Baltazar into any kind of sentimentalist sympathy, Baltazar opts for a giving away that can only be compared to a radical and violent break from this logic- retribution might be possible, but divine justice (creation, the idea) is impossible from within the confines of strict legality. Paradoxically, by divesting the object from every excess power that its supplemental beauty might confer to it, by disavowing the translatability of beauty into symbolic transaction, *the only thing that remains is this mortal beauty*. For Montiel, precisely because this commodity is suddenly turned into a gift, the cage becomes a 'bad' object, something that 'should not be there,' something that literally puts his sense of reality at risk. By giving away the birdcage, Baltazar turns it into a mere partial object of impossible exchange, whence Montiel's terror: "Stupid man! - He shouted- the only thing that remained was that someone would come to give orders in my own house. Dammit!"<sup>58</sup> What remains after one divests the object from its exchange-value is the 'dangerous supplement,' to use Derrida's words, the excremental excess that attests to the fact that there is no absolute correspondence between use-value and exchange value, that there is always an excess of truth that remains. What is the precise meaning of Baltazar's jubilant wretchedness at the end of the story?

Over against the typical socio-psychological reading, in which the whole scene is a depressive instance of alienated labor's exploitation, having as the ultimate consequence the degradation of the individual's dignity (his/her so-called dehumanization); against the interpretation of Baltazar's gesture as being one of submission and fatal acceptance of his subaltern condition (phrases such as "Of course, what he should have done was to follow his

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<sup>58</sup> Márquez, *La cándida Eréndira* . . . , 65-67. (My translation.)



wife's advice and sell the cage at the highest possible price!" come to my mind), one should read this story in the most radically affirmative way.<sup>59</sup> Baltazar's act should be interpreted as the most risky, the most consciously taken decision to *go beyond* any structuring relation of oppression, even if the price to pay for it, precisely the price of that which is un-payable, was to fall on the other side of this logic.<sup>60</sup> It has already been observed that Baltazar's complete destitution in the end can also mean his capacity to go beyond the pleasure principle and *enter* the realm of the death drive, which is paradoxically, also the moment of an excess of life.<sup>61</sup> But again, this reading seems to be grounded on a tacit subtraction from any political pertinence, where a Nietzschean affirmative instance with respect to creation comes at the price of an aestheticist flight from the utopian aporiae of the gift at the heart of a community. There is not pleasure principle that is not fueled by the death drive, by the (ultimately irrational, *religious*) impulse to

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<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Miller, Beth. "Alegoría e ideología en 'La prodigiosa tarde de Baltazar': El artista del tercer mundo y su producto," *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*.

<sup>60</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

<sup>61</sup> Even if the Freudian 'drive' was initially articulated by Freud as a mortifying instance- hence his adjective assignation to drive precisely as a 'death' drive-, more than one critic has identified it as rather signing to an excess of life, that which is, by its very falling outside of the realm of stupid, senseless re-reproduction, in 'life more than life itself,' as the adagio goes. The problem is that this act of affirmation is done as an act of absolute subjective intervention (which brings an echo of Schmitt's sovereign decision), one that is experienced as destructive negation (the opposite of fetishistic denial): in the specific context of cultural production, of the refusal to participate, and perpetuate, the deadlocked cycle of cultural production, distribution and consumption. The fundamental misunderstanding behind the concept of the 'death drive' is that it is generally conceived just as that which propels, as non-dialectized excess, the morbid dialectics between the reality and the pleasure principle, into the uncontrolled reproduction/consumption of sense/cultural objects, whereas for Freud himself things were not so simple. Throughout *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the 'death drive' is alternatively posed as a cause and as an effect of the mechanisms of tension and release that controlled the libidinal apparatus. The important thing to keep in mind is that, for Freud, the true problem, the true enigma lied in the reasons *why*, in the first place, there has to be an accumulation of tension, and even most importantly "why is it that 'pleasure' sometimes cannot be experienced as such, but as pain, or threat." (6) The key to understand this is that psychical *pain* or pleasure belongs to the order of perception. The iterative emergence of a repressed impulse is experienced as painful, unpleasurable. Freud thus formulated the important question: "In what relation to the pleasure principle then does the repetition compulsion stand, that which expresses the force of what is repressed?" (20) This question is strictly of the same order as what Marx asked with regards to the *value* of a commodity (why human labor has to be expressed as commodity value?). In his seminar on *objects relation*, in the section titled *The Signifier and the Holy Spirit*, the answer provided by Lacan is double: *meaning* (the 'reality principle' in Freud) is an effect of repression (interestingly, the metaphor that Lacan resorts to is that of the *dam* and *water* in a river, and the concept of meaning as the excess 'work product,' of the 'labor' of repression.) The point is that it does not make sense of talking about the unconscious, or about *jouissance*, without this act of 'daming' the river of words.

self-transcendence- of Reason, Capital, or Culture. In effect, after having lied to his comrades about the selling of the cage for a good price, Baltazar is left alone in a bar with his incredible dreams of building thousands, millions of birdcages. Two things should be noted, to which previous critique has not accorded full attention. The first relates to the actual meaning of the disruption in the commodity economy that takes place between Baltazar (the producer), Montiel (the Master) and the hysterical little kid (the consumer), whereby Baltazar *reinststitutes* what Roberto Esposito would call the logic of the gift-as-debt, of the act of giving as an act that *obliges*, an ethical act.<sup>62</sup> The second refers to the true allegorical dimension that the term *cage* institutes at the interior of the cultural scene obtaining between the writer-as-producer and the reader-as-consumer, when it is read in its metaphorical intersection with politics, namely a cage as any ideological formation. The message that exposes the paradox at the heart of Baltazar's affirmative gesture is precisely that, in order for the possibility of other worlds to remain open, there should be a contingent, untimely 'unhooking' from the impossibility at the heart of the loop of credit and debt, a dis-engagement that presupposes an unveiling of the divided nature of the master: what is prodigious about Baltazar's twilight is the revealing that Montiel 'has no clothes'.<sup>63</sup> In addition, the narrative voice posits this disengagement as a true act of militant engagement, of ethical intervention, not for the sake of the existing others (Montiel or his son, not even his friends at the bar, or his wife), but for the others to-come.

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<sup>62</sup> Esposito, Roberto. *Comunitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*. For example: "[ . . . ] It is in this withdrawal from being forced into an obligation that lies the lesser intensity of the *donum* with respect to the unrelenting compulsion (*congenza*) of the *munus*. In short, this is the gift that one gives because one *must* give and because one *cannot not* give. [ . . . ] What predominates in the *munus* is, in other words, reciprocity or 'mutuality' (*munus-mutuus*) of giving that assigns the one to the other in an obligation [*impegnio*]. But let's also add in a common oath [ . . . ]" (5) In his discussion of the *Local Exchange Trading System*, (LETS), Karatani says something in similar terms in respect to the paradoxical role of the gift in an economic system that does not generate surplus value. See *Transcritique*, 17-25.

<sup>63</sup> "An event is the creation of new possibilities. It is located not merely at the level of objective possibilities but at the level of the possibility of possibilities [ . . . ] an event paves the way for the possibility of what- from the limited perspective of the make-up of this situation or the legality of this world- is strictly impossible." (242-243) Badiou, Alain. *The Communist Hypothesis*.

This disjunctive relation between political commitment and aesthetic innovation seems to be a constitutive trait of the Latin American *letrado*. It is this splitting moment, the ‘dream-work’ that mediates between culture and politics that interests me. If this- the relation of Márquez stories with money- is something that has already been more or less extensively commented on; it should also be said that it has traditionally been done so from the merely aesthetic, self-referential standpoint, that is, reflections on how Márquez’s writings were in turn reflections on the dismal fact that the aesthetical domain, that most sacrosanct of precincts from which the dirty hands of political interest and economical realities should have refrained from meddling was, in point of fact, the preferred locus of capitalist intervention. But what seems to escape these readings, is precisely how they were also the symptomatic expression of what Franco has termed “the *split* between the political commitment of the writer and his/her writing,”<sup>64</sup> For a universalist, transcendent, aesthetic codification was one of the privileged sites through which the war against many of Latin American agendas of socialist reform was being waged and effectively won. Such seemed to be the source of an anxiety that was the driving force of writers such as Márquez, among many others. When everything had been said and done- from engaged journalism through subversive activism to clandestine activities, and finally exile - when the ideological dove of political and social justice had been bought and sold, there remained at the very least the illusion that the aesthetical trenches of fiction writing- where one could gather the ruins of that demise and still preserve some kind of political integrity- still harbored a minimum of interiority in which subjectivities of political contestation could find some kind of ideological solace.

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<sup>64</sup> Franco, *Decline and Fall*, 2. (My emphasis.)

Even if I want to be as far as possible from belittling the invaluable contribution of writers of the Boom whose work is a creative, diverse, engaging, interesting, and in many cases cogent response to genuine political concerns, I nonetheless want to emphasize, the difficult imbroglio in which many writers of the Boom found themselves, of which Márquez could very well be an emblem, regarding a globalist state of affairs that, because the assemblage of precepts that ordained the practices of the class they represented was so deeply ingrained in the structural composite of the order they were bent to subvert, they were so deeply immersed within such a problematic co-ordination, that they found themselves unable to recognize that the anxiety of their demise and its celebratory expression in their writing was one and the same thing.<sup>65</sup> In other words, Márquez's generation is most probably marked, more than any other preceding generation of Latin American writers, by the crepuscular specter of a man of letters assisting to what Idelber Avelar has called his auratic dethroning and eventual disappearance from the historical and political landscape of Latin America.<sup>66</sup> The immense proliferation and cultivation of personal styles in this epoch, many of which became schools on their own right, constituted a self-enclosed niche, and can be thus understood as the effect of a fetishistic denial over the enigma that this political defeat posed to the intellectuals. They were verily a 'boom,' which was accompanied by a 'whimper,' at the same time that it echoed the almost unanimous proclamation that Latin American identities had finally reached the moment of their self-presence. In this, one can include all regional specificities, all indigenous and urban idiosyncrasies. The generational assertion that Latin America and the Caribbean had already come upon the formula through which its experience as a distinct group could be conveyed, only proves that the man of letters,

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<sup>65</sup> Franco, *Decline and Fall of the Lettered City*, 21-56. This, of course, if we put aside the fact that many writers such as García Márquez were effectively duped into publishing in literary reviews and magazines that turned out to be the result of a grand scheme of anti-communist containment, orchestrated, financed and directed by the C.I.A., Nelson Rockefeller, Hollywood and the United States Congress.

<sup>66</sup> Avelar, *Untimely Present*, see note 3.

the ideologue and the intellectual of yesteryear on which the fate of the *polis* was decided- this, despite the fact that in the political arena things did not look as rosy, given that North American interventionism was anything but losing momentum- had been finally reduced to an autistic entity.<sup>67</sup> Márquez is not an exception to this phenomenon. It is true that he had insisted more than once, together with many others, on the necessity that all fictional flight of imagination has to have some connection with historical or political reality, hinting at the ethico-political imperative of the writer always to maintain a problematic and complex relation with that reality.<sup>68</sup> In this sense, it would be a mistake to accuse him of incurring some kind of facile accommodation to a literary formula or some sort of artistic autism. The point I want to stress is, rather, to what extent his work is a symptom of the evanescent situation of the lettered man during the years of the Cold War in Latin America, a situation that signified, first a proliferation, then an evacuation, and finally an exhaustion of all the metaphysical outsides that took place during this period, since these outsides were empty gestures already inserted into the loop of consumption.

#### V. *When the Laborer becomes a Consumer*

The last of Márquez's novels, *Memoria de mis putas tristes* (*Memory of my Sad Whores*), constitutes a far cry from the Colonel's heroic proclamation. The character of the story is a very old man (this time without the enormous wings), who on his ninetieth birthday decides "to give to himself the gift of a last night of wild love with a virgin adolescent,"<sup>69</sup> that is, by buying a prostitute in one of the most renowned brothels in town. To give something to oneself, to buy a

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<sup>67</sup> Of course, this argument is not mine: Idelber Avelar, Jean Franco and Alberto Moreiras have all articulated the same caveat in similar terms, regarding the deceptively celebratory tone with which writers of the Boom generation understood their roles as vehicles of Latin American's own voice.

<sup>68</sup> Márquez, *El olor de la guayaba*.

<sup>69</sup> Márquez, Gabriel G. *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*. Unless otherwise stated, this will be the edition referred to in subsequent quotations of this text.

gift for oneself seems to be since the beginning of the story the engine that insufflates the narrative economy of the text with a paradox whose mechanisms fills the experience of reading with an acute sense of the farcical, since there is something of the order of the ethically ambiguous in the act of ‘giving oneself the gift of a mad love,’ its declaration, and depositing in that mad love the ciphered reaffirmation of one’s desire to prevail in time. Since from the beginning one does not know whether one is dealing with a knave turned into a fool, or with a fool turned into a knave, this makes of the whole story an act of anticipated flight, a since always announced flight into the confines of aesthetical self-referentiality. While still being a work of fiction, that is, *a fictionalization in the form of a memoire*, the grammatical *I* of the protagonist becomes one with the autobiographical, of which one of Picasso’s *Suites de Vollard*— particularly one of those *aguafuertes* in which the artist is observed contemplating his naked model— could be a suitable metaphor.

Presented as a memory, this story is arguably the first of Márquez’s in which the narrator seems to barely hide the autobiographical with not so ciphered allusions. Whereas in *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba* the man of letters is still the resilient, although already vanquished figure of the militant, a militant for whom the memory of that rendition’s disrespected terms is nonetheless well worth being summoned, that is, as an un-retrievable loss, in this novel one can see a man of letters already relegated to the insignificant corner of his occupation, that of being “the de-codifier and re-constructor into an indigenous prose of the world news trapped in their flight from sidereal space by the short wave radios, or the Morse code,”<sup>70</sup> thus suggesting: first, a tacit confession that the man of letters has always been a more or less ingenious translator and therefore a mediator into an indigenous language of a code coming from an outside that one can

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<sup>70</sup> Márquez, *Memoria . . .*, 12. (My translation.)

safely assume being that of the more civilized Other, and which are caught by the imperfect and archaic mechanisms of representative mediation (short wave radios, Morse code) that, secondly, safeguards, perpetuates and nurtures his and his town's solitude. In turn, the awareness of this turns the whole story into a sort of museum-like, crystallized dead letter, in effect, like one of the many memories of the decay and disappearance of an empire of which the narrator is so fond, a memory that comes much too late, but in whose lateness one can still perceive the nerve of an anticipation, the future memory, a memory which, in its projection into the distant future, was already prefigured in the emblems of much of Márquez's characters' solitude- a much belated memory of a too much anticipated past.

There are few literary arguments more common and more quoted in the history of literature than the one of the rich, decadent, old man who is in the last minute redeemed by his love for a prostitute; however, in the first sentence of the story he mentions that he has decided to *buy for himself a gift*, moreover a gift of mad love, which is like saying *the gift of a gift*. The signifying an-economical economy of the gift that this argument establishes is truncated beforehand, thus signaling to the reader that there is hardly anything left of any transcending content, that it is all pure form, that the 'gift of love' so to speak, has always-already belonged to the narrator's most treasured possessions. The narrative of love, that is arguably the narrative about which one can still say today that there is, even if poorly and precariously, still some operative content, is from the very beginning, interrupted, rendered in more than one sense *stilled*, its transgressive nature arrested in this sort of representing of a representation of something whose pure presence, the present of the presence of which the child- baptized by him as *Delgadina* after an old Spanish romance- is probably the epitome, because if the practical, yet

anonymous woman in *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba* had at least a voice, however marginal, if the commonsensical woman portrayed in *La prodigiosa tarde de Baltazar* at least had a name, here the only role Delgadina is ascribed consists in merely and stupidly *being there*, as the present of pure contemplation that the old man buys for himself.

It goes without saying that the Old Man, about whom there is more than one sign in the story to think of him as being invested with the emblems of the Latin American writer, is also the archetype of the decadent, sterile intellectual: the son of an Italian piano player and a local merchant. His whole life has been dedicated to the writing of short articles in a local newspaper, *el Diario de La Paz*, in his provincial town, some private classes of Latin and Spanish grammar, an occasional musical and theatrical review whenever a notable interpreter comes to town, and an assiduous visit to the brothels. A man of culture, the inheritor of an elegant but run-down house, he has led his life in the peaceful seclusion of his chronic bachelor's routine. When he falls in love with Delgadina, the little girl that Rosa Cabarcas, the head mistress of the oldest brothel in town has raised, he knows love for the first time in his life.

Being the love story of given love that is already encased in the aesthetic representation of a purely economic transaction, a transaction that is not done away with in the end, but rather affirmed, the story not only fictionally represents (and therefore aestheticizes) the immanentization of the literary activity in which the author is one more character that obeys the commands of its logic, one in which there is no subaltern party in the executed business- Rosa Cabarcas and the old man seem to be more or less at the same level of negotiating power, although she prevails in the end- arguably because the subaltern, the virgin adolescent, is



*absolutely* divested of any agency and thus turned into a mere commodity, a mere object of exchange, but also the aesthetization of *that* situation, *the fictionalization*, with all the charge of tacit acquiescence one can attribute to it, of the same situation, and acting *as if* the gift was possible at all within that state of affairs. Arguably there is no way to fictionalize the closed circuit of consumption without turning it into the empty image of time, as Deleuze would say, a mythical present, a synthesis of the second order.<sup>71</sup> Even when the old man is willing to give up his possessions, even his encyclopedic capital of accumulated knowledge (in more than one occasion he is described by Rosa Cabarcas as *sabio*, wise), his treasured collection of Latin poets and grammarians, it goes without saying that this apparent gesture of love is suspect, since we never know anything about Delgadina's requital of his love. At the end of the novel, the old man ends up moving to the brothel, establishing himself in Delgadina's room, much to the delight of Rosa Cabarcas. It is thus that a love story and the fairy tale of capital accumulation seem finally to find its realization as the fantasy of a happy marriage between the gift and monetary exchange. This fantasy is properly the Nation, which the aesthetic object materializes.

More crucially, I also think this novel offers a good opportunity to highlight the distinction that Angus Fletcher establishes between *allegory* and *allegoresis*, the latter being "partially independent from the author's intentions and based upon the act of reading."<sup>72</sup> Among other things, this distinction echoes, however distantly, Benjamin's concept of *aura* as an experience that requires an active intervention, not *on* aesthetic things, but *through* the phallic fantasy that divides image from its material support in them, in order to enter into the disjunctive experience of an image that becomes corporeal and subject and of a subject that becomes image

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<sup>71</sup> See Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*.

<sup>72</sup> See, Dabove, *Nightmares of the Lettered City*, 36.

and object. Following along with this distinction, it is plausible to register the symbolic structure of this fantasy as being properly *national* in essence, as it materializes itself, within the text, as a projection of the ideal of beauty, and outside of the text, as an aesthetic object to be consumed in some fantasized outside, insofar as the libidinal balance it accomplishes runs along the investment in discourses on the Other, whose belatedness, obsolescence and archaic nature come shrouded within the novelty of a cultural commodity. Furthermore, its specifically *protean*, *daemonic* essence- its both terrifying and wondrous nature- perhaps underscores the fate of knowledge in Latin American high modernity as a narcissistic (and therefore *narcotic*) device- an *epistème* turned into a sort of *tekné* (whose etymology after all refers to *textuality* and therefore to *rhetoric*) and whose anesthetic function in Latin America was assumed in Europe and North America by all the technological apparatuses and inventions designed to create the private world of fantasy to safeguard the human perceptual-sensorial machine from the shock of an industrialized world, the artificial paradises that, moreover, depended for their creation and finance on a constant influx of capital from the colonies overseas. What comes probably unintended in this crepuscular celebration of the presumed *gratuity* of a work of art, is precisely this *visual image*, the staging of an artist in ecstatic (read religious) contemplation of a woman that is both wondrous and horrific, an *uncanny* artifact that is both objective and subjective, dead and living- *undead*. This image should be kept in mind, for it will return in my discussion of Borges' recurrence to the expediency of a fantastic artifact towards which all the anxieties of obsolescence of a knowledge that comes fragmentarily from somewhere overseas, filtered and deformed through an even more archaic technology. It is *there*, in the ambiguous, international logic of the gift (or rather its lack thereof) that is staged between European epistemic capital and Latin American raw materials, a subject whose division is projected on the fantasy of a nation

that is half dead, half alive, that the glaring truth contained in Octavio Paz's declaration should be sought, to the effect that the Latin American intelligentsia cannot produce original thought, except only materialize it in the aesthetic (cultural) realm. Just as the Nation- the land as woman, is the inert mass that needs to be given form, it is as if knowledge was merely the *hyle*, the raw material that the *letrado* had at his/her disposal to *imprint*, *manipulate*, and *produce*, like an able artisan, the object on which the phallic fantasy of an undivided nation is finally projected, as 'beautiful semblance' (Hansen, 354). I am not implying that this aesthetic instrumentalization of knowledge could not or has not happened elsewhere. (After all, Márquez's source of inspiration for this novel was explicitly the collection of short stories titled *The House of Sleeping Beauties*, by Japanese writer Yasunari Kawabata.) What I am trying to highlight is: first, the specific significance that this type of aesthetic instrumentalization had in accomplishing the function of substituting for the failure of a national project in Latin American late modernity, when it came head on against the impossibility of the instrumentalization of Reason- technology- that was the hallmark of industrial modernity in emerging nations across Europe and North America, and secondly, how this substitution accomplished a double economy: The passive, utterly contemplative character of this scene is important to underscore, as an index of the daemonic aspect it renders illegible, and which we will see at work in my discussion of Borges' *El Zahir*.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Miriam Bratu Hansen has noticed this aporia between the more classical 'beautiful semblance' and the more *haptic* conception of aura at work in Benjamin's work: "By assimilating aura to a regressive fetishistic cult of beautiful semblance (and, arguably, to a Kantian notion of distance vis-a`-vis the sublime as the condition of aesthetic pleasure and individuation), the artwork essay makes a case, not only for a recognition of the aura's irreversible decline, but for its active demolition. Conversely, by hailing film as a force in that liquidation, it places the cinema on the side of "a new kind of barbarism" and "poverty" of experience rather than assigning it a historic function for negotiating the transformation of experience. The essay thus jettisons what I take to be Benjamin's more productive reflections on the reconfiguration of distance and proximity in modernity, specifically as they revolve around new economies of body and image space and the role of film in enabling a collective, playful innervation of technology [ . . .]" Hansen, *Benjamin's Aura*, 355.

When Giorgio Agamben talks about the ‘man without content,’ he refers to the state of affairs in which a form of consciousness, in its self-realization, that is, in the retroactive ‘catching up’ of the anticipated positing of its predicative attributes, has since always become another form of consciousness, and what it perceives to be the realization of the predicative attributes of *what is*, is in actuality an empty shell, pure form with no meaningful content, in other words dead letter:

That of which, in the work of art, constitutes the artistic experience is, in fact, [the fact] that artistic subjectivity is the absolute essence, for which each matter is indifferent: but the purely creative principle- formal, split from every content, is the absolute abstract inessentiality that annihilates and dissolves each contents in a continuous effort to transcend and realize itself. If the artist searches now in a content or in a determinate faith his own certainty, it is in the Lie, because he/she knows that pure artistic subjectivity is the essence of every thing; but if he searches in it his own reality, he finds himself in the paradoxical condition of having to find his own essence in that which is inessential, his own content in that which is only form. His own condition is, for that reason, the radical laceration: and, outside this laceration, in him all is lie.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 82. [My Translation] We can relate this passage to Agamben’s suggestion on how the division that took place in the understanding of the word *poiesis* was a reflection of the alienation of humans from their essentially pro-*ductive* destiny: “Questo fare pro-duttivo(nella forma del lavoro) determina oggi dovunque lo statuto dell’uomo sulla terra, inteso a partire dalla prassi, cioè dalla produzione della vita materiale; ed è precisamente perché affonda le sue radici nell’essenza alienata di questa *poiesis* e fa l’esperienza della ‘degradante divisione del lavoro in lavoro manuale e lavoro intellettuale,’ che il modo in cui Marx pensò la condizione dell’uomo e la sua storia mantiene la sua attualità. [ . . . ] L’esistenza di un duplice statuto dell’attività poetica dell’uomo ci appare ormai tanto naturale, che dimentichiamo che l’ingresso dell’opera d’arte nella dimensione estetica è un evento relativamente recente, e che, a suo tempo, esso introdusse una lacerazione radicale nella vita spirituale dell’artista, in seguito alla quale la pro-duzione culturale dell’umanità ha mutato aspetto in modo sostanziale. [ . . . ] Con lo sviluppo della tecnica moderna a partire dalla prima rivoluzione industriale nella seconda metà del secolo XVIII e con l’affermarsi di una sempre più estesa e alienante divisione del lavoro, lo statuto, il modo della presenza delle cose prodotte dall’uomo diventa infatti duplice: da una parte stanno le cose che entrano nella presenza secondo lo statuto dell’estetica, cioè le opere d’arte, e, dall’altra, quelle che vengono in essere secondo lo statuto della tecnica e, cioè, i prodotti in senso stretto. Lo statuto particolare delle opere d’arte- in seno alle cose che non hanno in se stesse la propria *arché*- è stato identificato dal sorgere dell’estetica nell’originalità (o autenticità). [ . . . ] La lacerazione dell’attività produttiva del uomo, ‘la degradante divisione del lavoro in lavoro manuale e in lavoro intellettuale’ non è qui colmata, ma è spinta, anzi, al suo estremo: e, tuttavia, è anche a partire da questa autosoppressione dello statuto privilegiato del ‘lavoro artistico,’ il quale raccoglie or nella loro inconciliabile opposizione le due facce del pomo diviso a metà della pro-duzione umana, che sarà un giorno possibile uscire dalla palude dell’estetica e della tecnica per restituire la sua dimensione originale allo statuto poetico dell’uomo sulla terra.” (89, 93, 91 and 100-101.)

Forms of political contestation in Latin America, concurrent practices of fabling or poetizing these, and their ensuing contestations, were already obsolete, their problematic core already rendered inoperative by the dialectical movement that gave them existence. These were perfectly self-contained universes that were more or less the subjective projections into the fictional universe of what is Latin American specificity, had it not been trapped in the whirlpool of ideological marketing that came to be to a great extent the battleground of the Cold War. A set of positive contents whose positing signaled the moment of their being irretrievably lost, Latin American literary projects of onto-aesthetical transcendence such as magical realism, which was, after all, an off-shot of European modernist abstract post-expressionism, these expressions of a Latin America submerged in a timeless mythical present, an archetypical parenthesis within the avatars of post-industrial modernity, but more precisely, within the specters of a techno-scientific emergence, signaled both the irretrievable loss of such identities-that-were-never-had, the denial of this loss, and the definitive demise of the lettered man in Latin America as the agent of political change- what remained from this process was a form totally devoid of content. From then on, the writer and the intellectual came to constitute another category of specialists, representing a cultural proletariat who was not to deviate from well-policed protocols of cultural representation.

Such is the conundrum that Magical Realism *à la Márquez* came to constitute at the same time it appeared to be trapped into: the opening out into the kingdom of magic and myth in which all of Latin American reality could represent itself to the world as being the ‘miraculous’ manifestation of its specificity, also constituted the invagination of the transcendent instance into a narcissistic inside that lost all subversive pertinence. Solitude, arguably Márquez’s fictional

grand affect, can therefore be understood here in this double register: the solitude of a Latin America that was created in the image of the anxiety of the solitary, liminal man of letters, and a Solitude that manifested at the same time that it covered up the truth of its obscene enjoyment. Its minimal immanence, an immanence whose internal economy only attests to the fact that the lettered man has become one more monad in the all-devouring immanence of Capital, is probably the anticipated result of that solitude. The truth of Latin American Magical Realism came to be ciphered in the libidinal discharge that the aesthetization of this affect allowed, particularly the one that was to bear Márquez's imprint for almost three decades, arguably that way of doing literature which was the more or less direct result of an expressive quest for a sort of transcendence beyond the circuit of Metropolitan desires for a digestible otherness, a quest which was, in its turn, a reaction to the way the Latin American lettered man was insensibly but inexorably being turned into another cultural technician, an able artificer of the fetish, a specialist that produced palatable books at the demand of the latest fashionable tastes of the European and North American public.

## Chapter 2

### From Jorge Isaac's *María*, to Fernando Vallejo's *La virgen de los sicarios*: a Counterfeit Coin from the Future to a Love Story from the Past

*What is an obsessive? It is an actor who performs his role and accomplishes a certain number of acts as if he was dead. The game in which he engages is a form of putting himself at a safe distance from death. It is about a living game, which consists in showing himself invulnerable. – Jacques Lacan, The Object Relation.*<sup>75</sup>

#### I. *The Two Beginnings of the Colombian National Idyll: First as Tragedy, Then as Farce.*

*There can be a play within the play,  
but not a tragedy within a tragedy.  
- Carl Schmitt, Hamlet and Hecuba.*

Fernando Vallejo's novel starts with an evocation of a once-idyllic town called Sabaneta, his silent and peaceful birthplace, situated in the *finca* of Santa Anita, where his best childhood memories took place:

Further on there was nothing, there the world started to drop away, get bumpy, veer off. And that was something I found out the afternoon we released maybe the biggest balloon the skies of Antioquia had ever seen, a diamond with a hundred and twenty enormous pleats, bright, bright red so it'd stand out against the blue sky. You're not going to believe the size, but what do you people know about balloons? Do you know what they are? They're diamonds or crosses or spheres made out of flimsy rice paper and inside they have a small lighted candle which fills them with smokes so's they rise. People say the smoke is their soul and the candle their heart. When the balloons fill up with smoke and start to tug we, the ones who're holding them, let them go and up the balloon soars, up to heaven with its hear lit up, palpitating, like the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Do you know

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<sup>75</sup> Lacan, Jacques. *El Seminario IV: La Relación de Objeto*. Barcelona: Paidós, 1994. (My translation.) The passage continues: "To that end, he consecrates himself to a domination that conditions all his contacts with the others. One can see him in a kind of exhibition with which he tries to show how far he can go in that exercise, which has all the characters of a game, including its illusory character- that is to say, how far he can go with the others, the lower-case other, which is only his alter-ego, his own double. He himself is only a spectator, and upon that hinges the very possibility of the game and of the pleasure he obtains. Nonetheless, he does not know what is his place; that is the unconscious in him. What he does, he does under the title of an alibi. That he can see. He realizes that the game is not played where he is, and that is why nothing that happens has for him the least importance, which does not mean that he knows from where he sees all this." (My Translation.)

who he is? We used to have one in the living room of the house in Calle del Perú in the city of Medellín, capital of Antioquia; in the house where I was born (because I know you won't know the word), blessed one the by the priest. My country, Colombia is consecrated to him. He is Jesus and he is pointing to his breast with his finger, and in the open breast nestles his bleeding heart: little drops of bright red blood, lit up, like the candle inside the balloon: this is the blood Colombia will shed, now and forever, world without end, Amen. (Vallejo, 2)

This is a motive that constantly repeats itself in Vallejo's novels- *La virgen de los Sicarios, Almas en pena, chapolas negras, La rambla paralela, El desbarrancadero*- one which sets its tone in an alternation with post-modern snapshots of Medellín's dismal present of senseless violence and social decomposition.<sup>76</sup> It is, as Gabriela Polit-Dueñas has already observed, in the backdrop of this nostalgic evocation of an idyllic Colombia- what Raymond Williams termed the "residual element of previous social and cultural forms"<sup>77</sup>, that the 'picturesque' anecdotes in the novel are knitted.<sup>78</sup> Within the representational economy of the novel, there is in this very first paragraph a representation of the Christic figure of the lettered man, iconized in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and how this representation already lies sheathed within the nostalgic imaginary time capsule that very much determines the affective space of the

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<sup>76</sup> Vallejo, Fernando. *Our Lady of the Assassins*. Trans. Paul Hammond. London: Arts Council of England, 2001. Unless otherwise stated, this will be the translation used for this text. The Spanish edition to which all my translations are going to be referenced is Vallejo, Fernando. *La virgen de los sicarios*. Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia: Editorial Santillana, 1994.

<sup>77</sup> Williams, Raymond. *Literature and Marxism*.

<sup>78</sup> This formal category as a recurrent motive in Vallejo's work - the nostalgic evocation of a long gone past as the displaced negation of an unpleasant present - has already been de object of a detailed analysis by Polit-Dueñas. Read, for example: "[En la obra de Vallejo] El pasado se construye, entonces, como el archivo donde guarda recuerdos idílicos, el registro de los libros leídos, de los países visitados, del conocimiento adquirido, pero, sobre todo, representa eso que ha perdido, esa identidad que no tiene con quien reinventar. Recordemos que Fernando es un hombre solo, su familia murió, heredó un departamento en el que no hay ningún objeto en el que pueda rastrear la pertenencia a un mundo (cualquiera), no hay ni muebles, ni ropa. La única referencia a ese pasado es su nostalgia por un Medellín que dejó de existir cuando la invasión de las comunas. Hay en la construcción de ese pasado personal idílico, la manifestación de una nostalgia de clase que está presente como un residuo cultural, como remanencia del privilegio de hombre letrado. En este sentido, a la imagen de intelectual posmoderno que proyecta Fernando de manera consciente en su discurso nihilista, le traiciona un gesto de clase que aparece de manera inconsciente en la escritura y revela la nostalgia de una clase extinta. Por eso el referente específico que no parece tener juicios de valor, se lo encuentra en un registro más conservador y peligroso." Polit-Dueñas.



novel- the love of Fernando in exchange for the death in time of Alexis. Not coincidentally, the words of the famous picture evoke the quintessential Marquezian affect- solitude-, but now with one more degree of distancing. The text that accompanies this very popular picture among the Catholic strata of Latin American societies, reads: “Lord, help me discover *my solitude*, so I can collaborate in the salvation of the World.” Literally, *solitude*, enshrined, blessed as it may, by the priest, is here enclosed (immanentized, so to speak) within the *living room*, that is, the sentimental, familial, costumbrista snapshot of *nostalgia*- of a Nation forever lost *to* the State. Said otherwise, following the imaginary genealogy of this affect, there is at work here a sort of protective affective and metonymical displacement/entombment, since what is probably at stake is an ambiguous denial of the *unresolved* question, the question that was literally put in reserve, by the preceding generation of writers. By further burying this loss in the Chinese boxes’ tomb of representational ruses, the protagonist avoids the phantasmal *traversing* that is needed actually to speak from within the deadlocked position of the truth that his symptom expresses, that is, the truth of the State as the point of sovereign, exceptional violence. Behind the *melancholy I* of Vallejo and the solitary he/she/them of Márquez, there is an interchangeability that only accounts for this displacement.

## II. “*I is Colombia*”- *Écriture, Violence and the Writing of the Nation*

Fernando, the protagonist, narrates in the first person his meanderings through the streets of Medellín and its surrounding *comunas*, accompanied by a green eyed adolescent *sicario*, Alexis, who seems to kill with the same generosity and gratuitousness that his ostensibly rich and educated lover and benefactor applies as he buys him all sorts of goods:

The emptiness of Alexis' life, more all embracing than my own, even a rubbish collector couldn't fill. For want of something to do, after the ghetto-blaster I bought him a television with a satellite dish that picks up every station on earth and the galaxies too. Now the dear boy spends all day in front of the T.V. set changing channels every minute. And turning, turning the dish according to his fancy and the compass point to see what he picks up before changing it again. (Vallejo, 19-20)

In this way the aporetical interlacing of these two logics, the gift of death and the gift of love, is the engine that drives the narration, but it should not be forgotten that these two logics respond to a third one, within which they are encased: the narrator, who on the one hand constantly manifests the condition of his excremental lack of any tie to the social fabric of Colombian reality, decides to buy for himself some extra time in that reality, a time outside the temporality of that reality, in other words to give himself the gift of time, of a stilled present that, in the anomic suspension that this symbolic death imposes on the text, becomes the parenthesis within which the story unfolds, and the gift of death (for the contemplation and the enjoyment of the others, maybe of the all-enjoying Big Other, and of himself, as its embodiment) will come to an end when the monetary exchange that feeds the relation between Fernando and Alexis is suddenly ended by the *inexorable, yet untimely* death of the young assassin. Arguably, Latin American literature will have begun once again, because it will have ended there. The pair Alexis/Wilmar represents the knot, the nomadic element so to speak, upon which the semantic cycle of death and consumption closes.<sup>79</sup> In fact, the narrator's infatuation with the little assassin had much to do with this truth:

Such purity unsullied by the printed word was, furthermore, what I most liked about my baby boy. [. . .] So that was what was behind those green eyes, then, a purity unsullied by women. And the absolute truth, without extenuating circumstances or it mattering a damn

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<sup>79</sup> Franco, *The Decline*, 223.

what you think, is what I stick to. That was what I'd fallen in love with. His truthfulness."  
(Vallejo, 15).

Jean Franco acutely observes the symmetrical relationship existing between Alexis' unassuming 'being for death' and Fernando's obsessive postponement of his death, since all his apparent attempts at suicide, all his ruminations about the brevity of life, appear to be more like hypocritical/cynical gestures of representational distancing from the horror of that truth (similarly, the narrator in *Memoria de mis putas tristes*, once calls *Delgadina, the horror*)<sup>80</sup> one in which the abyssal chasm is reaffirmed, instead of abolished, the chasm that opens up between him and the little boy, or between the Colombian privileged class and the declassés, or between the realm of thought and the realm of experience:

Whereas honor was once staked on female virtue, status has now migrated to clothing, motorcycles, and guns. Yet consumer society and a high rate of poverty cannot altogether account for this alliance of consumption and death. Slavoj Žižek described the death drive as the subordination of the human psychic apparatus 'to a blind automatism of repetition beyond pleasure seeking, self preservation, accordance between man and milieu.' It is this 'beyond self-preservation' that strikes the reader of these chronicles of violence, for the young killers are perfectly conscious that they will not survive beyond the age of twenty. *This stands in stark contrast to the interests in survival at any cost and the postponement of death that is the obsession of Western societies, particularly the United States. It is precisely the 'beyond self-preservation' that tests the limits of what is intelligible to us in the outside.*<sup>81</sup> (My emphasis)

The point is that it is this truth that Fernando likes so much about Alexis, on which the coin of his narrative is minted; a truth that bespeaks horror, since the automatism wherewith Fernando's love is paid in full by Alexis' gifts of death can only be understood in its full

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<sup>80</sup> Márquez, *Memoria*, 28.

<sup>81</sup> Franco, 223.

meaning when viewed from the perspective of the precise allegorical referent this amatory pair stages— both Fernando and Alexis/Wilmar should be seen as embodying one and the same imaginary unit, the same divided subject, whose secret is predicated on a disavowal of Colombian national modernity as divided, trapped in the same destructive and suicidal death drive.<sup>82</sup>

### III. *Of What Is the Colombian Nation an Allegory?*

What is the precise nature, and the meaning, of the ideological invagination that seems to be at work here? In *The Letter of Violence*, Idelber Avelar traces a genealogy of the most frequently recurring motives in nineteenth century's Colombian novelistic tradition, and how they ultimately reflect, on the one hand, the intimate mutual interaction between 'literature' and 'nation' and, on the other, the political and class antagonisms of the period, whose recurrence throughout Colombian history manifest the failure of these narratives to articulate a viable national/narrative solution.<sup>83</sup> Fictional narratives of nation building, he goes on to propose, are too much intertwined with the different attempts, in various parts of the country, to deal with the marrow of political struggle and the violence that ensued from the failure to constitute a common discursive ground on which an effectively unifying narrative of the nation could be articulated. It is by virtue of these allegorized failures that Avelar talks about the different regional narratives

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<sup>82</sup> See Forrest-Hylton, Luis Duno. "Huellas de lo Real. Testimonio y cine de la delincuencia en Venezuela y Colombia," *Revista Iberoamericana*, Vol. LXXIV, Núm. 223, Abril-Junio 2008. 531-557, for an analysis in the same key on the motif of *horror* in cinematic adaptations of the *testimonio* and narratives of drug criminality in the region. The author notes that "the Real is sometimes embodied in a monstrous entity that communicates the horror, but *that is only present in its effects*." The point is that the Fernando/Alexis pair should be understood as a two-headed monster that allegorizes the modern subject in all its consumptive frenzy. See, also, Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

<sup>83</sup> Although it should also be conceded that Idelber Avelar never uses class struggle within these contexts, since the antagonisms during this period revolved around two main identitary matrixes: the region, and the political party, and not around social class (arguably because the Black and Indian populations were largely kept outside, or at best in the margins of the political processes.)

of the period, but most importantly Jorge Isaac's *María* (1967), as being examples of a *catachrestic* discourse, that is, the discourses that metaphorize a 'non-existing referent':

The Colombian narrative traditions gestated between 1840 and the early twentieth century maintain a *catachrestic* relationship with the nation, as these novels did not coincide with the consolidation of national pacts but rather attempted to explain their failure. The Colombian texts, however diverse and differentiated, do have something in common vis-à-vis the rest of Latin America's foundational Romanticism: They seem to be texts that hesitate, that consider contradictory hypotheses, that never fully settle around a conclusive project. This is, no doubt, related to the fact that they are national novels of regions that have not yet formed a nation. Their privileged trope is the catachresis, the metaphor of a nonexistent referent.<sup>84</sup>

Since Colombia's history of national consolidation was particularly fragmented and truncated, Avelar talks about several canons of nation-founding fictions in Colombia, instead of one, but for the purposes of my discussion I would like to concentrate, if only briefly, on one of these, namely the *Cauca Valley* canon, the one represented by the heritage of Jorge Isaac's novel *María*, the novel that eventually and only retrospectively came to allegorize Colombian nationality, thus occupying the paradoxical position of the genus *and* the species in the rather partisan-wise and localized early history of Colombian narrative, and (probably less so) Díaz Castro's *Manuela*. Referring to Díaz Castro's *Manuela*, but extending the argument to the case of *María*, Avelar expresses that:

*Manuela* portrays, then, the powerlessness of the liberal versus the conservative antagonism to translate into partisan state politics the real, constitutive social antagonisms in nineteenth century Colombia.[ . . . ] It is politics as such that fails.

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<sup>84</sup> Avelar, *The Letter of Violence*, 116.

The novel depicts a certain failure of the political structure to translate the movement of the real social reality. Díaz Castro composes an allegory of the powerlessness proper to the central political antagonism in Colombia, between liberals and conservatives, that does not seem to account for the real pluralism of social reality. Much like Eugenio Díaz Castro's *Manuela*, Jorge Isaac's *María* is also an allegory concocted around the image of a failed love, interrupted by death.<sup>85</sup>

Summing up Avelar's argument: What distinguishes *María* from Castro's novel is that, while in *Manuela* the political failure is centered on the mere ignoring of the real tissue of social antagonism, in *María* that failure is conveyed by a glossing over of that antagonism under the rubric of an ideology of cordiality and assimilation. In *Manuela*, the failure is symptomatized in the very incapacity of the protagonist, the typically liberal Demosthenes, to understand, contemporize with, and synthesize all the fragmented indications of the discourses of progress and civilization that he brought from New York. They are useless and inapplicable in a completely different social milieu, thus making of the failed love an allegory for a pact *that never takes place*, between the naive and idealist but ultimately good *draconianos*, represented by Demosthenes, and the conservatives, represented by Manuela and the priest, a pact whose failure was perpetrated by the barbarous don Tadeo, but *also* passed over by naive Demosthenes.<sup>86</sup> The novel is a critique of liberalism's illusory projects of civilization, as viewed by conservative Castro. But the conservatives also failed, since they "were unable to translate their cultural and moral hegemony into the legal and political realms [. . .], they were unable to go from the ideal to the actual."<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, the dispositive of failed-love-interrupted-

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<sup>85</sup> Avelar, *The Letter*, 131. For a more detailed account and analysis of these novels, refer to Avelar's text, in the chapter titled "Transculturation and Civil War: The origins of the Novel in Colombia."

<sup>86</sup> Avelar, *The Letter*, 128-129. The historical subtext of the novel, Avelar adds, is the "*restoration of the pact responsible for the 1854 rise to arms* by both liberals and conservatives against Gal. Melo."

<sup>87</sup> Avelar, *The Letter*, 130.

by-death in *María*, is the failure of an “intra-class pact,”<sup>88</sup> meaning that everything happens within the same social milieu. There is in *María* a total silencing of social antagonisms, since its failure is immanent to love itself. While the failure in *Manuela* is due to a lack of understanding of the real nature of the antagonism that failure in *María* is due to a total absence of antagonism, since that antagonism has been relegated to a sort of fixed backdrop against which the love story unfolds.<sup>89</sup> Citing Doris Sommers’ *Foundational Fictions*, Avelar explains:

*María* handles, rather, the ideology of cordiality and assimilation [ . . . ] Isaac’s is another form of white supremacy and subjection of blackness, to be sure, but it is not one that resorts to the Puritan code of horror in the face of monstrosity. His strategy is the ideology of cross-class and cross-race nice-ness [ . . . ] Precisely because there is no violence in it, *María* inserts itself in the Colombian tradition of ‘narrative of violence’: The brutally violent act of the text is the *erasure and denial of real processes of violence that were taking place in society*. In making ‘cordiality’ the basic paradigm presiding over his representation of social relations, Isaacs implicitly soaks his language with paternalistic rhetoric. In a way he inaugurates in literature a particularly Colombian understanding of violence as something not deprived of a certain sweetness, cordiality, informality. He *prevents social relations from acceding, in representation, to the real violence, which is their truth*.<sup>90</sup>

Whatever their variants, and whatever their obvious differences, Isaac’s, and to a lesser extent Carrasquilla’s and Díaz Castro’s foundational novels share many common characteristics with contemporary Colombian writer Fernando Vallejo’s *Our Lady of the Assassins*, and more generally with his writing considered as a whole.

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<sup>88</sup> Avelar, *The Letter*, 142.

<sup>89</sup> And is not this erasure the origin of the dangerously outcast “class with not class”, the *bandoleros* to whom Juan Pablo Dabove refers, the *lumpen* that Marx mocked at the same time that respected in his *Eighteenth Brumaire*, in other words, *populism*?

<sup>90</sup> Avelar, *The Letter*, 140-141.

I will schematize some of them for the purposes of my discussion, as they are catalogued by Avelar himself in his study of Isaac's novel, for I will argue that they constitute the ideologemes that constellate the signifying economy of both texts: (1) The transposition/fantasizing of (class, social, racial, political) antagonisms into the sentimentalist realm of a love story.<sup>91</sup> This antagonism is thereafter 'sweetened'.<sup>92</sup> This transposition metaphorizes the impossibility of an agonistic national pact through (2) the *interruption* of that love idyll by the sudden and unexpected death of the 'feminine,' 'passive' part.<sup>93</sup> The *untimeliness* of that love relation- the prohibition that makes that love possible/impossible, is ultimately the non-relation, the non-communicability between two temporalities that, although they *seem to* interact, such interaction is nonetheless recreated at *another discursive level* than the one in which the love relation takes place. As it turns out, monetary exchange comes to mediate, display and interrupt Fernando's and Alexis' love affair within the reality that unfolds under this discourse. In this sense, the love relation takes place in a representational sort of aporetic void, a bubble

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<sup>91</sup> In my use of this term I invoke the general definition offered by Fredric Jameson in his *The Political Unconscious*, namely as "the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes." *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*.

<sup>92</sup> Avelar, *The Letter*, 140-142. Read, for example: "[...] Blackness appears in Isaacs within a cordialist ideology of social relations. [...] *María* handles, rather, the ideology of cordiality and assimilation, not of scandalized racial segregation. Isaac's is another form of white supremacism and subjection of blackness, to be sure, but it is not one that resorts to the Puritan code of horror in the face of monstrosity. His strategy is the ideology of cross-class and cross-race niceness [...] Precisely because there is no violence in it, *María* inserts itself in the Colombian tradition of 'narrative of violence': The brutally violent at of the text is the *erasure and denial of real processes of violence that were taking place in society*. [...] In a way he inaugurates in literature a particularly Colombian understanding of violence as something not deprived of a certain sweetness, cordiality, informality. He *prevents social relations from acceding, in representation, to the real violence, which is their truth*. [...] One would have to add *María* as a moment in which racialized exclusion *becomes language* and establishes itself imperceptibly in the very set of cordial linguistic interchanges. *María* is a novel in which violence speaks through the very silences of the text."

<sup>93</sup> Avelar, *The Letter*, 126-127. Avelar explains, within the context of Díaz Castro's *Manuela*: "The voyeuristic invitation made by the text is for us to expect something to happen between them, the unadapted liberal (promised to a capital city girl), and the vivacious provincial woman (promised to a peasant). We expect it, but it never happens. Each one remains within an intra-class and intra-region couple, as an abyss impossible to overcome exists between the two cultures. [...] Much like José Mármol's *Amalia*, one of Argentina's foundational texts, *Manuela* is not structured according to the progressive, dialectical, Bildungsroman-esque temporality of the modern novel. It follows rather, an *episodic, segmented, and discontinuous temporality*, one that is periodically marked by *extradiegetic interruptions such as political pamphlets, philosophical or scientific digression, description of manners, letters, diaries*. This is a kind of *excessive, chaotic temporality* common in nineteenth-century Latin American novels [...] and usually resolved by the *deus ex machina* of death." (My emphasis.)



enclosed by the incalculable gift of death, given in return for a calculated monetary ‘gift’. The discourse that opens up this space, as it simultaneously is opened up by it, is a kind of mythical, and ultimately mystical discourse with Biblical, prophetic overtones, a narrative that is ‘oracular,’ since it is already woven from a symbolic *beyond* out of which an absolute, non-dialecticized truth about Colombian reality springs forth. Just as in *María* and Carrasquilla’s *Frutos de mi tierra* love is engraved into the logic of a monetary *calculation* that is haunted by the putting in reserve of a political incalculability that sustains it, this calculation in *La Virgen* bears the doubling value of an exchange of money and bodies in a love affair which finds its truth underwritten by the incommensurability between that relation and the political domain whose disappearance never ceases to come back, untimely and therefore beyond any possibility of calculation, as a *disruptive, untimely presence*. Furthermore, the interruption of the love idyll by the *deus ex machina* of another sicario in *La Virgen* invites a thinking of the impossibility of an interclass pact, both as a symptomatic insistence and as an ideological ruse. Moreover, this interruption is often mirrored by (3) the constant allusion to linguistic propriety and thus property, with the implicit class distinction it entails. Significantly, the bullets “that Alexis shoots only have symbolic value.” I argue that the phenomenon of what sociologists such as Álvaro Camacho and Daniel Pécault have recognized by the terms ‘naturalization’ and ‘banalization’ of violence, should nonetheless be understood under the light of a violent return of the ‘letter of violence’ in the Colombian nation, where discursive violence (that of the narrative of a failed love story) and actual, empirical violence form a dialectical whole.<sup>94</sup> Accompanying the crass

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<sup>94</sup> Vallejo, 129. For a thorough understanding of how the print culture helped create a sense of homogeneity and simultaneity of experiences at the intersection between novel (fiction) and newspaper (reality), galvanized the consensus of a collective imaginary around a set of ‘common’ experiences and traditions, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* stands out as a crucial reference. Also, see Rueda, Maria Helena. “Nación y narración de la violencia en Colombia (De la historia a la sociología),” *Revista Iberoamericana*, Vol. LXXIV, Núm. 223, Abril-Junio 2008. 345-359. This ‘naturalization’ and eventual ‘banalization’ of violence in Colombian social texture, has already been the object of extensive sociological studies. For a study of the historical ‘naturalization’ of the

equivalence money = words = bullets, there is a parallel one, that of fiction = reality. In this sense, it is interesting to note the particular logics staged in the novel between rhetorical and empirical experience, as quite literally the first *precedes* and *stands for* the cause of the latter, within the novel, while the novel is also inscribed within the larger framework of an accomplished cultural globalization, regarding which it entertains a paradoxical relation that could be understood in very much the same terms of the paradox of structure and event that Avelar develops in his reading of the Colombian *costumbrista* novel of the 1800's- what happens within the symbolic universe of the novel seems to replicate what happens, from the viewpoint of a larger historical arch, what happens in the Colombian nation. The narration therefore unfolds along two registers linguistic/ontological that are in constant tension, of which the Fernando/Alexis pair seems to be their mediator: there are the way things are named by *them*, the (linguistically inferior) *comuneros*, which imposes a degree of fictional distance with respect to what they 'actually' mean, translated by Fernando for the voyeuristic benefice of a touristic/metropolitan other into the authoritative realm of a particularly purist, even priestly form of Castilian language.<sup>95</sup> In the same way, Alexis functions as the ontological counterpart of this rift. This is particularly evident in the chain of equivalences which the proper name 'Alexis' puts into motion: Alexis/Wilmar = Woman = the Motherland/Colombia = Death. Again, there is a class division reaffirmed through this logic, in the distorted form of an anthropological knowledge about this inwardly, savage Other, one that brings strange echoes of the ethnographic treatises that, according to Roberto González Echevarría, were a common occupation within the circle of nineteenth century writers. Even when this might not be immediately apparent in *María*,

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language of violence in Colombia see, Camacho, Álvaro, Álvaro Guzmán, María Clemencia Ramírez y Fernando Gaitán. *Nuevas visiones sobre la violencia en Colombia*. Bogotá: Fescol-IEPRI, 1997. For a study on how the banalization of violence plays out in the construction of nationhood in Colombia, see Pécault, Daniel. *Guerra contra la sociedad*. Bogotá: Planeta, 2001.

<sup>95</sup> See, for example, in the original version in Spanish, Vallejo, *La Virgen*, pp. 9, 23, 26, 29, 82, 88, 97, 128.

it is generally a common trait of Colombian, and Latin American literary tradition in general.<sup>96</sup> More often than not, this knowledge is posited as irradiating from the narrator, which entails (4) the constant ‘feminization’ of Alexis, and his concomitant transforming into mere use value, the kind of value that is extinguished in its fruition.<sup>97</sup> In Vallejo’s novel, this role is successively assigned to Alexis and Wilmar. Since they mediate the passage from Fernando’s rhetorical violence into the realm of empirical violence, as such they form part of an automatism that only co-responds to Fernando’s drive. Moreover, in a way not too different from Delgadina in Márquez’s *Memoria de mis putas tristes*, it is as if the *sicario* became a mere prop, or rather an empty signifier that sutures into a coherent narrative Fernando’s otherwise flimsy reasoning and undead existence as a decadent and irrelevant aesthete, quite significantly the locus of enunciation that the narrator from Márquez’s last novel assumes. Moreover, Fernando more than once fantasizes Alexis in terms that remind the reader of the Derridean paradigm of the writing scene in which that which is written, always already disappears, erased, in the process of its writing.<sup>98</sup> The narrator’s evocation, as in Márquez’s *Memoria de mis putas tristes*, of a clean

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<sup>96</sup> Avelar, 142-147. Avelar comments on this aspect, with regard to yet another foundational novel of the Colombian canon, *Frutos de mi tierra*, by Tomás Carrasquilla, in the following fashion: “In literary terms, the instructive contrast is the one that opposes Antioquia to the lettered city par excellence, Bogotá. (Note that Avelar previously recalls Angel Rama’s use of Bogotá as the prototypical model for the Latin American lettered city.) Associated with *production*, Antioquia placed itself early on in a position antagonistic to the capital, perceived as home to an epidemic, bureaucratic, and rhetorical culture. [ . . . ] Lettered culture, which was a *colonial* heritage both on the Caribbean Coast and Bogotá, emerged in Antioquia within an already modern horizon. There was no need, in other words, to bring literary language ‘up to date’ with post-colonial context, because letter culture as such, for Antioquians, coincided with a fully modern, post-independence political moment. [ . . . ] One must ask what is the rhetoric and politics organizing the transcription. In the case of Carrasquilla, that operation was particularly embedded in a regional struggle that was simultaneously political and linguistic. [ . . . ] For the first time in Colombia, *money began to occupy center stage in fiction*. Not by chance, the first novel of ‘entrepreneurial’ Antioquia narrated the story of two love relations always already contaminated by exchange and business.”

<sup>97</sup> Avelar, 142. “*María’s* death reaffirms her value as one that does not survive itself, that is, a cheer *use value* that disappears with the death of the body. María is, in a way, the name of that which will never accede to exchange value. In allegorizing it as a failed love story, the author paradoxically endowed that sterility [ . . . ] with a truly national and fecund literary voice, one that created the conditions of a future Colombian canon.” (My emphasis)

<sup>98</sup> See Derrida, Jacques. *La grammatologie*. Paris: Minuit, 2005. (149-202) The pertinent passage is the famous ‘writing scene’ of the Nambikwara tribe described by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the chapter titled ‘The Writing Lesson’ in his *Tristes Tropiques*, to critique the ‘phonologist’ prejudice that inflects Lévi-Strauss’ ethnographic conveyance of the whole scene, significantly at the moment when he laments the loss of the edenic ‘purity’ of a civilization

slate, an empty, always already existing space of nothing, a constitutive absence, therefore his *emptiness* (vacío), his *untouched purity* (pureza sin tocar), *particularly from words*, comes already traversed with paradox by the fact that Alexis' consumptive rapacity seems to be the embodiment of the stultifying *white noise* attributable to global Capitalism itself. Fernando's desire for Alexis seems therefore to be subtended by the fantasy of an aesthetic clearing, whose function in the narration is to disappear as it is narrated. Within that logic, Fernando's search for silence can be conceived of as the dialectical correlate of Alexis' addiction to noise: to the young boy's compulsion to surrender himself in a consumptive frenzy to all the inundation of senses that can be gathered from the very real of a global post-modern – from trademark clothing through stereos, satellite antennas and TV cartoons to video games-, corresponds Fernando's desperate attempts "to hear the silence." Ultimately, the aporetic correspondence between the indistinguishable excremental white noise of a post-modern Third World city and this sound of silence becomes one of the most powerful ideologemes of the novel. (5) The absence of an

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previously unsoiled by phonographic writing, due to its contact with Western civilizations, while ignoring the fact jotting lines on a surface or grunting noises is what language is at its most material. Recall that Derrida revisits this scene, to make the point that, what the lines the Nambikwara were making on the ground and utensils, and around which a whole system of hierarchies began to organize the relations among the members of the tribe, was, against Claud-Lévi Strauss's own assessment, what writing *actually* consists of: "[ . . . ] il est difficile d'imaginer que l'accès à la possibilité des tracés routiers ne soit pas en même temps accès à l'écriture." (158) Most importantly Derrida proposes that this scene stages the birth of writing as it displays the moment of indiscernibility between empirical and symbolic violence- of a "violence originaire d'un langage qui est toujours déjà une écriture [archi scripture]": "Mais en radicalisant ce thème, en cessant de considérer cette violence comme *dérivée* au regard d'une parole naturellement innocente, on fait virer tout le sens d'une proposition- l'unité de la violence et de l'écriture- qu'il faut donc se garder d'abstraire et d'isoler." (156) " Comment refuser la pratique de l'écriture en general à une société capable d'oblitérer le propre, c'est à dire à une société violente? Car l'écriture, oblitération du propre classé dans le jeu de la différence, est la violence originaire elle-même: pure impossibilité du 'point vocatif,' impossible pureté du point de vocation." (162) Quite interestingly, the modern history of this concept stems at least as far back as S. Freud's use of the 'mystic writing pad,' to illustrate his topological model of memory and; also, it is linked to the lacanian *trait unaire*, its relation to the proper name, and with what Lacan, recurring to Heidegger's use of the grapheme *Being*. Furthermore, while Lévi-Strauss bemoans the lost virginity of the forest when he distinguishes a telegraph cable crossing the sky, Derrida stresses that the telegraph cable retroactively activated the imaginary virginity of the forest as always already lost. See also Freud, Sigmund. "A Note Upon The 'Mystical Writing Pad'", in *General Psychological Theory*, Chapter XIII, 1925. See also, Derrida, Jacques & Jeffrey Mehlman. "Freud and the Scene of Writing," *French Freud: Structural Studies in Psychoanalysis* (1972), No. 48, 74-117. For a full account of the Nambikwara 'writing lesson,' see Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Tristes Tropiques*. Paris: Plon, 2005. (346-360).

interdicting agent to that love relation; that is, love, by its very means of consummation, is its very prohibition. Again, the assassination of Alexis is recodified and subsequently reinscribed within a logics of class abstraction and aesthetic invagination, since Wilmar's body comes to occupy Alexis' within the context of a succession of vendettas that the author conveys as ultimately senseless and impossible to fathom. As such, it is only legible as a *deus ex machina*, a gift of death coming from an incomprehensible beyond, just as in *María*, death also comes in the guise of an untimely *deus ex machina*. This in turn brings about (6) the consolidation of a national(ist) discourse of violence and social/racial exclusion by the enactment and eventual frustration of that love and, (7) most importantly, the insertion into, and eventual confusion with, the reality the novel wants to describe, in a process Avelar explains, recurring to the structuralist paradox of infinite regression, or what Derrida, among others, termed a *mise en abîme*.<sup>99</sup>

It is not my intention in this chapter to discuss each of these aspects at full length; all of them have in their due time been the object of lucid and exhaustive analyses. What constitutes by now a respectable amount of critical work has already accumulated around the possible political

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<sup>99</sup> Avelar, *The Letter*, 86, 88-89, 132-133. Invoking Julio Ramos's analysis of José Martí's *Nuestra America*, where he defines a classic as a "text whose conditions of production have become effaced in the process of its canonization and the passage of time" (*Divergent*, 252), Avelar pronounces that "*María* begins to be confused with the reality that it presumably describes. Therefore, to an ample sector of readers, 'sentimental, colorful, romantic, harmonious' are not simply rhetorical figures found in Isaac's work, but rather ontological attributes of the Cauca itself. Most interpretations that attempt to trace *María* back to its historical, cultural soil struggle against the same paradox: They refer to a history and a culture that have been considerably shaped by the novel's fabulation itself." Again one can find the same preoccupation in González Echevarría when, speaking of Rómulo Gallegos *La vorágine*, another foundational fiction, the author finds the same structural paradox. For a more detailed account, see González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative*. Jonathan Culler further clarifies this concept, by putting in dialogue within the broader framework of the to what he calls 'the paradox of structure and event,' namely, the impossibility of determining the order of causation between reality (event) and and: [. . .] When we begin to look at the events which are said to determine structures, we find that every event is itself already determined and made possible by prior structures. The possibility of meaning something by an utterance is already inscribed in the structure of language. The structures themselves are always products, but however far back we try to push, even when we try to imagine the 'birth' of language and describe an originary event that might have produced the first structure, we discover that we must assume prior organization, prior differentiation." Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 95-96.

meanings and ideological implications concerning Vallejo's rhetorical and narrative maneuvers that make it virtually impossible to situate him in the just place along the spectrum of the enemy/friend (Right/Left) distinction. Moreover, I want to distance myself equally from the scene of condemnation and commendation that has so often been staged around the author's public persona, which in my view is unduly over-invested in settling for good the question about his supposed fascist tendencies.<sup>100</sup> This approach seems to take too literally (too naïvely) the author's obstinacy in writing only in the grammatical first person.<sup>101</sup> The opposite position can also be equally distracting. The criticism which wagers its arguments on the premise that Vallejo's narrative only *seems to be* fascist; that, within the multi-polar framework of advanced global Capital, the protocols of reading that try to encase him within a fixed set of binaries is altogether obsolete and therefore insufficient to account for a textual reality that reflects a state of things where the ideological camps inherited from the Cold War rhetoric are no more; and that he is more like an invisible puppet-master who stages a spectacle, a farce, for the scandal and delight, of his perplexed audiences. This reading seems to attribute too much intentionality (and knowledge) to the author's agenda, and it therefore falls into the phenomenological trap of finding the 'secret' new aesthetic and political outside heralded beneath the layers of the white noise of a globalized textuality. To my view, both sides of this antinomy- Right/Left,

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<sup>100</sup> See in that regard, María Mercedes Jaramillo, Eduardo Pineda Botero, Gustavo Álvarez Gardeazábal, y Jurado Valencia, who in more or less similar terms condemn Vallejo's work for its 'apology of violence' (Murillo). For a more complete bibliography and comments, see Serra, Ana. "La escritura de la violencia: *La virgen de los Sicarios*, de Fernando Vallejo, testimonio paródico y discurso Nietzscheano," *Chasqui*, Nov 2003; 32, 2. 65. For a critique of Vallejo's novel as representing a sort of exclusionary violence along gender and class distinction, see Polit-Dueñas, Gabriela. "Sicarios, Delirantes y los efectos del narcotráfico en la literatura colombiana." *Hispanic Review* (spring 2006). 119-136. On the side of a more or less direct apology of Vallejo's work as a demolishing parody of Colombian reality, see the following: Camacho-Delgado, José Manuel. "El narcotremendismo literario de Fernando Vallejo: La religión de la violencia en *La virgen de los sicarios*," *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, Año 32, No. 63/64 (2006). 227-248; Suárez, Juana. "'En átomos volando': Transformaciones de la iconografía patriótica en la producción cultural contemporánea Colombiana," *Revista Iberoamericana*, Vol. LXXIV, Núm. 223, Abril-Junio 2008. 405-422.; Santos, Lidia. "Entre Dios y los sicarios: las 'nuevas guerras' en la narrativa contemporánea de Colombia y Brasil," *Revista Iberoamericana*, Vol. LXXIV, Núm. 223, Abril-Junio 2008. 559-571.

<sup>101</sup> Serra.

surface/depth- inadvertently replicate the very division of the *letrado* (Ariel vs. Caliban)<sup>102</sup> that I intend to lay bare in my analysis of the relationship that Fernando entertains with Alexis.<sup>103</sup> I rather want to direct the reader's attention to the possible allegorical/historical meanings of this farce, when viewed from the standpoint of the repetitive structure that these intersections bring to light. If one posits, at least as a hypothetical possibility, cultural production as 'the manifest content' of a historical dream-work, and politics as its 'latent thought,' then what would be the 'unconscious wish' that mediates between the first and the second?<sup>104</sup> My fundamental premise is that the specter of these knots,<sup>105</sup> which resuscitate the catachrestic legacy of a literary discourse on the non-existing nation that the novels by Carrasquilla and Isaacs canonized in the Colombian literary institution almost two hundred years ago, come from the ruins of a past to haunt a contemporary tradition of the Colombian novel that flourished in the context of a lingering (*undead*), low intensity civil war that was never fully recognized as such, and that has been largely rendered invisible in its systematic criminalization (at least in the official rhetoric of the

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<sup>102</sup> The ideological deadlock whose mechanisms I am trying to expose here, has been otherwise articulated as the opposition between the Ariel and Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. For a full historical account of how the trope of the savage cannibal embodied in Caliban was created, emerged from within the tradition of the modern lettered man in Latin America and the Caribbean, see Jáuregui, Carlos. *Canibalia: Canibalismo, Calibanismo, Antropofagia Cultural y Consumo en Latinoamérica*.

<sup>103</sup> See Lacan, Jacques. *El Seminario IV: La relación de objeto*. Trad. Enric Berenguer. Paidós: Barcelona, 1994. At a purely psychoanalytic level, this very division is captured succinctly by Lacan in his seminar on object relations, when he explains the difference between what he calls the 'monogamous ideal' in the female, as opposed to the 'polygamous impulse' in the male, that is, how the position 'woman' and the position 'male' entertain an altogether different relationship with respect to the phallus, should be understood in terms of a co-relational inversion in the *logical sequence* that ensues in overcoming the dialectics between the Oedipus and the castration complex in the process of attaining subjectivity. The surmounting of the Oedipus complex in the human male entails the entrance in the symbolic order of the function of the real father, whose intervention provides the child with the capacity to overcome the Oedipus complex. The result of this overcoming, in which the boy surrenders the fantasy of (being) the phallus, in exchange of a future promise that he will have it in the symbolic, is, on the one hand, castration, and on the other, the Super Ego, or the Law. In the boy, the Oedipus complex is succeeded by the Super Ego: "The end of the Oedipus complex is correlative of the instauration of the law as repressed in the unconscious, but permanent. Only thus, there is something that responds in the symbolic." On the contrary, the subjective function 'female' entails the surmounting of the castration complex, but only *through* the entrance into the Oedipus complex. (205) (My translation.)

<sup>104</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *Interpretación de los sueños*. For an explanation of the relation of the symptom in Marx and Freud, see Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*.

<sup>105</sup> That which necessarily had to remain un-symbolized, in any gesture of overcoming the inconsistencies and contradictions of Colombian society, in order for it to be able to project itself as an imaginary whole.



nation's successive governments).<sup>106</sup> My intention is to position my reading in a parallax relation with respect to these binary oppositions- and ultimately with respect to the binary culture/politics proper. Most importantly, what I find lacking in all these readings is a serious consideration of how the iconoclastic language that some critics have celebrated in the author- as representing a demolishing, affirmative Nietzschean discourse that does not leave anything standing- bespeaks the repetition of the cultural symptom of the Colombian nation, in which the true form of the love idyll of the XIX century novel returns once more to 'haunt' the embodiments of that which was foreclosed.<sup>107</sup> The parallel that Fernández L'Hoeste has established between Dante Allighieri's Italy, as it is portrayed in the *Divine Comedy*, and Vallejo's novel is interesting to note in this context, since this comparison reflects the paradigm by virtue of which the problem that plays out in the relationship between cultural production and the failure of the modern project of national unification in Colombia (and by extension all of Latin America) is ultimately depicted as describing a *lineal* and *diachronic* one- the implicit message seems to be, echoing, by the by, Gabriel García Márquez's message in his address to the Swedish Nobel Academy- that Colombia *still* finds itself in a feudal, pre-modern national infancy.<sup>108</sup> By eliding the *transnational*, global context of Capitalism from the phenomenon of nation forming- mercantile, in the case of Renaissance Italy; finance, in the case of Colombia-, L'Hoeste's analysis limits his scope within the closed bounds of the imagined community he nonetheless recognizes as attaining its maximum state of being only in its periodic crises.<sup>109</sup> Consequently, he implicitly

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<sup>106</sup> For an account of the history of these cycles of violence, the events that punctuated their respective closures, and its relation to economic development in Colombia, see Palacios, Marco. *Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia, 1875-2002*.

<sup>107</sup> In that regard, see Suárez, Juana, *En Átomos Volando*, Note 23.

<sup>108</sup> Even if this structural aspect between culture and politics is without doubt hinted at, for example: "Este fenómeno parece confirmar la dinámica del desastre nacional, según el cual, a medida que el país oficial sufre los embates de la desintegración, el país cultural revive." Fernández-L'Hoeste, Héctor D. "La Virgen de los Sicarios o las visiones dantescas de Fernando Vallejo," *Hispania*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (Dec., 2000). 757-767.

<sup>109</sup> Francisco Ortega also notes this complicity between national history and fiction, although he fails to give it its



locates the symptom of the national failure within a kind of ‘formative reaction’ (the Sovereign State?): the cultural boom as an aftereffect of the political failure, and this happens in a sort of geopolitical vacuum. This interpretation does not allow us to clarify in its just measure the dialectical and iterative character that subtends the alternation between cultural boom and national failure, because it excludes the ways in which that alternation can sustain, in turn, a subterranean dialectics with respect to the forms and contents that in a given historical juncture have constituted the specific protocols of differentiation that effectively allow for a discernment between the cultural and the national, that is, as the effect of the State as the paradoxical place of legal and physical violence, on the one hand, and a reaction to the leveling forces of global Capital, on the other. To understand in its full historical dimension the meaning of violence in Colombia, and its relation with the dialectical overlay between cultural production and the struggle for political hegemony, one has to learn to see this dimension from the structural synchronicity that opens up an epochal hiatus between its cultural and political moments, and this within the global, transnational context that Capitalism established, as the exceptional nomadic instance that stands as the enabling condition for the modern Nation State. What does not work in the Colombian Nation, is precisely the State, whose division the novel nonetheless sutures, by re-enacting, in fiction, this division. Without this context, the question of modern nationhood, and its co-implication with Colombian novelistic tradition, becomes superfluous. Such structural synchronicity bespeaks a morbid and homicidal repetition of the Same, where the Same is neither the form nor the content of what ‘once’ was, but the form of that which in an anterior logical moment was perceived to be the specific content of another form, which now presents itself with the insidiousness of the empty form of *that* specific content. What Karatani

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full allegorical reading. See, Ortega, Francisco. “Sin orden ni final: escritura y desastre. Representación de la Violencia en Colombia,” *Revista Iberoamericana*, Vol. LXXIV, Núm. 223, Abril-Junio. 2008. 361-378.

says with respect to repetition- that which repeats itself over history is the ‘mythical,’ ‘a-historical’ knot, the structure, which imparts the temporal appearance to the geopolitical becoming of nations-, is very true.<sup>110</sup> But the formal character of such repetition requires further elaboration, because the concrete predicates of such repetition, *as repetition*, are by their very nature symbolically inattributable, inasmuch as such attribution always finds itself ‘in excess’ or ‘in lack’ with respect to form. This is, of course, equivalent to saying that the structure does not pre-exist its contents, that it is always the retroactive effect, a function, of this mythical (because with-out origin) folding into which the national subject, and the community, imaginarily enters into the full interiority of its ‘proper’ domain. It is, therefore a specter that remains always to-come, as a menace, from a future that returns from a past- a past future. That we name this structuring function the State, in this case, is only valid to the extent that, as a structuring principle, it remains invisible, illegible, and spectral. As such, this structure- the form that delimits the edges that separate the national ‘outside’ from its ‘inside’ -, it is literally spectral, the specter of that which did not, could not have form, because it constituted, through its exclusion, that particular form of the individual or national interiority *as* subject. Pablo Dabove’s analysis of the functional role that the mythical trope of the *bandit* had in the constitution of the national tales in late nineteenth century Latin America, proves without a shadow of doubt that this immunological reaction is, for one thing, the mechanism at the heart of the internal displacements perpetrated by the State (the dichotomy between urban and rural spaces, but that re-creates itself in the division between *écriture* and *langue*) that *every* modern nation has put in practice to constitute itself.<sup>111</sup> We only give it substance and realize it, this communitarian form,

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<sup>110</sup> Karatani, *History and Repetition, Introduction*, vii-xiii. In the last analysis, the distinction between form and content is also illusory.

<sup>111</sup> For a more complete analysis of the treatment of the theme of external and internal displacements in Colombian literary production, see Giraldo Luz Mary. “Narradores Colombianos y escrituras del desplazamiento. Indicios y

here and there, retroactively, by performing its embodiments, in obsessive rituals where the phantasmal invocation of that outside is only *underwritten*, in order to make its subsequent effacements/exorcisms, its multiple *overwritings*, possible.<sup>112</sup> Subjective and objective human time, their periodic character, are nothing but the spectral effect of this repetition compulsion, and as such they find in their spacing a moment when they become undistinguishable.

Singularly, what *La Virgen* allegorizes is, in the end, the repetition of this lack of correspondence. Ultimately, what *la Virgen de los Sicarios* narrates is the obsessive re-enactment of the Colombian nation as a second moment of erasure of the antagonisms that did not find their re-accommodation within the ideological ‘inside’ of the national project- that which *still* exceeds from within the ‘imaginary community’- both temporally and geographically- upon which the obsessive national tale will have been built, that is to say, the State.

First, I consider it necessary to elaborate a little further on some of the points highlighted above, but only to the extent that this discussion will help to illustrate better, from the viewpoint of the contemporary Colombian cultural scene in its international insertion, the ideological paradox by virtue of which the Márquez/Vallejo pair are the last examples of a subjectivity trapped within the specters of the politico-theological foundations of the modern nation. My ultimate aim is nonetheless to explain Colombian literary tradition as a good ‘*cas de pensée*’ to illustrate how at either side of the political struggle between the Latin American lettered class- the ideologues of the modern State and the left-wing intellectuals, to use Avelar’s distinction-

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pertinencias en una historia social de la literature,” *Revista Iberoamericana*, Vol. 74, Núm. 223, Abril-Junio 2008. 423-439. For a cogent reassessment of Mao Zedong’s *Great Leap Forward* and *Cultural Revolution*, see Badiou, Alain. *The Communist Hypothesis*. See also, Dabove, Pablo. *Nightmares of the Lettered City*.

<sup>112</sup> In a reading of the Cuban scene in the key of bio-political thought- in chapters V and VI- I will try to show that the form/content binary to which the debate around the ideological paradox has been reduced, is the symptom (or the metaphor, if I may) of the inability of modern political thought to come to terms with its corporeal ‘blind spot’ (the theologico-political core).

can only be fully understood as a perennial conversation, a dialogue in parallax, between two opposing, yet mutually presupposing ideological formations around the same object, which is the State.

Since the *inscription* of Latin American nations into the global scene of inter-nations has been narrated as a love story, I would like to start with a brief comment on the affective dialectics obtaining in the love idyll that the novel *represents*. There is a syncopated fluctuation that seems to determine the affective rhythm of the story until its very conclusion, since what defines the economy of *La virgen de los sicarios* is the constant alternation, and in the very last instance an overlapping, between public (political) and private spaces. Within this alternation, there is a point of affective articulation that only finds its support on, as well as it is constitutive of a shift from the subterfuges of a narrative on the social, cultural and political (not so distant) past of Colombia, towards the aesthetic realm where the narrator seems to indulge in a sort of compensatory gratification. More specifically, there are numerous instances in the story where a diatribe on Colombia's dismal situation metamorphoses into an effusive commentary on the narrator's passionate love for the young *sicario*. As has been shown, the text elaborates the vignettes on the daily life of the *comunas* (slums) using the rhetoric of love and cordiality. Yet, this very cordiality comes already infused with a charge of its opposite affect in the form of a nostalgic hate, where the antagonism is literally described in terms of a matrimony, and whose representation correspondingly fulfills the aesthetic fantasies of *a surrealist Parisian playwright*. This alternation is projected in the narration as a city already divided in two:

We could say, just to simplify things, that under the one name of Medellín there are two cities: the timeless one below, in the valley; and the one above in the mountains, ringing it. It's the Judas kiss. Those surrounding shanty towns built on the mountainsides are the

*comunas*, the spark and the kindling that keep the fires of the killing alight. The city below never goes up to the city above, but vice versa, sure: those from above come down, to prowl around, to steal, to stick people up, to murder. The ones who are still alive come down, I should say, because the majority of them up there, up there so very close to the clouds and to heaven, are killed before they can make it down to do their own killing. [. . .] In the *comunas* there's a tit for tat war going on, *barrio* against *barrio*, block against block, gang against gang. It's total war, the 'all against all' kind my friend the playwright Adamov envisioned. (Vallejo, 88-89)

The narrator describes Medellín as a city divided *from within*, entwined in an *embrace* of hate, arguably the symbol of cordiality if ever there was one, which nevertheless contracts the figure of a *betrayal*.<sup>113</sup> There is a *fire*, again an ambiguous emblem, since it can mean both amatory passion and hate, that binds these two realms, which also was once the *spark* that turned Colombian landscape into a slaughterhouse. Most of the slum dwellers die 'very near to the clouds and sky,' the emphasis being that it is precisely 'right there,' so *high up*, where they die, in all probability an invocation of a biblical reference destined precisely to screen out their 'infernal' death, there where the signifier 'angel' lingers in the religious imaginary of a Western reader. This war was 'married' long ago (*una guerra casada*), a probable reference to the argot proper to the (mostly peasant) activity of cockfighting, where a match between two fighting cocks is accordingly set up, arranged, therefore 'married,' by their owners, (*una pelea casada*); the animals are literally 'married' for the fight, in the same way that in the times of *María*, marriages were arranged (which more often than not ended up with the death of one, if not both animals).

Within this compensatory logic, the overflow of affect for the young assassin reaches a point of near absolute dialectic correspondence with the narrator's outbursts of love/hate for the

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<sup>113</sup> Later the author remarks that the Medellín of the value becomes the Medallo of the mountains.

motherland.<sup>114</sup> In the narcissistic yet asymmetrical game of mirrors that defines every love relation, Alexis is the narrator himself, or at least as Fernando sees himself through the historical disaster of Medellín and its surrounding *comunas*, even if only Alexis in turn has to pay the price by standing for Colombian reality entire:

From those levels in the *comunas* you can make out Medellín. And it's truly beautiful. From above or from below, from one side or from the other, like my baby boy Alexis. From wherever you look. [ . . . ] (Vallejo, 62) Incomparably green were my baby boy's eyes, of a miraculous green that not even the purest emeralds in Colombia, those they call 'drop of oil,' will ever match. (Vallejo, 85)

The recurrence of a nostalgic over-sentimentalization (that is, in the form of Colombia as an already lost paradise, or alternatively, the narrator's childhood) alternates with an equally recurrent eulogy to Alexis' youth and mortal beauty (a eulogy that sometimes acquires almost elegiac undertones, given the narrator's foreboding of the young assassin's impending death, as if Alexis had become, by virtue of Fernando's own objectivation, a dead entity, a dummy whose automatisms are the perfect counterpart to Fernando's touristic/pedagogic meanderings through the city streets, in which he entreats his readers to 'take note' of his explanations). If *María* partakes of a type of "Rousseau-Chateaubriandian Romanticism", which "allows fiction to take a certain distance from the immediate turbulence of state and political wars",<sup>115</sup> while still preserving some kind of folkloric taste, in *La Virgen de los Sicarios* this romantic *costumbrismo* is already embedded in a sort of flattening folklore that often adopts the rhetoric of unconcealed touristic marketing.<sup>116</sup> As Hector Hoyos has so acutely noted, Fernando more often than not

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<sup>114</sup> In Spanish, the ambiguity in the term is significant- "la madre patria", or literally, something like the mother fatherland.

<sup>115</sup> Avelar, 135.

<sup>116</sup> In other words, the narrator's implied reader is a foreigner depicted as a tourist. Fernando's narration can effectively be conceived of as embodying that of a ghostly tourist guide, offering to the gaze of its visitors Medellín's many amenities and curiosities. For more on this vein, see, Herrero-Olaizola. Alejandro. "Se vende

assumes this voice, touring his companions through a space that is incessantly figured as interchangeably evocative, erotic, ethereal, phantasmal, as much as it is real:

At dusk, our mountains look so sharp, so well defined, that you'd think a child had snipped them out of a photo from *El Colombiano* with scissors (30) [ . . . ] Of all the *comunas* of Medellín the north-west one is the most exciting. I don't know why, but I've got the idea into my head. Maybe because the handsomest of hit-men are from there, I reckon. (Vallejo, 58)

Even if this affective surplus largely exceeds the space of their romance, hovering in its very ambivalence over the entire story, the important point is that it is ultimately impossible- and maybe even misleading- to determine whether it originates 'there' (in Fernando's infatuation with Alexis) or if it is rather the result of the metaphoric transposition of a fundamental inconsistency in the narrator's symbolic order, that is, of an inconsistency that remains impossible to incorporate into the semantic landscape that constitutes the public persona of the narrator. In other words, whether an affect that originates as a symptom pertaining to the narrator's discourse on the Colombian situation, it is so only in a second time and retrospectively, by virtue of a ruse of supplemental signification, symptomatized/metaphorized in the register of a love story. To complicate matters, maybe even a third option is still possible: perhaps this excessive affect is essentially inattributable and constitutive of the narrator's subjectivity *as* a specifically Colombian subject, and it later acquires its signification (alternatively as public rant or erotic effusion) as the effect of a mechanism of future anteriority at work in the text. In this sense, Alexis' 'feminization' is telltale: that which Fernando's hate cannot accommodate comes to be inscribed in the narrative of a love story; the love which

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Colombia, un país de delirio: El Mercado literario global y la narrativa colombiana reciente" *SYMPOSIUM*, Spring 2007. 43-56.

Alexis' body cannot accommodate translates into the bullets that exterminate Colombian society. This libidinal displacement subtly functions to re-accommodate a classical motive of both nineteenth century *costumbrista* and Romantic fiction within an urban escatography that bears the signs of a post-apocalyptic, surrealist, hallucinatory reality. Not only is Alexis *qua* Colombian Nation gendered as Woman- he is not much more than the fluid, virginal 'receptacle,' the *chôra* of Fernando's symbolic incisions-, and not only is Alexis/Wilmar Fernando's fixed object of erotic and aesthetic contemplation, but his position bears the countersignature of a pervasive Marianism that participates in the economy of the whole book/city, as it stands for a demand, and therefore a question beyond any possible answer, for which Fernando inevitably occupies the ambiguous position of an omnipotent Mother, addressed to an all-embracing, all forgiving mercy that partakes of a particularly Christian understanding of justice, the gift, and responsibility, or rather, of a self-destructive conception of responsibility within Christianity.<sup>117</sup>

This strange association between a young boy who in his symbolic and corporeal interchangeability stands for a demand imposed as a given by a Roman Catholic ideology of consolation and justice, and Fernando's obsession with a God whose inexistence he so insistently affirms, invites some pondering on whether Fernando himself, contrary to other readings, might not be enacting the attributes of this Marianic culture in the story. My point here is that the protagonist, in all his maternal liberalities towards Alexis and Wilmar, which nonetheless is there to maintain for himself the reserve of a secret calculation, is the obscene side of the Virgin of the Assassins; put otherwise, that this secret is the 'auratic' wager of the novel's cultural meaning, of a meaning that its narrative conveys as the truth of Colombia. This mutual implication between a calculated mercy (*merces*) and an unconditional violence that situates itself in the abolishing of

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<sup>117</sup> Derrida, *Donner la mort*.



any condition, subtends the mercenary logic that unfolds in the novel.<sup>118</sup> What the novel stages in this sense is the return of this mercenary logic as the foundational force of the Colombian nation.

The ubiquitous *vallenato* song *La gota fría* (*Cold Sweat*, most recently interpreted by international popular icon Carlos Vives), which constantly plays during Fernando's flanêurisms<sup>119</sup>- probably serves to condense an otherwise disparate array of metonymical bifurcations- cordiality, love, politics, bullets/language, Marianic Catholicism, the gift, calculation, monetary transaction, death, forgetfulness:

What is this *vallenato* saying, the one I hear everywhere since I got back, at breakfast, lunch, dinner time, in the taxi, in my house, in your house, on the bus, on TV? It says, 'He pops me, or I pop him and then the shootout's over.' Which, translated into common parlance, means that he kills me or I kill him because, with the hatred we have for each other, there isn't room for the both of us on this tiny planet. So that's it, then? That's why Colombia was so enthusiastic about singing it, because it really struck a chord. There was nothing noteworthy about the lyrics, the scraping sound was all I heard. For the remainder of the year, for what's left of it till New Year, Colombia will go on partying, merrily singing its song of hate. Then it'll be forgotten, like everything gets forgotten. (Vallejo, 67-68)

It is as if the boy's powerful erotic allure depended on the constant danger that Fernando's solipsistic language collapsed and imploded into silence, just as much as Fernando's highly eroticized political tirades (violence produces in him a "kind of sexual nervous

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<sup>118</sup> In this regard, it is interesting to mention Marx's words in the section of the *Grundrisse* titled *On Wages*: "The first form in which wages make their general appearance -- military pay [*Sold*], which arises with the decline and fall of national armies and of citizens' militias. First, the citizens themselves are paid as soldiers. Soon after that, their place is taken by mercenaries who have ceased to be citizens." Marx. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*.

<sup>119</sup> Interestingly, a music genre mainly originating on the valley and the lowlands that moved along with the drug trafficking culture to the Caribbean coast and to the mountains to gradually displace the (afterwards mostly) Andean *cumbia*. See to this effect, Marre, Jeremy. *Shotguns and Accordions: Music of the Marijuana Regions of Colombia*, for an ethno-musicological account of how the *vallenato* displaced the *cumbia*, and how this displacement was the result of the establishment of the drug culture in Colombia.

excitation”<sup>120</sup>), depended for an effect of coherence on these highly aestheticized excursions into the erotic. Not too much unlike Márquez’s *Delgadina* in *Memory of My Sad Whores*, Alexis becomes for him, under the pretext of love, a purely instrumental prop for the totalizing desire of the protagonist/author, a killing machine in which his words are literally translated to bullets- “the bullets to recharge his gun I bought to him, for whom I live”-<sup>121</sup> The difference between *Delgadina* and Alexis probably lies in the function they occupy in the respective texts, but both constitute an empty signifier, both devoid of a past, of a life of their own- they are both, in their own way, a knotting and a reflection of the protagonist’s deadly automatisms. Just as *Delgadina*’s existence is only justified by the old man’s desire to prolong his only half avowed illusions of living a hundred more years (of political solitude), a prolonging that depends on her mortal fixity, so is Alexis’ random voyage toward his own death in the streets of Medellín related to the author’s desperate, and also half avowed desire to buy more time for himself.

The instances of what sociologists would call a ‘dissociative language’ are crucial to mention, particularly in connection with this self-division, since these displacements are ultimately the way in which this violence *returns*, in the language of its writer, as the true message, in its inverted form, in a narrative that literally mirrors the language of nineteenth century founding romances. In the author’s words, “ they do not decline the verb ‘to kill,’ they practice its synonyms,” just as the narrator declares himself a grammarian, asserting his authority over the jargon of the urbanized peasantry, and hinting perhaps at a lingering rivalry over the monopoly of linguistic property between Medellín and Bogotá. [“Illustrious grammarian murdered by his Guardian Angel. After that, thinking it over, I told myself that *the two*

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<sup>120</sup> Vallejo, 83.

<sup>121</sup> Vallejo, 42.

*periodicals of Medellín were serious, not like the sensasionalist fougletins from Bogotá.”*<sup>122</sup>] A *tombo* is a policeman, perhaps alluding to a useless but inconvenient obstacle you happen occasionally to stumble against; “to be in love” (*estar enamorado*) with someone means, in the language of the *comunas*, to want to kill someone, in a brutal equivalence that brings in the most direct way possible the truth of the devouring violence that subtends any erotic/romantic relationship; a corpse is called “the dummy” (*el muñeco*), turning the killing of someone into an entertaining cartoonlike scene, etc.<sup>123</sup>

The frequent claims by the author that he can only speak in the first person because he can only write about things that he has experienced, Vallejo’s constant claims that he is “the truth of Colombia” – are also worthy of mention here.<sup>124</sup> As usually happens in such cases, the speaker says more truth than he/she intended, if they are read from a position of a Hegelian self-relating negativity of sorts, so that Fernando’s self-conscious message can be understood *literally*: my narration (the text that is myself) *is* the truth of Colombia, not in the mere sense that the narration positively represents an accurate picture of Colombian reality as absurd and lacking of any meaning or solution, but that it stands at the very crossroads of all the deadlocks and contradictions that constitute it as ontologically lacking. The allegorical nature of this discourse, from which a singular constellation between sense, consumption, enjoyment and fiction emerges,

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<sup>122</sup> Vallejo, *La virgen*, 28, 111. (My emphasis)

<sup>123</sup> . . . a family feud is called ‘a snake’ (*una culebra*), perhaps in reference to the long string of corpses that it leaves behind, where the ‘tail’ and the ‘head’ are often difficult to distinguish; a “prayed bullet” (*bala rezada*) is a bullet heated on a pot and sprinkled with holy water accompanied with some prayers, imparting an afro-catholic religious aura to the act of killing; a gunshot is called un *frutazo*, perhaps in reference to an innocuous mock war where ammunitions are just fruits; a *tote* is a revolver, literally a dead weight, a charm, that one carries around, arguably like a *totemic* demigod, and the one who wears it is conversely a saint, a king, or an exterminating angel, in clear reference to the ‘magic’ and absolute peace-making powers that the weapon has, capable of ‘settling’ any dispute; to kill someone can alternatively mean to ‘bless’ him with the cure of death, like drawing an ash cross on someone’s forehead, to ‘cure’ him from the sickness of life, or to just *cascarlo*, to crack him as you crack an egg; a man’s head is just a shell full of stuff, a *coconut* . . .

<sup>124</sup> Which is, by the way, the same defense that Márquez makes against the ‘absurd’ tales that he writes. Interestingly, this also brings echoes of Lacan’s formula for the subjectivized, self-relating symptom, “moi, c’est la vérité qui parle”.

becomes particularly urgent to elucidate. Where sense falters, and therefore the possibility of narrating a story is endangered by its own self-evacuating contradictions, it is where the love story between Fernando and Alexis reappears to suture the otherwise shaky and fragmentary pseudo-philosophical meditations on the senselessness of Colombian reality. The point I want to stress is that this alternation points to an ideological deadlock that is the one obtaining between two contending parties in Colombian history, and I would dare say between the Latin American Right and the Left (which frequently conceived programs of social justice in terms Christian love).

To the extent to which Vallejo's narration co-responds and re-enacts the same foundational deadlock, this *insistence* should be understood in the larger context of Colombian literary tradition. Just as in Isaacs' novel the impasses of political turmoil and social antagonisms are metaphorized/transposed from a public discourse into a private/intimist one, eventually rendering the first virtually invisible under the cloak of the latter, in the very moment where Fernando's invectives over Colombia's disastrous situation reach the point of their constitutive truth, this invective undergoes a trans-coding into the register of a love story.<sup>125</sup> But in this case just to overlap with each other, to form a strange palimpsest cast in the discourse of someone who posits himself as already being *outside, above and beyond*. This is the precise register in which one should understand Fernando's constant allusion to his liminal relation with the world he narrates. Of his *undeadness* he writes, as much as he is written, from the impossible enjoyment of that symptom, which is in turn Colombia's truth. This truth is nevertheless not where he declares it to be, but in the constant alternation of the opposed semantic fields that conform the body of the text, in the cultural product that is the book itself, considered as an

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<sup>125</sup> Avelar explains that *María* "is an intra-class novel, to which peasants, servants, and even middle classes do not accede other than as part of the landscape. Neither do we see political enmity, as the reduction of social otherness to mere local color puts in parenthesis the Colombian political struggle between liberals and conservatives."

economic atom, for the mystical 'outside' contained in this book already forms part of (or is effectively framed by) the circulation of goods in an order of things now become global, as the narrator himself writes, without intending to, of a regime that once was, since the very beginnings of Colombia as an independent nation, part of the problem.

This sovereign State, is the truth that needed to remain repressed, so that a narrative on a Colombian nation would have taken place. It returns in Vallejo's novel in the form of the message, the 'open letter,' to use Hoyos' felicitous opening words, that is the text. Nevertheless, instead of simply instituting a touristic monologue with an absent reader/tourist, I would add that the untimely present narrated in the novel be read as a dialogue taking place between the two foundational times of the nation. In this key, this letter comes from the future to haunt the past, very much like Ricardo Piglia's thesis in *Respiración Artificial*, in which a message comes from the past to haunt the future. Conversely, it can be said that *La virgen de los sicarios* returns to *María* its long overdue truth, from the future. This would require envisioning Colombian history from the viewpoint of a transcendental, historical subject that is still trapped within the deadly automatisms of a pleasure principle that the specters of resentment (the snake, in the parlance of the *Sicarios*) only succeed in fueling: this *undead* past is, in a way, still happening *now* (to learn to recognize, from the standpoint of a parallax relation between the past and the future, the same structure returning, under the guise of a singular content), and in order for what remains to come to be opened up as an *actual* possibility, what needs to be done is to hear the novel's message as coming from a future that is, in other words, not so much a message of social inclusion (which in turn would create its concomitant exclusions), but a message perhaps closer to what Roberto

Esposito terms ‘No one’s Rose,’ quoting the poem by Paul Celan.<sup>127</sup> In *La Virgen*, it is the violence of the already divided city, whose emblem is the ubiquitous *vallenato*, that inundates the air with a story of a lingering hate between two men over a not so clear issue, that returns to haunt and eventually render (im)possible Fernando’s love for Alexis. The two characters’ love story is engulfed and undermined by the chaotic and murderous violence of the city, since it is the enabling agent of their relation, but it is also that very statist *invisibilization* of the political dimension, and its insistent return in that very invisibility, which depends on and concomitantly sustains their romance. The conditions of possibility for any coherent narrative about Colombia’s political reality seem to be based, both in Isaac’s romance and Vallejo’s *sicaresca*, on this displacement that entails, in the latter, a sort of dialectical inversion of the economy that determines the former’s sphere of meaning. Isaac’s *María* ciphers, dilutes and domesticates simmering antagonisms in nineteenth century Colombia, entombing them within the private discourse of affable intimacy. It is precisely this invisibility, as the insistent forgetting of this loss’s memory, the statist element (as exception) that is all too present to be ignored, in its timeless, yet untimely return. It can be said that this impossibility, like the love relation in the nineteenth century’s Latin American national romances, does not cease to (not) write itself in Fernando’s story. This specter incessantly returns in the novel, as the chaotic white noise of this violence that is the correlate of Alexis’ pure ‘emptiness’.

This assertion could be extended to the whole of Latin America, given *María*’s widespread reception as a national allegory).<sup>129</sup> In the presupposition that, in today’s Colombian

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<sup>127</sup> Esposito, *Communitas*, 7. “The community is not a mode of being, much less a ‘making’ of the individual subject. It isn’t the subject’s expansion or multiplication but its exposure to what interrupts the closing and turns it inside out: a dizziness, a syncope, a spasm in the continuity of the subject. The common ‘rose’ of its being ‘no subject.’ No-one’s rose [*Niemandrose*], or even beter, ‘no person’s rose’ [*rose de personne*] . . .”

<sup>129</sup> For example, Avelar refers to *María* as the “most Spanish American of all novels, an almost instantaneous classic with early representations in the school system, in painting, and in cinema.” *The Letter*, 133.

political landscape, it is no longer possible or at least pertinent to map a precise line of ideological struggle that would redefine the coordinates of a Colombian subjectivity, a line that once at least minimally defined Colombian political respiration, this narrative's triumphalist defeatism translates this division into a field of signification that does nothing more than insert itself into a marketable cultural niche for the consumption of fictions that sell Latin America's realities as fundamentally senseless, incapable of being accounted for, whose only solution is to clear the slate and start from zero, henceforth preempting any possibility of a readerly fiction that narrates the clearing of the slate itself.<sup>130</sup> This clearing, and its concomitant occultation (turning into a 'secret,' Alexis' 'pure emptiness') is precisely what has been happening since the very beginning of the Colombian nation.<sup>131</sup> The novel grounds its economy of meaning in the very gesture of finding a largely ineffable outside from this antagonism, but this fantasized outside is always already part of that antagonism, for it was always already *the* very foundational ruse of any political position taking, as it became, more than a hundred years ago, the canonical way of relating Colombian historical becoming, literally the ideological protocol the Colombian nation wrote to read itself.

The pertinence in mentioning these similarities in my discussion lies in the fact that whatever discussion could be instanced regarding some comparative points between Márquez and Vallejo, it should be framed within the historical discontinuity that the Boom signified in the

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<sup>130</sup> For a reading of the *sicaresque* genre as the conveyance of a complex urban world that is *ultimately impossible* to comprehend see, for example, Goodbody, Nicholas T. "La emergencia de Medellín: La complejidad, la violencia y la *différance* en *Rosario Tijeras* y *La Virgen de los Sicarios*," *Revista Iberoamericana*, Vol. LXXIV, Núm. 223, Abril-Junio 2008. 441-454. Cf., Kantaris, Geoffrey. "El cine urbano y la tercera violencia colombiana," *Revista Iberoamericana*, Vol. LXXIV, Núm. 223, Abril-Junio 2008, 455-470.

<sup>131</sup> Broadly, the one between the *liberales* and *conservadores*, or between the *gólgotas* and the *draconianos*- again, even Fernando nostalgically evokes the beauty of that ancient struggle, one with at least somewhat clearly defined ideological fences: "We passed through the Bombay of my infancy [ . . . ] and my memories started to blow towards me, gently, as a breeze of dew, refreshing, soothing [ . . . ] there, in the nights rioted by fireflies and butterflies [ . . . ] fired up by sugarcane rum and political passion, conservatives and liberals killed each other by machete for ideas. Which ideas, I never knew, but how wonderful!" Vallejo, *La virgen*, 113.

tradition of Latin American literature, in this case Colombian literature. To this, one can relate Avelar's words about this spectral remainder:

Radically different, the Freudian and the Marxian concepts of negation share the same *insistence*: What is negated is always and necessarily making possible negation itself. As you negate, a fundamental turned-around form of affirmation emerges. If one of Freud's most consistent axioms is that the unconscious knows no negation (what is negated is being fundamentally affirmed at another level), for Marx no true dialectics is possible unless the negative potential of any given antithesis is fully incorporated, fully preserved in the movement of the synthesis. Both in Freud and Marx one sees an incipient theory of the ghost as a component of the concept of negation. The process of negation, both in psychoanalysis and in Marxism, lets off specters, remainders that are not fully incorporated, and that invariably come back to haunt the act of negation itself.<sup>132</sup>

If one follows the notion that the Boom represented a radical break with the prevailing literary tradition in Latin America, then it is necessary to understand that chasm in the most Marxist/Lacanian of terms. What returned as the specter of that which was sublated/preserved in the Colombian Boom, and most particularly in Márquez, was precisely this remainder, whose effacement was also present, from *La Hojarasca*, precisely as its almost hermetic stylistic entombment in Márquez's fiction.<sup>133</sup> One can hardly deny that Magical Realism was codified in a

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<sup>132</sup> Avelar, *The Letter*, 138.

<sup>133</sup> In this sense, it is significant to mention the fact that violence as a theme is anything but new in the Colombian narrative tradition. Instead of periodizing Colombian political and literary history according to three different cycles of Violence (the Three Violences), one should learn to see these three different moments as being subsumed within the same Violence. This is the question that Gonzálo Sánchez poses: "How can the [Colombian] image [of a democratic model] be maintained when one considers that negotiations are taking place today in Colombia with what is generally considered the oldest guerrilla movement in Latin America? The question itself might well serve as the rationale for a study of the ideological mechanisms by which the true processes of the country's history have been concealed. What is immediately apparent in contrast to this established view of democracy is that Colombia has been a country of permanent and endemic warfare. The principal problem that must be faced, then, is to define the nature and the historical variations of this warfare" (789) Gonzálo-Sánchez, *La Violencia en Colombia*, See note . See Mena, Lucila Ines. "Bibliografía Anotada Sobre el Ciclo de la Violencia en la Literatura Colombiana," *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (1978). 95-107. For example: "*One Hundred Years of Solitude* is not an isolated phenomenon in Colombian literature. This novel is the result of a literary process that had started to evolve many years ago. This process searched to give literary reality to political violence. We can rightfully say that *A Hundred Years of Solitude* is, par excellence, the novel of Violence." (97-98) [My translation.].



highly stylized prose whose political under-text remained virtually invisible for the non-trained reader. The result was a total divorce between a magical reality with which the popular masses of Colombia could hardly identify themselves, and the day-to-day reality they were experiencing.

What I want to foreground with this observation is how the ‘dream-like’ character of Márquez’s narrative, in its relation to the ‘nightmarish’ universe of Vallejo’s escatographies should be understood under the light of their structural co-implication, rather than in their historical opposition. The affective entombment of an idyllic Colombia that never existed, into a domestic snapshot enshrined by a Catholic icon, and the concurrent emergence of the grammatical “I,” is the sign, the emblem of this implication.

#### IV. *The Love Story and the Double Structure of the Gift: The Lettered Man as a Two-Headed Monster*

There is a level of reading by virtue of which one can see in writings like this one, a mystical *beyond* from the appearance of a fascist discourse, an omniscient instance that, like God, can only see into the secret message of a secret knowledge, that is, by assuming an “aleph-like, [that is, ubiquitous] perspective.”<sup>134</sup> In my view, this interpretation keeps in reserve, as an open secret, the ruse that the priestly author displays, ostentatiously, in an exhibitionistic display, showing off, as it were, the truth, it could be argued, as a way to trick others into thinking that which he apparently hides.

To this reading, one should oppose the task of demystification that Derrida proposes, in a totally different, yet somewhat related context. That context is Charles Baudelaire’s *Pagan*

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<sup>134</sup> See Hoyos, Hector. *Gesturing Towards the Global: Latin American Literature at the Turn of the XXth Century*. Doctoral Thesis Dissertation, Cornell University, 2008.

*School*, in which the author attacks the neo-pagans of his time, those “false writers” who “can only see, love, and feel the beautiful, nothing but the beautiful”, who can only “see in nature but form and rhythm”, and for whom “philosophy will not appear but like an interesting game”<sup>135</sup>: La critique ou la polémique de *L'école païenne* aurait une vertu *démystificatrice*. Le mot n'est plus à la mode mais ne s'impose-t-il pas dans ce cas? Il s'agit de déplier l'hypocrisie mystagogique d'un secret [. . .]<sup>136</sup> Fernando's gesture is not too different from the one in another, yet similar text by Baudelaire, *The Counterfeit Coin*. As in Baudelaire's text, there is a mercenary logic at play, one which revolves around an unpayable debt that is, like an unforgivable deed, accruable on the very fact that it is paid against a gift that is nonetheless offered against a salary of death: For that is what the assassins are here for, to serve, like whores, and to be hired by those who can pay. They are the collectors of unpayable debts.<sup>137</sup>

In both cases, there is an offering of a false coin. Fernando's morbid enjoyment from the experience of death that the kid brings to him has the price of all the false gifts that he offers to the kid in the name of his love, and the reader is only obliged, almost to his own chagrin, to put himself in the same position as the first person narrator in Baudelaire's story, to whom the protagonist, the author of the story that occupies us, would give the same answer: “Oui, vous avez raison; il n'est pas de plaisir plus doux que de surprendre un homme en lui donnant plus qu'il espère.”<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> As quoted in *Donner la mort*, 151-152.

<sup>136</sup> Derrida, *Donner la mort*, 153. (“The critique or the polemic of *The Pagan School* would have a *démystifying* virtue. The word has become too fashionable but, is it not warranted in this case? It is about unraveling the mystagogic hypocrisy of a secret.”) [My translation.]

<sup>137</sup> Vallejo, *La virgen*, 103, 104.

<sup>138</sup> Baudelaire, Charles. *La fausse monnaie*. As appended in Derrida, Jacques. *Donner le temps: I. La Fausse Monnaie*. (“Yes, you are right; there is no sweeter pleasure than to surprise someone by giving him more than he expects.”) [My translation.]

As it is evident throughout the story, Alexis' only act of love is literally to embody Fernando's desire for extermination. In the perverse invisibility and impunity of a man representing a privileged class that refuses to acknowledge and address the desperate demand for an answer from the Other, an Other whose invisibility is rendered more desolating to the extent that the only answer to his/her demand is ciphered in the cynical gaze of monetary exchange, as if they knew, in their indulging self-sameness, what this other really wants, thus denying the impossibility that sustains that demand, the false gift of love is returned with the authentic gift of death in whose brutal authenticity literally goes the boys' lives.<sup>139</sup> Baudelaire's assertion that the purpose of love is to do evil comes here with a sinister resonance. To say that for the little kid to be alive amounts to the same as to be dead can be true, on the condition that one attributes a perfect, absurd interchangeability among love, giving and money, on the condition that one thinks that one knows, or pretends to know what kind of an answer the other expects from us, in other words, on the condition that the affective space that separates me from and binds me to the other is inundated with objects with which I think the other can satiate my impossible thirst for love.

The only difference, perhaps, is that, in the author's gesture of bridging the gap between reality and fiction, and therefore of instituting a *mise en abîme* not unlike the nineteenth century novels above mentioned, it is at the level of the terror of the real that this inundation opens up: what is being narrated in the story is what, on a global level, is unfolding with increasing intensity, between the so called 'rogue' states and the Western democracies, and the perverse

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<sup>139</sup> And this class exclusion is at the same time racial, as much as it is gendered, and sexual. To this effect, see Lobo, *La Bella y la Bestia*, where the author notes the emphatically racial character of this violence in the fact that more than seventy percent of the victims of violence in Colombia are of African descent. For an analysis of the intersection between violence and the sexual, see Rutter-Jensen, Chloe. *Silencio y Violencia Social: Discursos de VIH, SIDA en la novela gay colombiana*. *Revista Iberoamericana*, Vol. LXXIV, Núm. 223, Abril-Junio 2008. 471-482.

ideologies of humanitarian charity (Christian Love) succeeded by effective economic dispossession.<sup>140</sup>

### V. *After the Death of the Bride*

How does an allegorical gaze on this consumptive subjectivity- divided along the lines that have entwined the ‘brighter’ and the ‘darker’ sides of Modernity in a mortal embrace of hate and love- allow us to answer the question as to this ideological paradox?<sup>142</sup> Even if both Márquez’s and Vallejo’s work can effectively be conceived as instituting a short circuit, and therefore a moment of subjectivation outside the immanence of the cultural circulation of goods, this moment also constitutes another re-capture into the immanence of capital, if their work is not read (and therefore written) as an allegory of such ideological deadlock, that is, within the larger narrative of the Colombian nation, as it is being written *by*, as much as it writes itself *through* its literature.<sup>143</sup> Under this perspective, both Márquez and Vallejo are simultaneously the ‘Old’ and the ‘New’ Man, since the New Man heralded by Che Guevara can only have a voice, in its becoming, as the irrelevant aesthete representing this agonizing, decadent order.<sup>144</sup> The utopian

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<sup>140</sup> That is, the logic of abstract (financial) over-accumulation, on the one hand, and material dispossession on the other.

<sup>142</sup> Incidentally, an exclusionary logic that creates its own others, modernity as a phenomenon trapped in the hypocritical game of onerous gifts that create un-payable debts- ultimately the ‘gift’ of modernity (progress, scientific knowledge, etc.) materialized mainly in the form of technological apparatuses, as the price of a surplus of debt- has been largely the argumentative crust of the major work of Walter D. Mignolo. See, Mignolo, Walter D. *The Idea of Latin America; The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995; *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*.

<sup>143</sup> Olaizola captures this contradiction, when he quotes Yúdice’s critique of multiculturalism, to the effect that “There is no doubt that we are in a moment of cultural speed proper to globalization and the free circulation of capitals, where authors such as Vallejo and his co-religionaires are engulfed by the cultural difference that sells, in the name of multiculturalism. A question remains: just as the venerated magical realists G.G. Márquez and Álvaro Mutis, the new Colombian narrators also display a literary quality which makes them deserving of a literary success ‘at the margins’ of editorial intervention and their media promotions. Yet, the tag ‘se vende Colombia, a country of delirium,’ works in this ‘our’ plural market.” (54) [My Translation] Olaizola, *Se Vende Colombia*.

<sup>144</sup> Guevara, Ernesto. “El hombre nuevo”. Texto dirigido a Carlos Quijano, semanario *Marcha*, Montevideo, marzo

dream of the New Man- which the Boom in more than one occasion heralded- can only be seen in tension with its dialectical reverse, in the form of the agonizing nightmares of an old, decadent man.<sup>145</sup> The dream of the New Man is made of the stuff of the nightmares of the Old Man. Whereas Márquez's dreamlike world represents a metaphorical entombment of this 'love idyll' between reality and fiction that took place in Colombia at the time of its inception as a nation, this idyll returns in the hallucinatory form of an all out, undeclared war that seems to realize Carl Schmitt's critique of parliamentary, liberal politics, and his diagnosis of the future of warfare, to the effect that the realization of the co-transparency between Capital and State brings about the insidious proliferation of undeclared mercenary wars.<sup>146</sup> Recent sociological studies on the emergence of violence have taken notice of the geographical recurrence of this foundational violence.<sup>147</sup> What some academics, activists and policy-makers have come to call the actual 'colombianization' of Mexico, is a case in point, suggesting that the foundational barbarism at the heart of the modern nations is not something that happened sometime in a distant, unnamable past.<sup>148</sup> One should instead learn to see this barbarism as always already happening and founding the modern nation. In other words, this barbarism is not 'anterior' to the constitution of civilization in the historical sense, but rather 'logical,' taking place 'at the same time' as it were.

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de 1965. Leopoldo Zea, Editor. *Ideas en torno de Latinoamérica*. Vol. I. México: UNAM, 1986. "Las taras del pasado se trasladan al presente en la conciencia individual y hay que hacer un trabajo continuo para erradicarlas. [...] La nueva sociedad en formación tiene que competir muy duramente con el pasado." [...] (4)

<sup>145</sup> Gutiérrez Alea's film adaptation of Edmundo Desnoes' novel *Memories of Underdevelopment* stages this tension between the crepuscular life of a bourgeois intellectual and the birth of the New (socialist) Man.

<sup>146</sup> See Schmitt, Karl. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1985.; ---. *The Concept of the Political*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1976.

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<sup>147</sup> See for example, Sánchez, Gonzálo, & Peter Bakewell. "La Violencia en Colombia: New Research, New Questions," *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Nov., 1985), pp. 789-807; also, Beaucage, *Langage de la Violence*, Note 132.

<sup>148</sup> Perhaps in the same spirit in which some Latin American intellectuals described as the 'puertorricanization' of Latin America, by which they were reacting to the effective disappearance of the nation states in a swift process of market neo-colonization that took place in the region during the twentieth century, in spite of the official status of the Latin American countries as 'sovereign nations'.

Summing up: Fernando occupies, in the story, the place of the cultural agent, the place of private owner of cultural wealth (the means of cultural production), as opposed to Alexis, who ‘works’ for him, as it were. Furthermore, the invisible, hidden secret of this subject- hidden, because it is everywhere as a structuring principle in the novel-, that is, as the instance that confers full meaning to the amatory pair- is the imaginary function of the Nation (Magical Realism as national emblem), inasmuch as the co-implication between symbolic (commodities as the language that mediates between him and Alexis) and real violence, which is what the State accomplishes, is what this imaginary pair embodies.<sup>149</sup> This is Fernando’s secret, in the sense that he states his own position as ‘undivided’ - all his lamentations of a once pristine and Eden-like Colombia, now forever lost, all his poses as being symbolically dead, suggest that his subjectivity is predicated on that denial. Fernando posits himself as the dead symbol, a coin fallen out of circulation, of a lost Nation. The State, as the function through which the principle of the Nation hides its own divisions, is ultimately absorbed by the mercenary logic, by the same imperial, barbaric instance that created the Nation.<sup>150</sup> Let us establish, then, what the figure of Fernando accomplishes, the cosmopolitan *letrado* upon whom the weight of this ideological chasm falls – a chasm that is altogether religious, in the order of belief, for that matter (again, his unknown knowledge is the Nation as divided).<sup>151</sup> He accomplishes, on the one hand, the function

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<sup>149</sup> In “Nationalism and *Écriture*,” Kojin Karatani refers to the work of Dante, Luther, and Descartes to argue that the problem of *écriture* is universal to the foundation of the modern nation: “we must consider the problem of phonocentrism as one which is not limited to the ‘West’ [ . . . ] With respect to the forming of nations, the same problem has emerged all over the world without exception, even if such occurrences have not always been concurrent. [ . . . ] The matrix of the modern nation takes shape in tandem with the process of creating a written language based on the vernacular. [ . . . ] In each nation, these classics can still be read today not because the languages of each nation have not changed much, but rather because the languages of each nation have been formed by means of these [literary/religious/philosophical] works. (4-6)

<sup>150</sup> Here I rehearse Karatani’s idea that the concept of the modern nation was born out of the Imperial phenomenon, whose expansive principle is the war machine, as Deleuze/Guattari have noticed. See *Capitalismo y esquizofrenia: El Anti-Edipo/Mil Mesetas*.

<sup>151</sup> To this one can relate Schmitt’s conclusion in *Hamlet and Hecuba*, to the effect that the Hamlet myth was at the heart of a schism between the Church and the State (the birth of Protestantism) that replicates the schism at the heart of the lettered city.

of the ‘*vanishing mediator*’ between Nation- as the imaginary principle of that division- and what can be called in due justice *the barbaric War Machine*, that is to say, the nomadic war-like principle of Capital, as it is embodied by Alexis, the assassin/slum-dweller.<sup>152</sup> Alexis- as sheer body/commodity- disappears as soon as he effectuates this exchange.

On the other hand, Fernando simultaneously officiates- one should not forget Rama’s remarks to the effect that the lettered man was born out of the necessity to administer the newly emergent colonies as one more gear in the imperial machine (the recurring metaphor of a ‘priestly caste’ to refer to the lettered class is no mere coincidence)- the function of a two-way passage from the Law as symbolic instance, to war as empirical violence (Derrida’s *archscripture*, or *écriture*, in the properly Saussurian nomenclature).<sup>153</sup> These two functions are essentially the same, and as such, inseparable from each other. Through the very fact that Fernando buys gifts for Alexis, Alexis’s body becomes Fernando’s prop for accomplishing the mediation from the function of ‘culture’ to that of the State. It is Alexis, from his own positioning of being ‘bare life,’ who fulfills that transition, by enacting, as ‘vanishing mediator,’ the transformation from Culture into State. Just as Fernando (by the fact of occupying the place of pure exchange value, *money*) mediates the passage from words towards commodities, Alexis mediates the passage from commodities to founding violence, the *nomos* of the Earth. This very passage- and the sacrificial logic it presupposes- is the function of the military machinery of every nation-state *qua* potential empire. What is produced in this operation, as the result of the message that is Alexis’ pay for Fernando’s gifts, is at the cultural level, the aesthetic object,

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<sup>152</sup> One should not forget the imperial role that the social outcasts, as potential military concripts still has had and still has in every constituted imperial power.

<sup>153</sup> The details of Derrida’s *foundational* misunderstanding of the Saussurian precise usage of *phonologism* in his system- again, we find ourselves here in a properly parallax relation with respect to a dialectical impasse- are too complicated to expose them here, and too important to repeat them in just a half-cooked fashion. I refer the interested reader to Karatani’s above-referenced essay, *Écriture and Nationalism*.

whose allegorical value is that it contains the ugly truth, the nightmare of the dream of the Nation, in the form of the State qua Sovereign Violence. At the political level, by virtue of the inversion, which can be properly called an ideological ‘invagination,’ we see what is produced is the State, as an excremental loss, as pure aesthetic expenditure. The truth-value, the aura of this story is grounded on this fantasized re-functionalization of State by Capital, or Capital as the hidden truth of the State. Contrary to what many leftists lament today, the State does not simply disappear.<sup>154</sup> It only puts itself ‘in crisis’ by internalizing Capital, and thus accomplishes its function as mediating instance between Nation and Capital. Once more, one should learn to see in this operation the enduring insistence of a specter that comes to haunt from the past the Colombian national subject, a subject that simultaneously writes this reality, as much as it is written by it or, as Fernando himself after all has stated, “I do not write this reality, it is this reality that is writing me.”<sup>155</sup> Contrary to what some critics say about the crisis of Colombia as a national unit, one can say that the Colombian nation is very much alive and healthy.

This is also the point where the wonder of Magical Realism is given its surplus of truth, in the form of the ‘terror’ of dirty realism. What in Márquez is an objective reality depicted in the grammatical third person singular, this objective singularity becomes a subject, and interpellates the reader directly as a cultural object, but in order to do so, it has to un-fold itself back into the *iustissima tellus*, the telluric principle embodied in Alexis’ bared life, and the epistemic principle, embodied in Fernando.

Walter Benjamin’s insistence that ‘aura’ is everywhere, that it impregnates the whole world (rather than being perceptible in just a particular cultural object), was arguably aimed at

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<sup>154</sup> Here I am not only invoking Karatani’s remarks, but also Levinson’s, to the effect that “the ‘end of the state’ does not refer to the state’s disappearance. It alludes to the demise of the *sovereign* state, which now must compete with other domains, such as the global market [...]” *Ends of Literature*, 1.

<sup>155</sup> Vallejo, 89.



overcoming the division between manual and cultural labor, which also necessarily entailed the division between producer and consumer, and ultimately that between subject and object. What is the relationship between the politico-theological extimacy of the modern subject in the institutional formations of the Nation-State, and the emergence of the ‘cultural’ as an aesthetic cleaning of the slate? What is the story, or the stories, that are waiting to be narrated, once the aura of the artwork reveals itself as sustained by this barbarous remainder? If they indeed come from the future, what is the meaning of this ‘future’? If the founding gesture of the Nation as “imagined community” becomes co-transparent with the act of writing as symbolic violence (*écriture*), what does this mean for an understanding of the ‘auratic’ that accounts for this dissolution? To rephrase it in the words of Carl Schmitt, what is the nature of “the irruption of (historical) time into the play”, in the specific Latin American context, since it seems that the ideological split between Church (*autoritas*) and Crown (*potestas*) that Schmitt identifies as the source of the emergence of *Hamlet* as the first modern myth, replicates itself in the emergence of the Latin American nation-states, but as an imaginary *split* within the Nation between the political Left and the Right?<sup>156</sup> If what is entombed, as encapsulated in a mythical past, is the Nation, as the pseudo-object of a surplus of *solitude* as *nostalgia*-, which is always empirically destroyed at the very moment of its being written, what happens after the nation/woman dies (or goes into a deep sleep)? I will contend that the function of the cultural scene- the reader(-as-writer)- emerges in full view, comes onto the stage, when the sovereign State as the founding gesture of the nation, becomes embodied in a cultural, and in our case, literary artifact: the

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<sup>156</sup> Schmitt, Karl. *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of the Time into the Play*. It is important to mention Schmitt’s main argument in our context: Hamlet is the first of modern myths, because it stands at the crossroads of the schism that gave birth to modernity (the split between the Church and the Monarchy, which was also necessarily a split from within the Church- between Catholicism and Protestantism-, and within the Monarchy). The modern Nation-State, as imaginary affect, is the result of this double schism. Similarly, one could advance the hypothesis that, in a similar fashion, post-modernity is born at the split between the nation and the state, which is also a split within both the nation (imaginary/ideological) and the state (real/cultural).

lettered man, and its object of aesthetic consumption/contemplation, which is not immediately viewed as 'feminine,' is engaged in a relationship with the object that stands as a metaphor of the dyad barbarism/civilization. Only when the question of the Nation as failed inter-class marriage is overcome- but also repressed, put in reserve-, the question of the State becomes completely visible as a duel, a struggle to the death, between the national inside and its multiple outsides. But what lies beneath this struggle is also waged over the question of the modern Nation. In Borges, the State as an unresolved problem, is nonetheless ever-present, as the structuring principle (the division between law and sovereign violence) that sutures the whole duel between a civilized (urban/insider) and a barbarous (rural/foreign) bandit.

Said otherwise, if the lettered man in the form of the ideologue of the State, whose appearance signals the disavowal of the Nation's self-division, the object of this disavowal returns as a structuring principle that gives birth to the Nation, in the form of the very function of the State, which is to *mediate* between the *nomadic war machine*, and the Nation. In Vallejo's novel, Fernando positions himself subjectively as the master who keeps the division of the Nation as his secret, and this division structures the whole narration as a performance of the separation between *écriture* and *langue*. On the other hand, Márquez, whom in my comparison I have taken as the emblematic figure of the hysterical leftist intellectual in Latin America- and who one may consider, from now on, as belonging to what Badiou called the 'speculative left,' situates himself as the symptom of the nation's very self-division.

It is this division *within* the Nation-State, between *écriture*, as the barbaric 'outside' of a human group who imposes its law on another, and *langue*, as the stable abode of the Nation

(*langage* that has internalized *écriture*) that Borges symptomatizes, in the form of an enclosed, domestic space that often displays the characters of the signifier ‘Argentina’ as the imaginary function of a national interiority; whereas *La Virgen* ultimately symptomatizes, and stages, the very moment of indifferenciation between Ariel and Caliban (as conceptual characters of the ideological aporia), and this indifferenciation is what the nation produces, as *surplus of jouissance*, in the excremental form of the State, as sheer aesthetic effect. Ariel, the *lettered man* as ideologue of the State, is only truly born when the barbarian, Caliban, dies. But this comes only in exchange for the Nation to become a mere cultural artifact, a mere object of aesthetic fruition, which in turn is only possible when the self-division of the State becomes visible as the structuring principle of the Nation. This embodiment happens twice in Borges’ fiction: once, within the story, when the first-person narrator posits himself alternatively as reader *or* listener; a second time, when this very ambiguity is transposed *onto* the relationship that we as readers, and writers-to-come, entertain with the cultural artifact that is Borges’ text. That is why the affective oscillation of an aesthetic object as containing the remainder of a *barbarous deed*, within the story, replicates itself at the level of the relationship the reader entertains with the story. This is going to be the focus of my analyses in the following two chapters.

## Part II: The Paradox of Culture

The notion of 'civilizing,' as bringing men within a social organization, was of course already known; it rested on *civis* and *civitas*, and its aim was expressed in the adjective 'civil' as orderly, educated, or polite. It was positively extended, as we have seen, in the concept of 'civil society'. But 'civilization' was to mean more than this. It expressed two senses, which were historically linked: an achieved state, which could be contrasted with 'barbarism,' but now also an achieved state *of* development, which implied historical process and progress. This was the new historical rationality of the Enlightenment, in fact combined with a self-referring celebration of an achieved condition of refinement and order. It was this combination that was to be problematic. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*.

With Mendelssohn they got comfy; after that, generous and well-rounded *Don Giovanni*, with its sticky melodic phrases. Debussy would make them feel like artists, because not everyone understands his music. And after that, the main *entrée*, the great vibrational massage of Beethoven, because fate knocked upon our doors, the V of Victory, the deaf genius, and then hurry back home because tomorrow there is work like crazy in the office. - Julio Cortázar, *The Maenades*.

In the beginning was the Deed. – Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*.

## Chapter 3

### Troubled Beginnings: Affect, Truth-value and the Subject of the State in Jorge Luis Borges' *El Zahir*

In wonder, the basic disposition of the first beginning,  
beings first come to stand in their form.  
Terror, the basic disposition of the other beginning,  
reveals behind all progress and all domination  
over beings a dark emptiness of irrelevance.

Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*.<sup>157</sup>

The fact is that fear comes first. It is *terribly originary*:  
the origin for that which is most terrible about fear.  
- Roberto Esposito, *Communitas*.

#### I. *Wonders and Curiosities of the Argentine State: The Cultural Artifact as Leviathan*

As should be evident from the preceding two chapters, the dialectical flipside of the failed love story- the Nation as the locus of an ideological symptom-, is precisely that “cornerstone of the mythology of exclusion, upon which the imagined community called Argentina was built”<sup>158</sup>, which Domingo Faustino Sarmiento developed in his *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*. Dabove’s pointing out that Sarmiento’s usage of the *bandit* trope as a protean device around which the *impossible* that lies at the core of the antinomy ‘civilization vs. barbarism’ appears in the uncanny figure of a rural *caudillo*- *simultaneously* a statesman and an out-law, was invoked by the author to solve the (ultimately political-theological) riddle of how legal constitutionality had to give way to the war machine as a law-creating instance.<sup>159</sup> As has been extensively commented by Julio Ramos and Dabove, the *Sphinx*- the hybrid monster from Greek mythology, half woman, half beast- was the conceptual character that Sarmiento

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<sup>157</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 45. 197. (As quoted and translated by Slavoj Žižek in “Nature and its Discontents”, *Sub-Stance* #117, Vol. 37, no. 3, 2008. 46-47).

<sup>158</sup> Dabove, *Nightmares*, 56.

<sup>159</sup> Dabove, *op. cit.*

invoked to tackle this impasse of inclusive exclusion, by positing it as both the source of the enigma and its solution. In the last instance, the riddle that haunted Sarmiento was the problem underlying the Roman juridical figure of the state of exception.<sup>160</sup> As an argumentative anchoring point, I propose in this part of the dissertation a reading of that aporia as the symptom of the modern State, the understanding of which delineates a *cultural* field of signification (the signifier *culture* as the place of both an overcoming and preservation of the antinomy civilization/barbarism, which the State functionalizes). Pablo Dabove has already remarked that Doris Sommer tends to elide the co-implication of national romances with narratives, the signifying economy of which hinges upon the semantic equivocity obtaining within the literary tropisms of a violence that is simultaneously *symbolic* and *real*.<sup>161</sup> This violence, while *represented* as perpetration by a common outlaw against its citizens, actually *structures* the logic of statist authorization and legitimacy over some national value (territorial, racial, moral, linguistic, economic integrity). Moreover, to the extent that the function of the State apparatuses is to instantiate, administer and police a national language, by introjecting *écriture* into *langue*, what is at stake is the monopoly over the very language through which the national- perhaps obeying the autotelic fantasy of a male body creating itself *ex-nihilo*-<sup>162</sup> will produce, *materialize* itself *as* cultural value for overseas export. Said otherwise, the very means of materialization of national value- its cultural language- structures the narrative economy of a violence- military, economic, and symbolic- unleashed by the State apparatus against its rural inhabitants. The

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<sup>160</sup> My use of this juridical fiction will run along the debate that Carl Schmitt entertained with Walter Benjamin's notion in *The Origins of the German Tragic Drama*- both in his *Political Theology* and *Hamlet and Hecuba*, as well as with more recent debates on the subject, most prominently Giorgio Agamben's *State of Exception*.

<sup>161</sup> Read, for instance: "Sommer's approach can be criticized on several grounds, in particular because there is no theoretical attention paid to violence being as important a signifier as romance (even when violence is occurring within romances)." Dabove, *Nightmares*, 36.

<sup>162</sup> I am borrowing from Susan Buck-Morss' reading of the *martial* metaphor at work in Kant's understanding of the ethical subject as 'sense-dead,' as *autotelic*, as a "silly-fantasy of the phallus, this tale of all-male reproduction, the magic art of creation *ex nihilo*." Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics*, 10.

imaginary fixation that seems to be at work in the *future anteriority* of a beloved nation that- precisely because of the devouring, homicidal narcissism that punctuates every love relation- *will have been* destroyed, translates into the re-enactment, in the real, of a (both materially and symbolically) dispossessed rural inhabitant, who will have been named *persona non grata*, *enemy of the people*, in short a *bandido*, and subsequently destroyed, in the name of national integrity. If a national romance, he seems to imply, is the metaphor wherewith the whole nation performs the imaginary scene of a domestic drama- perhaps for the enjoyment of a *supra-*national spectator- the scene of the symptom that constitutes the *bandido*'s exploits and his eventual demise, delineates its points of contention along the *inner* frontier between the urban centers and the countryside. It can be ventured, therefore, that these narratives of Latin American *bandidaje* allegorize the instance of the modern State, as it enacts the same structure of plunder that, from the transoceanic, imperial perspective, obtains between Capital and Nation.

For the purpose of illuminating this structure, I want to state very succinctly the narrative argument of Borges' *El Zahir*: The ghost of a *dead woman*, the stuff of a love story, in the form of a forgetting which returns to haunt and turn the narrator into an *undead* lettered man who, from then onwards, wanders endlessly in the labyrinth of Western knowledge, wondering about the actual *value* of what *he thinks* he possesses as his most precious possession, is a wonder, moreover, that can only be experienced as being constantly endangered by the remainder of a 'dark emptiness of irrelevance'. Could this argument be understood as the 'dream work' of the national *qua* constitutive *enigma* for Borges, of the national as a value that always comes at the price of an *interdiction*? Could the Borgesian aesthetic affect- the one that describes the frontier that traverses between *wonder* and *terror*- be recognized as the symptom of this inter-diction?

Can the *Zahir*, in short, be considered to accomplish, at the cultural scene, the same function that the enigmatic Sphinx, embodied by the two-headed ‘monster’ Rosas-Facundo, had for Sarmiento? In a way, the nation is ever present in Borges’ stories, in the form of the grammatical ‘I’ within which the metropolitan *lettered man*, the statesman, and the provincial *bandit* live in precarious cohabitation. But, perhaps with the rare exception of *Ulrica*, this ‘I’ is always ‘in the past,’ buried in a long lost love story, about which nothing can be said, and around which a halo of sacredness is formed. However, Borges, the fictional one, also speaks from that abject past, as its abject, undead witness.

Furthermore, there is a perplexity to which not enough attention has been paid: The main themes in Borges’ short stories often come shrouded within an erudite meditation that, not unlike Márquez, takes an epistemic body (history, philosophy, religion, psychoanalysis), and uses it as a pre-text for another text.<sup>163</sup> The failed love story, the national mytheme, is somewhat of a taboo for Borges. Instead, what comes first onstage in the uncanny theater of Borges’ narrative is the logic of the sovereign state as the autotelic, founding principle of the nation, but only at the price of it being a mere aesthetic device, a *dispositive of (in-)discernment* between the ‘inner’ (*langue* without *écriture*) and the ‘outer’ (European knowledge, *écriture* without *langue*), of which the literary object (the story) is its metaphor. In Borges, this tension- between the local and the cosmopolitan, but also between the barbarous war machine and the civilized intellectual- is resolved only at the price of being displaced towards an object that nonetheless emerges from within the very split between a ‘dark emptiness of irrelevance’ of a vulgar, local, domesticated

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<sup>163</sup> This idea is somewhat analogous to Levinson’s critique of Roberto González’s Echevarría’s commendation (via Octavio Paz’s argument) of the Boom writers’ practice of introducing knowledge (epistemic capital) merely as fictional devices. The case in point is Márquez’ fusion of ethnographic, legal and naturalistic knowledge to produce the thought or dream-work of the Colombian nation called Magical Realism. Levinson, *Ends of Literature*.



reality- a library or the basement of an old house in some suburban or province- and the ‘wonder’ of an object- a dictionary, an ancient coin out of circulation, a dagger, a bible- in whose very form lies the contents of a *fantasmagoria* of transatlantic knowledge, a vertiginous flow that is wondrous, planetary, international, overwhelming, mortifying and ultimately terrifying. These objects become, therefore, torsional dispositives between the two terms of the dyad civilization/barbarism. Perhaps unwillingly, Borges makes this logic confess its truth, so to speak, but only by reproducing Capital (*drive* of knowledge), as sheer loss.

## II. *Culture Consumption And The Cultural Thing*

Let us first rehearse however briefly what seemed to be Walter Benjamin’s fundamental preoccupation in his paradoxical usage of the category of ‘aura’. The gesture is paradoxical mainly because, as Miriam B. Hansen has shown, Benjamin’s use of aura as an exclusively aesthetic category was only meant to rescue it from its religious, metaphysical usage at the hands of the theosophists and occultists, but ultimately in order to preserve its properly messianic, utopian character.<sup>164</sup> This manner of phrasing the problem resonates, on the other hand, with Susan Buck-Morss’ treatment of the phenomenological distinction between *hyle* as brute

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<sup>164</sup> Jameson’s allusion of the Benjaminian auratic to the barbaric deed can be found in the first pages of *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Miriam Hansen’s reconceptualization of Benjamin’s aura, is also worth noticing here, insofar as Benjamin’s recuperation of the ‘aura’ involved a move similar to that which Karatani foregrounds with respect to Kant’s *transcendental subject*. Walter Benjamin wanted to rescue the concept from its occultist and messianic connotation, not in order to give it a purely aesthetic meaning, but in order precisely to restore the truly visionary dimension involved in the concept of aura, as ‘profane illumination’ or ‘optical unconscious’- aura as that which permeates all of reality, not just an aesthetic object. As per Miriam Hansen: “The first definition—‘ein sonderbares Gespinst von Raum und Zeit: einmalige Erscheinungeiner Ferne, so nah sie sein mag’—appears in Benjamin, ‘Little History of Photography’ (1931), trans. Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, *SW*, 2:518; *GS*, 2:378. It is resumed almost verbatim in the artwork essay; see *SW*, 3:104; *GS*, 7:355. The parenthetical phrase—‘however close the thing that calls it forth’—is from Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Tiedemann (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), p. 447; hereafter abbreviated *AP*. The second definition—“die Aeraeiner Erscheinung erfahren, heisst, sie mit dem Vermogen belehnen, den Blick aufzuschlagen”—is elaborated in Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1940), trans. Zohn, *SW*, 4:338; *GS*, 1:646. See Note 4, in Hansen, Miriam B. “Benjamin’s Aura,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Winter 2008), pp. 336-375.

material stuff (the wooden stuff behind Dürer’s engraving; the ink-trace on a sheet of paper), and the aesthetic image, the ‘aura’ which makes the object, as it were, participate in ecstatic disembodiment from itself.<sup>165</sup> In spite of Buck-Morss’ incisive critique of Kant’s defense of the male auto-telic subject, and to the extent that aesthetic experience, such as it came to develop during the nineteenth century, relies on the very division between mere sensorial stimuli coming from the ‘brute’ mass, and cognitive perception, it is possible to think that what is at stake in Benjamin’s double movement is ultimately an ethical moment of re-subjectivation, similar to Immanuel Kant’s use of aesthetics in his parallax critique of the transcendental subject.<sup>166</sup> Benjamin’s critique of the theosophists’ *aura* was an attempt to make it a worldly experience, and as such, it can be said that it was aimed at exploding the very illusion of the division between empirical phenomena and rational processes (of which sense, perception, and memory are part).<sup>167</sup> Just in the same way that Kant’s critique of the metaphysical subject was ultimately aimed at preserving the transcendental subject (but exclusively within the sphere of the symbolic indeterminateness of the empirical ‘others-to-come’), Benjamin’s gesture was ultimately aimed at the making of *aura* a purely empirical, immanent, materialist category.<sup>168</sup> What ‘the others’ as

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<sup>165</sup> See Buck-Morss, Susan. “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics”.

<sup>166</sup> See Karatani, *Transcritique on Kant and Marx*.

<sup>167</sup> Hansen notes, for example, the fact that one of the earliest remarks Benjamin makes about the ‘aura’ (in his *On Hashish*), hints at a conception of aura that is totally at odds with what became its usual meaning: “Walter Benjamin’s first comment on the concept of aura can be found in an unpublished report on one of his hashish experiments, dated March 1930: ‘Everything I said on the subject [the nature of aura] was directed polemically against the theosophists, whose inexperience and ignorance I find highly repugnant. . . . First, genuine aura appears in all things, not just in certain kinds of things, as people imagine.’ ” Hansen, *Benjamin’s Aura*, 336.

<sup>168</sup> In other words, according to Karatani, what is truly universal, the thing-in-itself, in Kant, is the irreducible failure of the symbolic order (or Kant’s ‘categories of understanding’), to fully account for the others’ point of view, the unbridgeable gap between our symbolic universe and empirical phenomena (including ‘the others’ in their purely epidermal character of sensorial input). The important thing is the *salto mortale* from cognition to taste that any attempt to bridge this gap entails, that which, in any discussion about the rational cognition of empirical phenomena, becomes ultimately ‘a question of taste,’ thus aesthetics. With regards to the ‘profane illumination’ of *aura*, read Hansen’s comment from above quoted essay: “Benjamin’s deployment—and remarkably longtime avoidance—of the term *aura* is informed by the very field of discourse from which he sought to disassociate the term. And it is precisely the broader anthropological, perceptual-mnemonic, and visionary dimensions of aura that he wrests from that field which I take to be of interest for more current concerns. Restoring these dimensions to aura will highlight the conflicting roles the concept played in his lifelong endeavor to theorize the conditions of possibility of

a condition for universality meant for Kant was not a democratic (relativistic) consideration of the others' point of view, but effectively what *remained* from our symbolic narcissistic projections (read 'reductions,' 'impositions,' that is, symbolic violence) upon the others, the lower-case *other* that forever remained outside the Other.<sup>169</sup> One could even go as far as to say that both movements are essentially coterminous, insofar as Kant's ethical project ultimately relied- at least according to Karatani- on this aesthetic (read *sensorial, perceptual, hence bodily*) inflexion. Kant's universal ethical imperative had the differing taste of the others-to-come as its ultimate anchoring point; Benjamin's *aura*, for its part, could only take place as the active intervention of an ethical subject, inasmuch as his paradoxical treatment of *aura* was aimed at saving Europe from its suicidal, self-immolating drive in the form of Fascism and Nazism, through a recasting of *aura* along the lines of a preservation of the sensorial beyond the libidinal dispositive of a cultural fetish, which entailed in turn a *synaesthetic* (Buck-Morss, Hansen) conception of the subject/object dialectics.

My main point is: what characters like Montiel, the brutish capitalist in Márquez's story, reveal is the sheer materiality of the art-object, the moment where the illusion is broken, when the object is bared naked, so to speak. In that regard, this act of detaching the phantasmagoric cathexis on an artistic object is after all a necessary ethical step to overcome, first, the division between manual and intellectual labor (or ordinary and artistic objects), which itself involves the

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experience (in the emphatic sense of *Erfahrung*) in modernity. For *aura* not only named the most precious facet among other types of experience he described as irrevocably in decline, to be grasped only through their historical erosion. *Aura*'s epistemic structure, secularized and modernized (qua "profane illumination," Weimar *flânerie*, "mimetic faculty," and "optical unconscious"), can also be seen at work in Benjamin's efforts to reconceptualize experience through the very conditions of its *impossibility*, as the only chance to counter the bungled (capitalist-imperialist) adaptation of technology that first exploded in World War One and was leading to the fascist conquest of Europe." (338) Hansen, *op. cit.*

<sup>169</sup> Karatani goes great lengths to suggest that the origin of Kant's philosophical project in his three *Critiques* was in the ultimate instance *mystical* and *aesthetical*, particularly related to his admiration for scientist and Christian mystic Swedenborg, as well as from the Scottish literary critic Henry Home. See the Kant section in *Transcritique*.

subversion of the division between subject and object. Said otherwise, it represents an opportunity to re-think the notion of aura as impregnating the whole world; it is the exact dialectical correlate of recognizing the differing taste of the ‘others to come’. In a way, we, as cultural consumers, must come to the moment where we can ask, in all earnestness, “what is this thing?”, since this is when aura is detached from its aesthetic (therefore fetishistic, ideological) determinations, and the object opens itself towards *anything* that the ‘others to come’ would make out of it. This is, in other words, the properly Duchampian moment in Márquez, only in reverse.

A discussion of the way this double movement is at play in Borges, would perhaps warrant a recasting of Walter Benjamin’s understanding of the tensional knot between barbarism and civilization, for that discussion passes by obligation through the quest for what is *specifically barbaric* in consumption today, particularly in the act that capitalizes on the understanding provoked by the experience of our relation with so-called cultural objects, human or inanimate. This idea of the barbarous implicit in an act of cultural consumption would in turn require thinking about it in relation to the idea of the New, arguably because what is consumed today in a particular cultural product- be it a book, a sculpture, a feature movie, or a rock concert- is, rather than the object in-itself, the promise for an *unmediated* newness that would mark a new beginning of something, miraculously emerging, as it were, from some kind of a-historical nowhere. This notion of an immediacy of the New in the midst of an unmediated Now, the imminent wonder of a new object in the immediacy of its presence, is what needs to be questioned. Not just because, as Karatani, following closely upon the introductory remarks in Marx’s *Capital*, has elsewhere made crystal clear, there is nothing immediate about it, i.e., the

object in question is itself embedded, as one more link, in a complex chain of production relations that mimics, as well as it performs, the policing mechanisms of the ‘ideological state apparatuses’ that legislate and hegemonize meaning-as-experience, or even the very meaning of experience, in the name of the material privileges of one human group over the rest.<sup>170</sup> Also, and most crucially, because: first, in ignoring it, acts of cultural consumption make subjects become involuntary accomplices of the preemptive erasure of the transcendental contained in the narration of a collective experience, as well as the experience of the collective as such, as this is ultimately sustained by the undercurrent of this battle. Secondly, because the differential relation between a debtor (culturally dispossessed) and a creditor (culturally endowed), replicates the condition of material inequality of which the product consumed could in some instances be a mute witness.<sup>171</sup>

One way to question this is to declare that the experience of the New can only come forward as a *willed* attempt, in humans’ relations to cultural objects, to preserve the sphere where this barbaric differentiation between what is barbarous and what is civilized unfolds. This chapter elaborates an argument around the premise that this *auratic* moment is nothing but the affective space opened by the untimely return of an X ‘cultural thing,’ where the ruins of a symbolic void bear all the terrifying glare of an abject fight to the death between two particular worlds, but which also allegorizes, in a cultural object, the trace of the eternal fight between barbarism and civilization. To consume this aura means, therefore, passively to forget, and

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<sup>170</sup> For a succinct catalogue of different forms of phenomenological subjective bracketing (and unbracketing) of ethical and political concerns in the aesthetic appreciation of cultural products, and a (frequently obfuscated but nonetheless crucial) distinction of such bracketing from the mere unconscious omission of such concerns, see Karatani, Kojin. “Uses of Aesthetics: After Orientalism”, *boundary 2*, Vol. 25, Edward W. Said (Summer 1998), pp. 145-160.

<sup>171</sup> Or, as Theodor Adorno said with regards to Marx’s theory of commodities: “ their fantasmagoria mirrors subjectivity by confronting the subject with the product of its own labor, but in such a way that the labor that has gone into it is no longer identifiable”; rather, "the dreamer encounters his [her] own image impotently." See footnote 25, in Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics*, 24.

accrue, the mnemonic indebtedness that culture owes to the spectral remnants of that battle; in other words, to preempt the possibility implicit in that debt to redress the (itself barbarous legacy)- as an act of creative remembrance, which is an act of active forgetting- of the defeated- as-barbaric. The threat of a regressive process towards barbarism today lies, therefore, not merely in the vanquishing of one order of things over the other- where one order would by definition be 'more civilized' than the other-, by the result of which struggle the fate of something called 'culture' would depend. Neither can this menace be overcome by the naïve *relativization* of the terms in conflict, in a sort of hypocritical game of negotiated 'mutual respect' done under the imaginary circumstance of (non-existent) equal conditions of possibility, which is more or less the case today. Since the threat lies in the possibility that the imminence of this abject space is closed for good, as imminence, the criteria to answer the question of whether one world is 'more civilized' than the other seems to depend on the appropriate choice of the criteria by which one judges the extent to which any of these worlds approximates, in the narration of the experience of a contact with their cultural objects, the barbaric specter left over by the violent, untimely decision over the day-to-day battle waged between civilization and barbarism that sustains each of these worlds from within. In other words, what is lost in this acting as if this savage antagonism was external to the space of culture, is the Cultural Thing itself. Cultural consumption therefore, as it is policed today, entails a danger to the extent that it stages the absolute denial of the debt which culture owes to itself as unfolding within the legacy of a savage, barbarous act, done in the name of civilization. This legacy imposes the duty to be interpreted and narrated, for otherwise it would not be a legacy.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> The idea is from Jacques Derrida, as quoted in Idelber Avelars' "The Angel of History's Forged Signature: The Ruins of Memory and the Task of Mourning in a Brazilian Postdictatorial Novel", in *The Untimely Present*.

This means that a cultural object (in the ‘aesthetic’ sense of the term) embodies a more or less direct challenge to reflect and narrate the collective experience of any culture (in its ‘anthropological’ sense) in its historical emergence, as culture, from the barbaric vestiges of this battle.<sup>173</sup> Since any act of narration is an act of forgetful recollection, in the context of that relationship, any act of representation that accounts for that experience which remains blind to the blinding spot of the barbaric un-representable, remains consumptive, and frustrates the possibility of narration as such. Cultural consumption- arguably any act of interpretation, symbolic ‘introjection,’ epistemic representation, ideological ‘immanentization,’ etc.- is therefore never exempt from the pitfalls of the very reenactment of this barbaric remainder.

In this context, the figure of the anachronistic man of letters, the irrelevant and forgotten antiquarian who, like Márquez’s old man with enormous wings, becomes himself a matter of mundane transactions, just to end up disappearing in the horizon when no one cares about him any longer, remains a very contemporary one. That there is something in the order of the carnival in this story is essential to keep in mind, together with the consumptive frenzy that animates such a carnival.<sup>174</sup> This short story poses a pressing question, not only about present-day Latin American cultural markets in their relation with its metropolitan clientele overseas, of which it seems to be perhaps a more or less unintentional allegory, but also about how a relation between

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<sup>173</sup> A good example of this would be Alejo Carpentier’s passage in *Los pasos perdidos*, in which the narrator meditates on the tragedy involved in the fact that very few people realize today how much cultural artifacts considered of ‘high culture’ relate to a barbaric past. The example he uses is that of a Greek marble bust, which carries in it the legacy of the barbaric custom of using a spear to exhibit the upper part of the vanquished enemy in front of the victor’s dwelling place, as a trophy of war.

<sup>174</sup> An excellent example of this consumptive fury would be Julio Cortázar’s *Las Ménades* [*The Bacchae*], a story in which an opera concert is turned into a cannibalistic frenzy, where the spectators, raved by the power of the singers’ voices, fall prey to a savage hypnotic trance and devour the performers. The general idea of the story is that there is always something in the order of that savage trance in every act of culture consumption. Cortázar, *Cuentos Completos I, II*.

text and reader is to be reframed so that this situation can somehow be, if not overcome, at least destabilized. If the state of things that the story describes holds some truth today- and there are good reasons to think that it does- then a re-politicizing reading of it could only become possible if one can elucidate what a plausible reconfiguration of this relation might look like, most particularly when the suggestion is made that a likely incarnation of such a figure in Latin American letters is Jorge Luis Borges.

What if the situation is precisely a more appropriate metaphor for the unexpected emergence of the New in Latin America today? In other words, what if, in the particular context of the Latin American contemporary cultural scene, in the search for the latest literary event, the unexpected emergence of the (truly) New would have to come, like a terrible Tiger in the time-labyrinth of a lost dream, from the past, and not the future? What if, as Borges himself has suggested, this emergence of the New implicated an act of remembering one-self (*recordarse*; the Portuguese *acordar*, means to wake up), as one remembers one's self when one wakes up from a dream?<sup>175</sup> This is precisely what Borges does in his writings, since they are very often the staging of a *willed* attempt at preserving the imminence of the abjection of a past terror, *within* the mnemonic expectation of the wondrous. In this sense, Borges can be conceived of as the emblematic figure of the narrator, and in many ways the sentinel of the cultural thing in all its ambiguous charge of terror and wonder. In effect, his narrative is frequently similar to that of the

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<sup>175</sup> Jorge Luis Borges and L. S. Dembo. "An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges," *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Summer, 1970), pp. 315-323 "The terrible lucidity of insomnia. And there is a common word in Argentine Spanish for "awaken": *recordarse*, to remember oneself. When you're sleeping, you can't remember yourself-in fact, you're nobody, although you may be anybody in a dream. Then suddenly you wake up and "remember yourself"; you say, "I am so-and-so; I'm staying in such-and-such a place; I'm living in such-and-such a year." But *recordarse* is used as a common word and I don't think anybody has worked out all its implications." (318-319) "I suppose if I had to define myself, I would define myself as an idealist, philosophically speaking. But I'm not sure I have to define myself. I'd rather go on wondering and puzzling about things, for I find that very enjoyable." (317)



old, almost blind antiquarian who, immersed in the labyrinth of a Library, unexpectedly, as if by the workings of a cosmic lottery, comes upon the fragment of an ancient, previously unknown document, that a future reader will uselessly try to retrieve in order to corroborate its truthfulness, but which nonetheless tells something essentially truthful. After all, the sudden appearance of this apocryphal fragment that refers to a wondrous story, itself hiding a simultaneously magic and execrable object, as well as the very idea of this object, submerged itself under the no less a-mazed ruins of former readings, transliterations, and translations, is a very plausible version of what Walter Benjamin calls the figure of History.<sup>176</sup>

It is therefore within the context that this image evokes- that of something incredibly old irrupting into a cultural spectacle of well-policed cultural innovation and novelty- that I would like to introduce in this chapter a critical discussion about the state of contemporary Latin American literature, in its relation with truth, value and consumption.

### III. *Borges as a Dialectic Materialist, or How The Gaucho Becomes a Man of Letters*

This attempt at conveying a materialist-dialectical reading of Borges does not amount to turning Borges himself, the inveterate conservative idealist, into a materialist-dialectician. For one thing, Borges would most probably have rejected the imposition of these choices.<sup>177</sup> At any rate, the important idea is to make a good case in showing in the figure of Borges, and not

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<sup>176</sup> Even when Benjamin talks about an ancient architectural structure covered in ruins, already half demolished, I think the metaphor can easily be translated to the fragment of an ancient document.

<sup>177</sup> See, for example, Dembo, L. S. & Jorge Luis Borges. "An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges," *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Summer, 1970), pp. 315-323. "When I write a story or a poem I am simply concerned about that story or that poem, but I have no general philosophy; I have no message to convey. I am not really a thinker. I am a man who is very puzzled- and generally speaking, very pleasantly puzzled-by life and by things, especially by books." (315)

necessarily his fiction pieces taken in isolation, something like the paradox of the resilient antithesis, and at the same time the ominous prelude, of a subjectivity turned into a cultural artifact, a sort of liminal cultural oddity that would strike a critically productive contrast (or an uncanny resemblance) with the substanceless universality of the specialized proletarian who sells, not his products, but his labor force, and whose self-exclusion from this dynamics prefigures the imminence of yet another re-territorialization into contemporary culture's symbolic circuit; or, to put it in two of his most celebrated catchphrases, the turning of the wonder of "a revelation not yet produced" into the dystopian horror of "a tired man", where the only imminence is that of the terrified possibility that there is no more antagonism, no more history, and therefore no more revelations to come.<sup>178</sup> In other words, from a situation in which the lifetime puzzled quest, itself a labyrinth, for an unexpected labyrinth, loses all meaning, not just because there are no wondrous things, no more Bengal Tigers or Alephs or Minotaurs left to be found (and killed), but because the Idea of the Labyrinth itself has somehow become something impossible to conceive, something like a banished, exiled Platonic form in the post-modern cultural 'desert of the Real'. It is at this point that a political connection in his stories becomes in my view possible. As I hope I will make patent in the second part of this chapter, when I discuss the work of contemporary Argentine novelist Alan Pauls, particularly his novel *Historia del Llanto*, another name for the lost, yet terrifying labyrinth in whose center-less void lies a terrible, equally execrable Thing, or even perhaps another labyrinth, is the subject, (mis-)conceived as autonomous interiority. It is there, in the desert of the ever-changing sands of an autistic, self-cancelling subjectivity of an individual at war with himself, that a contrast against the Borgesian labyrinth will render possible a productive comparison.

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<sup>178</sup> The references are, respectively, to *The Dream of Coleridge*, and *Utopia of a Tired Man*.

If a subject is the irreducible affective distance that separates it from *and* binds it to the Other, how is this tension safeguarded in the Argentine author? To a great extent, the intention in this part of my discussion is: first, to persuade the reader that this antagonism is present as an incessant reconfiguration of the foundational aporia of national Argentine literature, itself another labyrinth, initiated by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*.<sup>179</sup> Second, that this aspect of Borges' writing, which one could conceive of as belonging to the anecdotal and the oral, embedded in the history of the Argentine nation, is intimately related, 'from within' as it were, to the other one, which has been given the misnomers of 'fantastic,' 'magical,' 'philosophical,' 'magical realist' or even 'metaphysical'.<sup>180</sup> My working hypothesis is that it is at the jarring intersection of these two opposing poles of his writing- and not simply in the internal tension (civilization against barbarism) inherent to the first category- that a political index can be identified.

This tension, almost without exception, assumes the form of the *duel*. Very often the tipping point of this immemorial duel resolves alternatively into the form of an abject *betrayal*, or as an undercurrent of polite hostility over some matter of high culture. Ultimately, the mnemonic trace of this antagonism bears the figure of the *dagger*. More than a mere "phallic

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<sup>179</sup> See Doris Sommer's *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*, Chapter 2 "Plagiarized Authenticity: Sarmiento's Cooper and Others", pp. 52-81, for a critique of the analogies the author establishes between race, gender and nature, all of these discursive fields converging in one single discourse of European civilization, and a simultaneous figuration of the monstrous (and much reviled) *Americanismo* in *Facundo: America as the hybrid, savage woman who resists European civilization*. For a more exhaustive exposition of the national constitutive aporias present in Sarmiento's foundational fiction, see Julio Ramos' "The Other's Knowledge: Writing and Orality in Sarmiento's *Facundo*", in *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth Century Latin America*, pp 3-21. And more recently, on the problem of the political as an 'uncanny enigma' in *Facundo*, see Carlos Jáuregui's *Canibalia: canibalismo, calibanismo, antropofagia cultural y consumo en America Latina*, especially chapters third and fourth: "Guardarropía Histórica y Simulacros de Identidad", and "Los Monstruos del Latinoamericanismo Arielista", pp. 223-391.

<sup>180</sup> See for example, Seymour Menton's classification of Borges' fiction as a 'metaphysical kind' of magical realism, where the oxymoron takes place in the uncanny conjunction between local (particular) folklore (the oral), and the metropolitan (the literary).

symbol”, this motive in Borges is closer to the Colonel’s fighting *cock* in Márquez’s novel, a sort of Lacanian “partial object”, the Deleuzian “nomadic element”, or Lyotardian “dark precursor”, that travels through history and collective memory to entwine two characters in a battle whose motives they only vaguely understand.

If a critical narrative is to be articulated that establishes the plausible cartography of a dialectical displacement of terms from the ‘first’ series of more ‘local’ or ‘telluric’ stories, and the ‘second,’ more ‘cosmopolitan,’ or ‘fantastic’ ones- a connection that not necessarily traces a dialogical regime or implies a chronological line of progression-<sup>181</sup>, a decisive *moment of thematic re-signification* of the tensional duo barbarism/civilization has to be found in the stories. If the signifying space of this tension is generally given by the signifier *duel*, one should expect to find something similar to this operation, in the aporetic slippage from one form of the meaning of the word *Duel* (in Spanish *duelo*), as a confrontation between two opposing forces, into its other meaning in Spanish, as the act of *mourning* for a lost one.<sup>182</sup> A good place to start would be the collection of short stories *Brodie’s Report* (1970). In it, a succession follows that obeys this transformation. I shall demonstrate that the first four stories, *La intrusa* [*The intruder*], *El indigno* [*The Unworthy*], *Historia de Rosendo Juárez* [*Story of Rosendo Juárez*], and *El encuentro* [*The Encounter*] deal with several narrative arguments that will find their symmetrical

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<sup>181</sup> In fact, the chronological publishing order of the collections, rather suggests a constant vacillation between these two forms, with obvious ‘contaminations’ and ‘influences’. For example: His first collection, *Ficciones* (1944) is mostly a collection in which both ‘fantastic’ stories with philosophical underpinnings- the first part, *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* [*The Garden of Forking Paths*]-, mingle with stories that refer in one way or another to the ‘barbarous’ past of the gauchos, alternating with stories about crimes and betrayals committed.; the following two series, *El Aleph* (1949) and *El hacedor* (1960), composed of mainly fantastic stories; in *El informe de Brodie* (1970), there is a ‘relapse’ into the ‘oral’ theme; *El libro de arena* (1975) is a collection mainly composed, with the exception of *Avelino Arredondo*, of fantastic stories.

<sup>182</sup> In Spanish the word *Duel* can signify both things- a battle, and the act of mourning-, functioning as a sort of ‘shifter’ in which the specter of the battle still survives in the survivors’ memory of the defeated.

other in tales such as *Guayaquil*, and *El evangelio según Marcos* [*The Gospel According to Mark*]. The main themes of the stories *Juan Muraña* and *La Señora Mayor* will similarly correspond with *El duelo*, and *El otro duelo*. The last tale, *El informe de Brodie*, stands alone, as a unique case of abject cohabitation between the barbarous and the civilized that entertains a relation of inclusive exclusion with regard to the rest of the stories that constitute the collection. For the sake of convenience, the collection can generally be divided in three parts. First, I will briefly summarize the plot of the third and fourth stories, *Story of Rosendo Juárez* and *The Encounter*, highlighting some important features in each of them; I will then linger for a more detailed analysis in the four stories, taken in pairs, of the middle third- *Juan Muraña*, *The Older Lady*; *The Duel* and *The Other Duel*- and finish with some concluding remarks on the next-to-last two stories of the collection, *Guayaquil* and *The Gospel According to Mark*, where I will try to suggest some important connections with the first two stories, *The Intruder* and *The Unworthy*. The last story, *Brodie's Report*, will be discussed separately.<sup>183</sup>

In *Story of Rosendo Juárez*, the last duel of a bloody assassin for hire ends up with the *symbolic laying down of the dagger* that a woman, *La Lujanera*, puts in his hands, when provoked and insulted by another man during a dance party. The story is told in the first person, and the absence in the original Spanish title of the determinate article “*La*” is, perhaps, important, for it suggests that in this gesture there is already the intimation of an imminent transformation. Instead of *La historia*, it starts with a more intriguing *Historia*, hinting at a possible gesture of insertion of the particular *in* the universal- it is simultaneously *any whatever* story, and also encapsulates the fate of all the *gauchos*, in their historical duel with civilization,

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<sup>183</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. *Collected Stories*. Trans. Andrew Hurley. Penguin: New York, 1998. Unless otherwise stated, this will be the translated edition referred to for the quoted texts.

as if the author meant to suggest something as paradoxical as an (impossible, since unlettered) *History of the Argentine Gaucho*. For now, I only want to recall in this story what was probably the implicit reason, told at the beginning of Rosendo's tale, for him to lay down the dagger and withdraw from battle at the end: "I've always been of the opinion that nobody has the right to stand in the way to progress. You just do the best you can with what you're dealt . . ." (Borges, 359)<sup>184</sup> The specter of this decision returns in *The encounter*, where an unexpected duel and a tragic death surprises the lives of a group of young adults who came *from the city*, to assist with an *asado* in the *Quinta de los Laureles*, an *estancia* in the countryside to the North of the City. The story, we discover, is told to us thanks to a *betrayal* by the author of a vow of silence over the incident, arguably in the name of a cultural act, like telling (writing) a story. A childhood memory, it takes place in 1910, the year of the Comet and the Centenary, significantly, of Argentina's war declaration of its national independence. The whole setting- the penumbra of the evening, the old house, the dog, the smell of trees and dried leaves, the fire, "which reunites men", and the scent of burning meat, slowly transforms into a primal scene, about which "brings men together" (364); "Not a word about heading back home." (365) (Interestingly enough, this strikes a bold contrast with evocations of the conversation amidst the 'big people' about "subjects that to this day I am unworthy of: racehorses, tailoring, automobiles, notoriously costly women." (365) Soaked in the remembrance of the festive atmosphere, where someone with a guitar was interpreting some folk songs, telling stories of legendary duels, the author remarks, quoting Leopoldo Lugones, that he felt "the fear of that which is too late." (42)<sup>185</sup> The kid loses

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<sup>184</sup> Borges, 31. ["Siempre he sido de la opinión que nadie es quién para detener la marcha del progreso."] For a reference to the Spanish edition of all my translations, cf. List of works Cited.

<sup>185</sup> Andre Hurley translates this phrase into a more circumstantial, less ominous, and in my view too overly inclined to psychological explanation- "the fear of the lateness of the hour" (365) I decided to keep my own translation in this case- "the fear of what is too late"-, since I think it is more consonant with the somber ambiguity that the Spanish original conveys- "el miedo de lo demasiado tarde"- and also with the suggestive hint of historical dimension that it suggests

himself in the labyrinth of the house. The owner notices, and takes him in front of two daggers in a glass showcase, where he narrates to him the stories of famous duels in which similar knives might have been used. Meanwhile, back in the patio, a disagreement happens between Maneco Uriarte and Duncan, over the trivial incident of a round of poker. Someone suggests that there were weapons in the house, and a battle ensues in which Uriarte kills Duncan. Afterward a policeman tells the narrator the story of the possible original owners of the two knives: Juan Almanza and Juan Almeida were two gauchos who lived in the area long before the incident. They came to hate each other (*se tomaron inquina*), probably because of the resemblance of their names, thanks to which people tended to confuse them. They never found each other during their lives. The author concludes by suggesting the idea that the ones who fought in the battle he witnessed were not two people, but two knives: Things last longer than men do. Who can say whether the story ends here; *who can say that they will never meet again.*” (369) (My emphasis)

These two stories- in which, if read together as constituting a larger narrative, the dropping of a knife is followed by the re-encounter, many years later, the *retaking* of the knives as the symbol of a lingering memory-, in themselves an end and a beginning of something, are the prelude of a crucial transformation from ‘civilization’ to ‘culture’ in Borgesian narrative. The concluding remarks, with a mixture of the ominous and the promising, reinforce this idea. From this story, it is also worth keeping in mind the idea that every *encounter* is always a *re-encounter*.

The tales *Juan Muraña* and *La señora mayor* perhaps convey the first part of this transformation. Each of them tells the story of two old widows who live in their own way a dreamlike existence in a long-gone mythical Present, in which the ghostly presence of the male figures- respectively a gaucho and a colonel-, who linger in the memory of their survivors, is the

main theme. The woman of the first story, Florentina, is the impoverished widow-in-denial of Juan Muraña, a well-known *cuchillero* [dagger fighter], who insists that her husband is still alive and is going to return and save them from greedy Luchessi, the landlord who constantly threatens them with eviction. Luchessi is found murdered. Florentina is not surprised, convinced as she is that her Juan would not to allow Luchessi to leave them on the streets. The story concludes with Florentina showing her nephew where Juan Muraña is hiding: from a drawer, she draws a dagger and shows it to her nephew. The widow in the second story, María Justina Rubio, “the only living child of the soldiers who had fought the wars of independence” (375), is daughter of Colonel Mariano Rubio, who led many battles, and was considered a minor national hero. Already a hundred years old when the story commences, she lives in a vegetative state of half-consciousness. An unexpected official visit of a government delegate tells María’s daughter that a ceremony in commemoration to the honor of her grandfather’s memory is to take place soon, and they should prepare accordingly. María Justina never realizes what has happened in the ceremony, and dies soon thereafter. Probably the sudden carnival of protocols, ready-made speeches, and avid journalists, who later exaggerated her father’s greatness, sped up her death. The author concludes both stories with a similar intervention that is itself an imminence: Both conclusions are formally identical, in that they announce a *definitive, yet somehow belated closure of an era* in the history of the Argentine nation:

“I believe one can make out a symbol, or many symbols. Juan Muraña was a man who walked my own familiar streets, who knew and did the things that men know and do, who one day tasted death, and who then became a knife. Now he is the memory of a knife. Tomorrow- oblivion, the common oblivion, forgotten.” (374)

Compare this to:



“ I think about the men killed at Cerro Alto, I think about the forgotten men of our continent and Spain who perished under the horses’ hooves, and it occurs to me that the last victim of that chaos of lances in Perú was to be, more than a hundred years afterward, an elderly lady in Buenos Aires.” (380)

As we will see, the only enduring symbol of this era is going to remain in the form of the (itself lost) memory of a dagger.

These two stories should in turn be commented on together with two more stories in the collection, *The Duel* and *The Other Duel*, which follow immediately after them, and display a similar implication of this antagonism with what for Borges may have been another constant source of personal tension- the battle between what represented the (‘higher’) sphere of European letters, which in his imagination was probably represented by his (English) father’s library, and the oral world of the Argentine *gauchada*, populated with folk legends that his mother, a *criolla*, or perhaps other friends may have told to him. In the story, which “is the sort of story that Henry James [ . . . ] might not have scorned.” (381), the author refers the plot of two improbable painters, Clara Glencairn and Teresa Pizarro, both Argentine, who dispute an international price. Somewhere around the middle of the story, the narrator observes “Everything, as we all know, happens first in other countries and then after a time in Argentina.” (382). In spite of their mutual and sincere affection and friendship, there is an underlying rivalry that finds expression in their painting: Clara is more inclined to the newest trends of abstract expressionism coming from Europe, while Marta, after an intimate analysis of the affected style of Spanish writers such as Ortega y Gasset and Hispanophiles such as Leopoldo Lugones, in whose writings she probably detects an aftertaste of wordy vanity [“vanidad palabrera”], opts for the more local, more modest, but perhaps more genuine art of the portrait and homely scenery: “

From the portraiture of local worthies she progressed to that of the old houses of Buenos Aires, whose modest patios she limned with modest colors rather than the stagy garishness that others gave them.” (382) The prize is given to the more *avant garde* Clara, even though the jurors “intimately despised her style”.<sup>186</sup> It is crucial to mention that, at this point, the author intervenes to tell us that, two years later the *First Congress of Latin American Plastic Artists* was celebrated in the city of Cartagena. The main theme orbited around the question of “[whether] the artist can put aside, ignore, fail to include the autochthonous elements of culture- can the artist leave out the fauna and flora, be insensitive to social issues, not join his or her voice to those who are struggling against U.S. and British imperialism, et. cetera, et cetera?” (384) The author meditates that painting imposed on them the passion that united them, in short that “Clara Glencairn painted against, and in some sense for, Marta Pizarro.” (384) There was, moreover, a “reciprocal influx” in that intimate duel. [76]. Understanding that her life had no longer any meaning, Marta dies shortly after Clara’s death, not without painting a last, sober portrait of her friend and rival, which was judged by someone to be her best painting ever.<sup>187</sup>

In *The Other Duel*, the narrator imperfectly remembers an anecdote told to him in an informal conversation with Carlos Reyles, the son of the novelist, who in turn was told to him by his father’s *capataz*, named Laderecha (Spanish for Theright), who received its details through oral tradition. The context is the “ensnared history (entreverada historia) of our two

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<sup>186</sup> Borges, 74. (My translation.)

<sup>187</sup> As a side note, this autochthonous and sober representation by Clara’s cultural archrival underscores a bit of irony and oceans of insight, since it could very well be understood as one more allegorization of how the ‘superiority’ of European culture – embodied in the achievements of its modern art- was adopted, assimilated, and domesticated in Latin America, *as an empty form*, thus itself to become an object for aesthetic representation. But could it have been otherwise, given that both Clara and Marta, despite their rivalry, could not see in the imported artistic and intellectual trends of European modernism but its mere empty form, devoid of any historical substance, and therefore proceeded through colonial mimicry? Could it be otherwise for Borges, or for any other Latin American intellectual?

motherlands.”<sup>188</sup> In it, a hate unfolds between two neighboring *gauchos*, Manuel Cardoso and Carmen Silveira, a rivalry that was gradually fired up by the accumulation of small, insignificant incidents- a bareback horse race, an interrupted fight over a *trucada* (a Spanish card game), a back-handed incident involving the same woman, a secret suspicion over some poisoned shepherd dog called *Treinta y tres* that belonged to Silveira. Political developments- the Revolution of Aparicio- soon overtook their rivalry and dragged them into a war the causes of which they ignored: “ One side was the same as the other for them.” (388) Chance has them fighting together for the Whites (or *Federales*, also called *Montoneros*), led by a Brazilian mulato, against the Reds (or *Unitarios*), led by Captain Juan Patricio Nolan. During one of the battles, they fall prisoners to Captain Nolan, and end up becoming the object of a gamble amongst the prisoners and soldiers, over a mock race between the two, in which they are supposed to run against each other with their throats slit. In the afternoon of the agreed-upon day, they have their throats cut and stumble a few meters, before falling dead on the floor in front of everyone. Cardoso, with his arms stretched before him in the last second, wins the race, without ever realizing it.

As the title already suggests, this story is in many points the exact negative of the preceding one. If in the first story Clara and Teresa are bound together by a mutual affection, the two *gauchos*’ existence is perhaps solely justified by their mutual abhorrence. The two friends in the first story are each other’s justification in their cultural duel. Except for uncertain, dubious skirmishes that are never decisive, the *gauchos*’ rivalry is never openly declared, yet everyone knows about it, and it binds them fatally, turning each one “ each of the two became the other’s

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<sup>188</sup> Borges, 78. My translation. Presumably Spain and Argentina, or maybe Spain and England. Andrew Hurley translates “ The interwoven story of our two countries” (386) The text is not altogether clear about this point.

slave” (387) The personal secrecy of both pairs is like the involuntary shadow projected by an archetypal/historical Duel- in the case of *The Duel*, between the supposed (‘progressive’) cosmopolitanism of European modernism and the inwardly faithfulness to (‘backward’) local folklore or at best a sort of urban *costumbrismo*; in *The Other Duel*, by the raw politics-by-other-means of all out war. The atmosphere of urbanity that surrounds the friendly competence between Clara and Teresa invites a direct comparison with the undomesticated, rowdy life of the *gauchos*. Most importantly, the correspondence between the cultural battle (which is interestingly unleashed by two women) and the struggle for political power (which completely excludes them), seems to have a dialectical counterpart in *the internal division* that subtends each term. That is to say, the inveterate antagonism between Clara and Teresa, and Cardoso and Silveira, is each internal to his or her respective side, *and yet somehow external to it*, since in both cases all individuals are unaware of its true cause. Each of the stories is, respectively, the inside and the outside, the imminence and the reminiscence of the other: the allusion in the first story to the lingering, unresolved question, stated in highly militant overtones, of the involvement (or lack thereof) of the Latin American intellectual in political matters (the main theme of the *First Congress of Latin American Plastic Artists*), which takes place *after the fact*, that is, the giving of the international prize to the presumably more European and cosmopolitan Clara Glencairn; and the evocative inauguration, in the second story, of a *dialogue* between Borges and Carlos Reyles, *the son of the novelist*. The remembrance of this reunion is a confused mixture “a hatred and its tragic end” and “the medicinal fragrance of the eucalyptus trees and the singing of the birds.” (386) In other words, the tale of this hate with a tragic end is shrouded within the domestic sphere of the medicinal scent of the Eucalyptus trees and birds (an allusion to the homely abode traditionally referable to as the ‘domestic,’ or even ‘feminine’).

This series of symmetries is significant in itself, but it also operates, within the larger whole that represents the series of stories contained in the collection, the inversion from what was, in the first moment, the main space of signification of this duel, the ‘barbarous’ Pampa of the ‘oral’ regime, into the ‘civilized’ Lettered City of the second, ‘literary’ regime, in which the signifier ‘culture’ as an aesthetic category acquires increasingly more prominence. What is important not to ignore is that the receding into a spectral background of the fierce gauchos locked in combat over an immemorial debt, and the concomitant advent of duels between two lettered men about some cultural wealth, has to go through the previous re-semanticization of the word *duel* as a thematic engine- in *Juan Muraña* and *La Señora Mayor*-, and an equal exchange of places in terms of *who* is involved in the duel, an *exchange* that is, moreover, gendered. The passage from the fierce gaucho to the refined lettered man, and the passage from the *particular* rivals (the two female painters and the two male gauchos) to the *universal* form (embodied, respectively, in the battle between the ‘sophistication’ of European cosmopolitanism and the ‘folkloric’ local costumbrismo, and between the ‘barbarian,’ local *federalismo* and the ‘civilized,’ metropolitan *unitarismo*), is respectively preceded, that is to say *mediated*, by the particularization of *the (disavowed) duel* (mourning), of two women over two men- the first a *gaucho*, and the other a minor national hero (un *prócer menor*)-, in *Juan Muraña* and *La señora Mayor*, and *the other duel*, the involuntary contest, the significance of which bears largely on the important irony that the two illiterate gauchos, even when they are already dead, participate voluntarily in a race organized by forces the causes of which they totally ignored. The ‘barbarous’ space of the oral, influenced by Borges’ mother as many critics have noted before, is nonetheless governed by overstated male and illiterate figures, and the ‘civilized,’ cosmopolitan

space of the written, which even Borges himself associated with the influence of his English father, in *The Duel* is (still) identified with the female figure. The final victory of the (itself divided) realm of the public 'cultural' over the secret, private affection between the two female friends, is the correlate of the final demise of the barbaric male gauchos, caused by the battle between the *Blancos* and the *Colorados*, itself also an instance of self-division.

This inversion is itself 'inverted' from 'within,' as it were, since *The Other Duel* marks the end of what was the first movement (the so-called 'oral' part). The first story, which, according to this narrative, would mark the thematic beginning of the second third of the collection, actually 'belongs,' thematically, though not formally, to the previous part. The result, viewed from the totality that constitutes the collection, is a sort of double 'interlocking,' to use a rather clumsy metaphor, in which the first 'oral' theme still remains, in *The Other Duel* as a sort of 'prelude,' that is, a sort of *belated beginning*, to the last third of the collection; and in which the 'cultural' theme remains, in the first story, *The Duel*, which would commonly announce the beginning of the second part, but actually thematically belongs, as an epilogue, to the first third, in other words, as a sort of *anticipated end*. *The Duel* unfolds around two women, and *The Other Duel* tells the story of two men. The two *particular* widows and the memory of two particular warriors (in *Juan Muraña* and *La Señora Mayor*), who are also mere entities at the service of an Idea, which is also transforming itself from a rather non-dialectized confrontation between the barbarous *pampa* and the civilized city, to the cultural level, in which the confrontation will take place between two men around a cultural matter, but which will always contain the first as a lingering and (as we will see, ultimately) decisive tension.

To sum up, we can see two simultaneous displacements secretly developing in this collection of stories. First, the passage of the male, savage realm of the story about a secret duel between two gauchos, in which a woman is the cause (*La intrusa*, Rosendo Juárez), to the domestic, private realm in the preceding two stories, *Juan Muraña* and *La Señora Mayor*, in which the time of the gauchos is already past, yet lingers in a mythical present, which the two ladies embody. Secondly, a passage from the abstract immediacy of the male duels that take place in the pampas, a theme that, with several variations, forms the bulk of the first third of the collection, towards the more ‘cultured’ treatment of (essentially) the same battle. These two stories- *Juan Muraña* and *La Señora Mayor*- are themselves a sort of prelude to this transformation, since the two dead heroes are presumably on opposite sides of the tensional axis *barbarism vs. civilization*. This passage carries with it the memory of a distant terror, which somehow echoes “the fear of what is too late,” evoked in *The encounter*. The dialectical relay of these inversions bear the symbol of the irreducible remainder of that ruse, in the ubiquitous form of the *Dagger*, the only mute token of an abject transgression: Borges’ secret intimation, implying that it was he (who else could it have been?) who suggested that there were weapons at the warriors’ disposal for the battle; his subsequent betrayal of the solemn vow of silence; the previous betrayal of a criminal hero in the name of civilization (*The Unworthy*, to be discussed in detail further below), all point to an abject coefficient being attached to the subjective implication of their protagonists in this series of inversions. My point is that this *Dagger*, which carries all the *affective charge of a guilt over a betrayal*, but also the terror of a crime committed, subsequently acquires different forms in other stories- the pending *Literary Matter*, the *Aleph*, the *Minotaur*, *Woman (Ulrica)*, *The Tiger*, *The Zahir*, *The Book of Sand*, the *Dream of*

*Coleridge, the Yellow Rose of Keats-*, and in all of them survives in one way or another the beloved and execrable *Labyrinth*.

The end result is that both figures perish, together with their world, that of the provincial widows, concerned with the domestic *post-mortem* occupations (or rather distractions) of 'high' culture, more often than not painted by the author in parochial and trite terms, and the incurable, barbarous and heroic warrior, to disappear as the testament of a *terrifying*, distant past, only to (re-)emerge in some fantastic tales, *as the imminence of something not yet revealed, yet already past*, doubly transformed, respectively, in the nostalgic, *public* portrait of a *recently* lost, beloved woman (i.e, *The Aleph; The Zahir*)- *whose personal characteristics are as well given in pedestrian and parochial terms-* for whom there is still a lagging, *not fully assumed duel* (mourning)-, and a *secret duel* (battle) *between* two lettered men (one of whom is always Borges himself), over some highly intellectual matter, particularly about the matter of possessing some (without exception) apocryphal fragment, *which typically does not belong to any literary genre*. This battle is often interrupted (and re-solved) by the sudden, violent (re-) appearance of a fascinating, magical object that is, in the end, disavowed and rejected *in terror*, because ultimately, it is the signifier *culture* which, suffering the agonizing burden of this dialectical relay, bears the irreducible kernel of that terror. In other words, from then onwards, *the characters cannot but engage in a secret battle over a public matter, when there once was a public battle over a secret matter*. The first, of course, defines the space of politics; the second, that of culture. Moreover, this battle is going to unfold within the affective, dialectical overlapping of *the terrifying imminence of what is always already past, and the wondrous*



*remembrance of things to come.* (In addition, from now on, the tale is going to be the fragment of a larger, forever lost document, instead of a story referred by hearsay.)

The next duel in the collection, *Guayaquil*, which follows immediately after *The Other Duel*, is going to be waged by two male intellectuals, Borges and Eduardo Zimmermann, but this time it is going to be over some definite *cultural business*, namely the recovery and publication, commissioned by mistake to both intellectuals by their respective universities, of (an apocryphal) historical document which records Simón Bolívar's interview with General San Martín in Cartagena, in 13 August 1822. Zimmermann and Borges meet, in order to settle the misunderstanding. Yet again, *the obscure object of a debt* and therefore the antagonism persists, and is going utterly to be irreducible to the logic that determines the premises of their cultural fight. Said otherwise, *the intellectuality and cordiality of the matter involved cannot reduce the indelible remainder of a ferocious battle.* After a moment of mutual compliments, after Borges' showing Zimmermann *two spades* that belonged to his ancestors, after testing each other's acumen over some philosophical ideas, and albeit Borges' giving more than justified reasons to be the *worthier* man for the mission, Zimmermann wins the fight, because "the power lay in the man, not in the dialectic" (394) (The same motif recurs in *The Embezzlement*.<sup>189</sup>) The abjection of the narrator over the loss of an intellectual battle obliquely evokes *The Encounter*, of course. But most importantly, it also recalls the second story of the volume, *The Unworthy*, in which the author tells the story of a betrayal of the token of trust and affection given by Francisco Ferrari, a *compadrito*, to his childhood friend Santiago Fischbein, a sort of part-time intellectual. When he was young, Ferrari became his hero, after a succession of deeds that impressed the young man. Soon, Fischbein, after a series of cordial invitations by Ferrari, becomes part of the group. There

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<sup>189</sup> Borges, *El libro de arena*.

was a robbery of a textile factory being planned, and Fischbein was given the task of acting as a look-out for the police while they were sacking the place. Fischbein, most probably influenced, as the story suggests, by his mother's recalcitrant displeasure for the young thugs, planned a sell-out with the police, and during the night of the robbery the robbers were caught, with the final result of Ferrari getting killed. Just as, in *Guayaquil*, the narrator's cultural worthiness of the task at hand is *betrayed in the name of something that exceeds culture, yet grounds it*, so to speak, not precisely by Zimmermann, but by the same cultural game which was the guarantor of Borges' worthiness to salvage a historical, but also intimate debt owed to the memory of his ancestors. In *The Unworthy*, this betrayal, itself an unforgivable transgression, is carried out against the barbarous element (the space of male criminality), in the final and *willed* side-taking of the amateurish Fischbein's abject intellectuality. The cultural debt incurred in the *Unworthy* survives, and is paid in full, as it were, in *Guayaquil*, by the terrifying imminence and already past return of an irreducible barbarism betrayed in the name of civilization.

*The Gospel According to Mark* is, like the inaugural story of the collection- *The Interloper*- about the irruption of a disturbing element into the simple life of a family from the pampas, but while in the latter the intruder is *an illiterate country woman*, Juliana, who suddenly appears in the life of two brothers, in the former, the intruder is a *cultured man from the city*: the medical student Baltasar Espinosa, who ends up being crucified by the illiterate members of a family from the countryside, the *Gutres*, deeply impressed as they are by the readings from the Bible that the young student generously offers them every evening. The woman in the first story had been the shared object of love and latent rivalry between the Nielsen brothers, in whose veins "the blood of Denmark or Ireland (whose names they probably never heard) flowed in the

veins of those two criollos.” (349) She is sacrificed and buried by one of his brothers, so that “she won’t cause any more hurt.” (351) Both stories mention a Bible, the only book in the two houses, which neither of their dwellers knows how to read. The narrator remarks on the fact that “Cain lurked about, but the love between the Nilsens was great” (351) While in *The Interloper*, the universality emblemized by a biblical allusion is implicit, as a blind force that dictates their destiny, in *The Gospel*, that allusion to universality is made explicit, and what recedes into the background is the intrusive, in itself violent presence of the particular, civilizing element, which is heretofore “introjected”, again, in the name of civilization, by the barbarism of a primal murder.

In short, what I want to emphasize in these four stories is the way the narrator threads the plot around *the inextricable relation that the most abject act, a betrayal, or the most barbaric act, a murder, entertains, in the form of a sacrifice, with the preservation or the constitution of a symbolic order*- the Nilsen sacrifice their shared woman to preserve the sacredness of their brotherhood and their semi-savage life. The Gutres, on the other hand, crucify Baltasar to “save themselves from hell,” as the prelude of another, arguably more advanced stage of civilization. A debt incurred in the first story again resurfaces in the second. The same happens with the *Unworthy* and *Guayaquil*, where the references to Sarmiento, Schopenhauer, Heidegger, and Nazism are anything but incidental: vitalism, will, force, strength, Fascism as the best argument, are all signifiers that converge to hover around both stories as a spectral remainder of a long past barbarism. In Borges’ fiction the overcoming of the barbarism vs. civilization tension in favor of the latter would not come smoothly. It rather entails an (ultimately subjective) unforgivable, and necessarily violent transgression in the form of a murder and a betrayal that leaves in other

stories an abject aftertaste of guilt and unworthiness, that is, in the form of an incapability in their grammatical-first-person protagonists to recognize- therefore his insightful blindness, “*Mon siège est fait*”- the barbarous founding principle of the cultural game that they otherwise play impeccably. A principle that, as an enduring debt, this game recreates, and whose payment it *precludes*, but that the narrator will paradoxically have to pay, inadvertently.

#### IV. *In the Other More Than the Other*

Giorgio Agamben’s *The Open: Human and Animal* perhaps suggests an interesting interlacing between the remainder of this tension and the situation of cultural consumption allegorized further above. If symbolic representation is to consumption as knowledge is to Capital, and if, consequently, there is, by virtue of the antagonism that this model renders illegible as such, an unequal relation of debt and credit that finds its replica at the cultural level, then there must be moments in Borges’ works in which the un-payable cultural debt upon which the transition from one matrix into the other will re-appear as a terrifying imminence, violently threatening to unravel or at least unhinge the narrative balance of a given text, a logic whose symmetry depends on that debt’s introjected exclusion.

The subtitle of Agamben’s book- *Human and Animal*- proposes a degree of affinity with the dyad *Civilization and Barbarism*.<sup>190</sup> In keeping with a close relation to our discussion, from the pages of this book I want to preserve the paradoxical notion that there is something in the order of the uncanny and the terrifying in the imminent irruption of what does not belong to our habitual thinking of what is human, and for that very reason one has to leave open the possibility

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<sup>190</sup> The passage belongs to the chapter titled .

that the imminence of something to-come, not from the future, but from the past, might realize itself, if the human, and therefore civilization, is to be salvaged. The promise that this possibility safeguards, Agamben recalls citing Heidegger, which is the possibility of the human as an open totality, is predicated on its utter ontological contingency, its fundamental groundlessness. The affective space that conditions the openness where this radical groundlessness can manifest itself as the promise of a new community to-come, is *abjection* (from the Latin *abjicere: to banish, to expel, to exile*), the space where the distinction between human and animal is no more. If abjection could be conceived as the affective index of a disciplined act of anthropological asceticism, in the service of an encounter with the uttermost, absolute otherness that is, in irreducible excess, in the other *more* than the other, and therefore an experience that resists at all costs any act of representation, then it is conceivable that this experience of the non-representable in Borges harbors an important clue to highlight the way a different experience of reading and writing that traces a detour from consumption announces itself, even if in the form of a fleeting imminence of something not yet revealed. This sort of anthropological labyrinth hints at a moment where all coordinates of meaning are put into peril, where the symbolic map by the means of which we establish the boundaries that separate the ‘proper’ from the ‘improper’ gives way to the non-place of a total being-lost.

Something of that order is what happens in *Brodie’s Report*, the last tale of this collection.<sup>191</sup> This story stands out as an exceptional case in the series described above, for it narrates, again in the form of an apocryphal cultural object, someone’s encounter with the most absolutely ‘other’ in the other. Yet it gives to the whole its full meaning, for it stages the realm of

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<sup>191</sup> This theme recurs, among other stories, in *El tema del guerrero y la cautiva* [*The Theme of the Warrior and the Captive*], *Deutsches Requiem*, and *La cautiva* [*The Captive*].

the Cultural Thing as the abject territory where the distinction between the barbarous and the civilized recedes to hindstage, as well as the moment when the lettered man as a cultural entity emerges. One can be sure that the cultural good that constitutes *Brodie's Report*, the book that we read (consume) also partakes of this implication of its reader with this superlative 'other' in its consumable index.

This story, the only witness of which is the author, is referred to as a fragment belonging to a larger work, a report now forever lost (instead of a story referred by hearsay). The manuscript was nevertheless found in a "first volume of Lane's translation of the *Thousand and One Nights (An Arabian Night's Entertainment, London, 1840)*" (402). The fragment in question relates the story of a Scots missionary, David Brodie, who records his time in the land of the savage *Yahoos*. It is important to mention that the purpose of this report is, ambiguously enough, that "lest my readers forget their bestial nature." (402), opening the question about the exact nominal referent to which the possessive pronoun *their* can be attached. The report is full of allusions to the "bestial nature" of this people, who live near the land "infested by the *Apemen*." Their mode of greeting is by throwing dung to each other, "which was an honour", they sleep wherever night finds them, devour the raw bodies of their wizards and kings, to assimilate their virtue, "their lack of imagination makes them cruel [ . . . ] they lack any concept of paternity" (404-406). These observations gradually give way to more insightful observations about the existence, *within which all this barbarity takes place*, of a higher instance of order and legal organization (they had a language, a religion, they knew the concept of poetry, they strictly followed customs and rituals regarding their dealing with their bodily needs, the disposal of their dead, their choosing of their rulers, etc.)

The concluding lines of the story are in themselves astonishing, for what they retrospectively reveal in terms of the overall significance of the collection:

The yahoos, I know, are a barbarous people, perhaps the most barbarous of the earth, but it would be an injustice to overlook certain redeeming traits which they possess. They have institutions, and a king; they speak a language based on abstract concepts; they believe, like the Jews and the Greeks, in the divine origins of poetry; and they sense that the soul survives the death of the body. They affirm the efficacy of punishment and reward. They represent, in a word, culture, just as we do, in spite of our many sins. I do not regret having fought in their ranks against the Apemen. We have the obligation to save them. I hope Her Majesty's government will not turn a deaf ear to the remedy this report has the temerity to suggest. (407-408)

The obvious question to ask would be: At what specific point did the passage from one, the initial horror of their bestiality, into the other, the wondrous admiration for their existence as a cultural whole, take place? Does this story captures that very moment, in our encounter, as symbolic beings, with the other, in which one sees, or fails to see, oneself in the 'civilized' elements *or* in the bestial strangeness of such presence? A first level of reading would see in it a message of cultural tolerance, the possibility of a harmonious commercial exchange, and so forth. But it is interesting to notice, first, how this 'higher' domain, where the unexpected (wonder of a) cultural instance can be located, comes 'later,' although it is, within the topological model I have been more or less consciously (ab-)using, the 'outer' skin of this cultural object. What comes 'first' is the terror of being in the presence of the superlatively strange, savage, violent, in other words barbaric aspect of their collective existence. I would therefore argue that, instead of falling into the immediate temptation of thinking that what made Brodie recognize his own cultural stain in the Yahoos were those abstract traits that resembled more closely his own,

something that the text itself seems to support, it was on the contrary the most *violent side in them, which contingently supported their organization as a human structure*: their lingering war against the *Apemen*, their custom of cutting the king's limbs, piercing his eyes and bringing him into the most heated point of the battle, as a "sort of banner or charm", their custom of expelling someone from the group, in whom they might have recognized a poet, their custom of eating alone or with their eyes closed, their habit of doing everything else publicly (like the Cynics), etc. Within the register of this interpretation, there is the paradox that the most 'immediate,' 'superficial' encounter with the Yahoos was actually the more 'truthful' one, and the seemingly 'deeper' ulterior contact with that group, where the missionary could 'see them emerging as culture,' is actually an ideological trap, a narcissistic re-accommodation (and *mis*-recognition) in which one finds 'structural similarities' that explain, or at least redeem, their 'seeming' bestiality. It is arguably the moment in which Brodie turns that group of men into an aesthetic artifact for cultural enjoyment, and seals their fate.<sup>192</sup> One should not forget that the purpose of this narrative is nonetheless *to remind readers of these people's [and ours] bestiality*. How can one offer a reading that overcomes the inconsistency of these two apparently opposed interpretations: the duty of the reader (the implied reader here is Her Government's Majesty), not to forget their 'bestial nature,' which opens the story, and the concluding lines that urges Her Majesty to preserve them, in the name of the universal form of a cultural entity which they, like Her Majesty's Government, represent?<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> An interesting experiment would be to imagine a sequel to this story, in which the Government of Her Majesty would, in all good faith, following Brodie's advice, engage in periodic relations with the *Yahoos*- regular exchange of goods, frequent visits, treaties, cultural exchange, etc. It is not hard to foresee the tragic end of this: the total annihilation of the Yahoos. The terrifying recurrence of that 'barbaric' stain in them, which the Scott missionary tried in vain to exorcise, by seeing them as a cultural, self-coherent unit, would be something unbearable to Her Majesty's Government: After all, "they would not let themselves be completely civilized, they were too rebellious to our intentions to bring them the light of modernity, etc." A more effective report would be the one in which Brodie would begin by telling Her Majesty something like "look, they are just as cruel and barbarous as we are ..."



I want to demonstrate, for the purpose of what comes next, how the relation between wonder and terror in Borges provides for a reading of a structure of future anteriority and inclusive exception that impinges on the way a cultural object may be approached that is non-consumptive. My intention is to show that the ordinal arrangement of the stories in this collection, together with the individual narrative structure of each, suggest a larger narrative of the emergence of the modern Latin American man of letters in self-constituting interaction with his/her object of knowledge. The experience of this junction, where the subject and its cultural objects are taken to arise in unison, is what can be called the (Latin American) ‘cultural thing’. The collection can be conceived as the very emblem of this thing, as the belated imminence, first wondrous and then terrifying, of their joint emergence. Within this larger narrative, Brodie’s call for the preservation of the *Yahoos* as a cultural unit retrospectively echoes the series of mediations that precede the piece, which are non-apparent in this last tale, but which it nonetheless encompasses, since this story, in all its uncanny characteristics, is the irreducible supplemental product of that mediation, both a remainder, and a reminder.

If, modernity was, since its beginning, a globalizing phenomenon in which “all domination over beings” in the continent, with all the charge of terror this conveys, was perpetrated under the pretext of all the affective charge of wonder the word ‘progress’ (as the harbinger of the New) may carry, and if, as Julio Ramos has argued, Latin American divergent

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<sup>193</sup> In talking about the much celebrated ethnographic report *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*, by Marjorie Shostak, anthropologists Ferguson and Gupta invoke a series of critiques by other anthropologists that apply to Borges’ tale. Shostak depicts the !Kung as a “pre-existing ontological entity”, outside of history, etc. (p. 15) In citing other sources that demolish Shostak’s exoticizing discourse, Gupta and Ferguson call attention to the relations of material inequality at work in the process of production of cultural difference. Germane to their argumentation is the idea that discourses of cultural difference, in other words, the core of ethnography, of which the short-story *Brodie’s Report* seems to be an allegory, have consistently effaced the traces of their own material conditions of possibility, namely colonialism. Gupta, Akhil & James Ferguson. “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference.”, pp. 6-23.

modernisms can more or less be conceived of as a wealth of documented attempts at overcoming, in the name of civilization, the immanence implicit in this tension, this means that one should pay closer attention, in our interactions with those cultural objects, to the demand for narration that the legacy of the abject violence of these over-comings calls for. This is the larger meaning of the call to “never forget their bestial nature,” upon which the terrifying disposition of being in which a “dark emptiness of irrelevance” unfolds in our (self)-annihilating relation with such objects. Borges stands, in this sense, as an exceptionally emblematic figure, for his stories often have the particularity of portraying the interaction between the two sides of this process: of the lettered man as affirmatively incarnating the sufferance of the abject guilt of this symbolic debt, a man in constant duel between an imminence over something past and a remembrance of a thing to come; and the cultural artifact whose ‘wonder’ depends on the imminent return of this terrifying transgression. This interaction portrays the situation of a lettered man caught between these two moments: the first wonder of the cultural event, and the terror of the eternal fight that subtends it. This *in between* is what is narrated in many of his tales, as a legacy in the Latin American cultural wealth that demands an interpretation, if it is to be a legacy at all.

Frequently performing the persona of cultural guardians, Borges’ protagonists nonetheless indicate where the ‘treasure’ of Latin American particular universality should be looked at: not in the wonder of the cultural result of those attempts, as the later Boom generation would have us do, but in the disruptive ‘barbaric’ violence implicit in them, on which the first depends.

V. *First Beginning: Undr*

Why, in Borges, this imminence of something not yet revealed is never like a dawn, as if this wondrous beginning was always already at the threshold of a night's terror? Why this paradox of imminence that is always crepuscular, shrouded without exception within the vestiges of a distant past? A state of wonder connotes the lingering space of a timeless questioning and of a being-lost that grounds the untimeliness and the encounter that the word signifies.

*Undr* is a perfect story of future anteriority. It describes the passage from the imminent fear of something to come, into the wonder of what has already happened. Within the story, wonder will have been that experience, but that experience will have prevailed, in the cultural encounter of consuming the cultural object that is the tale we are reading (the narrator is, in a way, narrating, selling, the experience of *his reading as credible*), as the affective overlapping of a terrifying imminence of things past and the wondrous remembrance of things to come. It will be remembered as a beginning, but it is actually the 'last' to come. This story, which like any story, begins by creating in the reader an expectation that projects into the chronological futurity of the events what is already their past imminence- something that is already past will be re-created for the enjoyment of an audience-, thus entertaining a relation of irreducible, fundamental ambiguity between the writer and its reader, perhaps offers an opportunity to pose the question of how these two realms jar to convey the idea of a non-consumable, eternal remainder that insists beyond any act of culture consumption.

In the beginning of the story, the narrator feels that he should warn that the reader will look in vain for the pages that he is translating, and that will constitute the core of the story,

*Libellus* (1615) of Adam of Bremen, who, as we all know, was born and died in the eleventh century. Lappenberg found the text within a manuscript in the Bodleian, at Oxford; given its wealth of circumstantial detail, he judged it to be a late interpolation, but he did publish it as a curiosity in his *Analecta Germanica* (Leipzig 1894). (545)

It is, in other words, an impossible non-place, shrouded within the vestiges of an improbable cultural object, lost and found in the labyrinth of accumulated knowledge (the series of transliterations, translations and interpretations the story alludes to). *Undr* is the word the narrator uses in his tale to designate the non-place where this happens.<sup>195</sup> At first sight, in what Hegel would have probably called the consciousness of sense-perception, before anything is told, but also after anything is left, from the reading of a tale, or even after listening to a story well told, this word is supposed to remain, and the effects it evokes linger in us, for the longest of time, when even the details of its plot have been lost, even when the echo of its insight's lightning has withered away. In the words of Heidegger, it points at the origin, certainly not of storytelling, but of beings themselves, as they "first come to stand in their form," that is, in their most immediate "unconcealedness", in the intimacy of their disclosure.

But, as we have seen, this wonder hems into its core the abject terror of a battle to the death. And this story is not the exception. The story is written by Adam of Bremen, who refers to the search of the Icelandic poet Ulf Sigurdarson (a probable allusion to Sigurd, the hero of the Norse *Völsunga Saga*, and the *Nibelungs*, as Siegfried) for the Word that stands for all poetry ever conceived, by virtue of which there is an *endless wandering*, in a labyrinth of sorts, *which is also his own life*, and at the end of which he finds this word revealed to him: *Undr*. He had heard it before, in the middle of a meeting with a king, in which an infinite and monotonous chant was sung; it is very significant that *he forgot the word immediately, and could not retrieve it*. The

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<sup>195</sup> Plato talks about this taumaturgical character of the Sophist; opposed to this, there is the disenchanting, demystifying power of theory.

word, the understanding of its full meaning, comes last, and Ulf (a not so distant reminiscence of Wolf, the symbol par excellence of the Wanderer in the Occidental ideary), in order for this word to be revealed to him, *has to go through the anticipated terror of being lost in his own life, which entails a self-surrendering into the openness of an absolutely other*. In other words, he will have *to wander*, like Ulysses, be no-one, in order for him to understand the full meaning of the word *to wonder*. He will have to become a wanderer, in order to understand the meaning of wonder. He needs to lose himself, in order to find something through which that being-lost will have retrospectively acquired its full meaning. The Open here, announces the overcoming, the *going-through* of this terror, as a terrifying assumption in the nowness of its presence.<sup>197</sup> In order for Ulf, the poet, the wanderer, to find this treasure, the search takes place in what is described as *a savage, uncharted territory*,<sup>198</sup> in the place of the *Urns*, where the poet, before being graced with the revelation of the Word of words, is told by the *Urn* king's poet, Bjarni Thorkelsson, that he will have to be Everyone and No-one. He wanders, in order to become the wondered one. Throughout the rest of his life, he "was a boatman, a slave trader, a slave, a lumberjack, a thief of caravans, a singer [. . .]" At the end, he comes back to the King's poet. He finally reveals to the tired traveler the magic word:

- 'Did you often sing in those lands?' He asked.

The question took me by surprise.

'At first,' I said, 'I sang to earn my bread. Then, from a fear that I do not understand, I grew distant from the singing and the harp.'

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<sup>197</sup> Heidegger names this experience of unconditional deliverance, in talking about Rainer Maria Rilke, *sine cura*, without care, the carelessness of the open in which the only true security might be found.

<sup>198</sup> Borges, 88-89.

- 'Hmm.' He nodded.

- 'Now, go on with your story.' I complied. Then there fell a long silence. 'What were you given by the first woman you slept with?' he asked. 'Everything,' I answered.

- 'I, too, have been given everything, by life. Life give all men everything, but most men do not know this. My voice is tired and my fingers weak, but listen to me . . .'

He spoke the word *Undr*, which means *wonder*. I was overwhelmed by the song of the man who lay dying, but in his song, and in his chord, I saw my own labors, the slave girl who had given me her first love, the men I had killed, the cold dawns, the northern lights over the water, the oars. I took up the harp and sang- a different word.

- 'Hmm,' said the poet, and I had to draw close to hear him.

- 'You have understood me.' (458-459)

This word, *Undr*, with the last vowel at its beginning and with its muted end, eats upon itself even almost before being pronounced; it is *almost* a beginning of something, and already an end. The glow of a story, its *charm* is, therefore, the *charm* of the Idea unveiled in its wondrous imminence, however distorted and betrayed, and the word itself is nothing, for the sound of it is everything. But the full meaning, the particular content, of the sound of this *imminence* is only accessible as a *remembrance* of a terrifying thing that is already past, when the wanderer has found out that it makes no difference which word is used, because in its inaugural immediacy, it does not mean anything. In the story, *Undr* is the word of that radical openness to which humans are exposed, that, even though it suggests a first beginning, is revealed in the end. The wonder of this openness only comes at the price of experiencing in terror one's abject *being there* in the utter otherness of the Open. The story, therefore, proposes a definition of the emergence of the New as the *wondrous remembrance of (the terrifying imminence of belated) things to come*.

Arguably one of the best examples of this ambiguity that a writer and his/her reader entertain in the service of a non-consumptive preservation of the New to-come, would be the short story *The Book of Sand*. In it, an anonymous writer, who is within the story also a reader, narrates, in the form of an anecdote, the story of a visit paid to him by another bibliophile, a familiar stranger who, after unsuccessfully trying to sell him some Bibles, is granted the opportunity, which is also, implicitly, a challenge, to examine a strange book, *The Holy Writ*, better known as *The Book of Sand* by its previous, presumably anonymous possessors, who happened to belong to an *untouchable caste* in India. The duel here is immediately, yet temporarily tamed by the transaction of a cultural object, again, a Bible. This cultural item, arguably the epitome of Western civilization, the accumulation of different versions of which is the main object of their antagonism- we are dealing here with two Bible collectors, who presumably pride themselves of possessing the best collection of Bibles- represents the life-long accumulated wealth of (Occidental) culture in one person. There is no possible negotiation to be done around this, since the whole course of events seems to hinge on who is the more culturally wealthy, and worthy. The precarious economy of this antagonism is going to unravel by the sudden appearance of this other, bad object that signifies the questioning, not only of cultural wealth but of the notion of economy tout court. The narrator/reader examines a book without beginning or end, whose pages proliferate infinitely, and specific passages of which disappear after being seen only *once*, never to be found again. The narrator identifies a random passage in the book, and is invited by his visitor, the current possessor of the book, to close it and try to retrieve the passage; after several failed attempts, during a sleepless night, at finding the passage,

the narrator gives up. He takes it to the National Library and hides it in the basement, where he tries hard not to look where the book exactly went.

*The Book of Sand* is a sort of labyrinth brought to the author's hands by the fateful visit of an unexpected visitor. Since the title of both, the fictional text and the actual one, within which the first exists, is the same, one could ask whether it could be read as the emblem of the affective relation the writer sustains with any text, where an irreducible gap of illegibility sustains and menaces it from within. This necessary gap, where the notion of belief, and therefore the notion of a religious pact is brought to the stage as the necessary precondition for something in the order of the wonderful to come, is established in the tale as the declared impossibility of the author to convey that which has happened to him. As in many other tales, the author is asking the reader for a token of credit, to transcend the realm of the merely credible, an unconditional, gratuitous token of faith, something that the reader will have to give, at his own risk of being deceived, in order for the promised experience of something truthful to be realized:

The line consists of an infinite number of points; the plane, of an infinite number of lines; the volume, of an infinite number of planes; the hyper-volume, of an infinite number of volumes . . . No- this, *more geometrico*, is decidedly not the best way to begin a tale. To say that the story is true is by now a convention of every fantastic tale; mine, nevertheless, *is* true. (Borges, 480)

The narrator refers to the story with a sort of disclaimer, introducing himself as being inherently incapable of narrating it, as an illegitimate, unauthorized, yet authentic narrator. One could even say that his authenticity, even in the guise of an abject unworthiness, has to run against the grain of his lack of authority, in order for him to become the author and therefore gain authority over what is being told.



The question that haunts the writer of this story, a haunting that arguably is the message of the *Book of Sand* itself, revolves around the question of ‘selling’ a story to the reader at a rather onerous price, as it were, just as the mysterious visitor offers, generously, and after several failed attempts at selling some rare editions of the Bible, to sell this, the Book of Sand, an ostensibly onerous sale that is nonetheless conveyed in the form of an offering ‘No, I’m offering it to you,’ and he mentioned a great sum of money.” (482) [“No, se lo ofrezco a Usted- dijo, y propuso una suma elevada”<sup>199</sup>]. This book comes into his possession through *the exchange* of a rare edition of the Holy Bible (another Holy Writ), *plus the amount of his jubilation*. The selling, as it were, of a gift, in any case a concession, a transaction to his disadvantage, a compromise to the lucrative purpose of his visit, done within the limits of a ‘letting go’ of sorts, because the Bible seller did not get, will not get what he went there for. This story, sold to the reader at such an onerous price, risks, nevertheless, to be worth nothing, if it exceeds the limits of the credible. For it is not anymore possible to sustain, to entertain the illusion and possibility of selling a story that everyone will believe, will buy- as one often says in English, “ok, I’ll buy it”, or as the author seems to have said to himself, when closing the murky deal-, unless it is in advance declared incredible, impossible to believe.

As the strange visitor did to him in his story, he declares in advance his failure, his insufficiency, to render an account, of which he is going to be, nonetheless, the truthful, legitimate and only possible narrator. He is going to be truthful, even when the artifices and falsities of language impede him in doing so. He will try selling it, like a good, unexpected, untimely salesman, for the price of someone’s retirement. And even if he cannot succeed in

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<sup>199</sup> Borges, 134.

selling the story to the reader as credible, he will try to make an offering, at a very high price, of another, fantastic, impossible story, not that of an infinite, yet bounded book, but of the impossibility of telling it. He is going, at least, to be the truthful witness to the impossibility of being a truthful, and therefore a faithful witness. One can only negotiate on an irreducible substrate of the non-negotiable, Derrida would say, and this non-negotiable (non consumable) remainder in a cultural object is what is at stake here. Also at stake is that the reader, who is also the narrator whose account we are reading in this deal, this contract that one cannot but subscribe, will believe it, with the certainty of an eternal truth- he, in the end, will 'buy it'. A common denominator in Borges' storytelling, the declaration of his impotence to narrate, which is also the impotence of the letter itself, of inscribing *in* the text, and therefore transmitting, that is, communicating, the truth value of that which is consequently lost to forgetting, or to the writer's inability to be the *faithful* narrator of the very event for which he stands as a private, impossible witness, doubles here the impotence of a reader to retrieve, to recuperate the passage, to locate the *precise meaning* of the experience, the authenticity of which he is nonetheless the only and truthful witness. This is because the wondrous event of this truth, like the pages of the untouchable writ at his perplexed hands, will have been lost forever. In other words, the writer is the sole *unworthy* witness of the cultural unnamable. He is *undeserving* of what he narrates, even when he may be one among many, indeed a multitude as bounded and yet as innumerable, in other words *an abject outcast*, like the barbarous collectivity to whom the book once belonged.

Within the story, both books, the Holy Bible, and *The Book of Sand*, bear almost the same name, in an alternation in which a correlation between the public and the private cancels while supplementing itself: there is a Holy Writ, known officially to all men by *The Holy Bible*, offered

in exchange for a book bearing the title *Holy Writ*, but known, *unofficially*, as the *Book of Sand*, arguably by all those who, like the narrator of the story, bear witness to the same experience of an impossible reference and a doubtful faithfulness. The uncanny, disturbing, unholy quality of the book- we are told that the book *is diabolical*-, which makes the Bible seller, and thereafter the narrator, dispose of it, as an unbearable excrement-, stands as the dialectical correlate to the obsessive desire of the narrator, of the wondered reader, for *The Book of Sand*. Bounded, yet infinite, this impossible book may represent the space that exceeds a text. There is an experience of totality, a message that the book, which the book contains, but from which the writer is excluded, not because he is not able to read it, at least once, but because he is utterly unable to retrieve it, and therefore, possibly to reference it in an act that is both a readerly self-authorization and a faithful relation. This is, perhaps, the definition of the wonderful itself, something that is unrepeatably, on which name a relation of debtor and creditor is thereafter instituted.

This book can stand for any book whatsoever, because its title is also the title of the story within which it figures. We, the readers, read the actual text titled *Book of Sand*, the story written by a reader who reads a fictional text titled *The Book of Sand*, and in doing so, declares his inability, and also makes us declare our own, of conveying the truth that his story intends to tell us, in other words to sell us, as truthful, the story, but he assures us, through his naked word, that he writes this impossibility as truthful, which is also the impossibility inherent in him, as a reader, of reading the totality of the book as a unit of meaning, precisely because the book is, *literally*, a unit *beyond itself*, a book, literally a *tome* that is not- *impossible*, *but it is*, says the visitor, implying that the impossible *is*- more than itself, since something always remains

outside his examination, and something will always be left out from our totalizing reading, and therefore from the possibility of a writing that accounts for that reading, and of us, as readers, of reading the impotent truth of that impossibility. Incompletion is the condition for a book to become as such, a tome, and paradoxically the *Book of Sand* is no book *at all*, because it is infinite.<sup>200</sup>

This is the story of an impossibility that nonetheless is, of the existence of the impossible as such, which grounds the infinitude of possibilities, of the infinite as the realm of the possible.<sup>201</sup> But we still believe the story, we ‘buy it,’ as one says in English, filled with wonder, for there is certainly something truthful and wondrous about all this, even though we know it is a fantastic, false, therefore an impossible tale- to tell it is an abomination as criminal as the existence of the thing itself, to tell it is the conjuring of this abjection. In a cultural object, there is some truth that we cannot fully apprehend, because like the un-retrievable pages in the *Book of Sand*, it slips through and past our grasp. And we, like the reader in the story, will have eventually to put the thing to rest, feeling that we have been had, lured into a disadvantageous transaction, and shelve the thing in a hidden place, not precisely in the encyclopedic wealth of our collective memory, the infinite Library, another labyrinth which is there for us to retrieve and get lost into, but in the cellar of oblivion, a place which we prefer to forget, even though we know it is there, as a kind of excess of an already excessive over-accumulation. We are irredeemably lost in the immense shelves of the Library, because what we look for is in its cellar.

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<sup>200</sup> There is an underlying affinity between this story and *Funes el memorioso*, the story of a man incapable of forgetting every single detail of his sensory perceptions, but for that reason incapable of any abstraction and any thought, condemned to live in a hallucinatory world of the pure immediacy of perception; perhaps the only one capable of reading the Book of Sand without becoming mad would be the bed-bound Funes.

<sup>201</sup> Or the Imaginary as the inside-out of the Real.

In *El Zahir*, the narrator tells the story of a *coin of common circulation* in Buenos Aires, which fell by chance into his hand, the seventh of June, and which had been, in parenthesis, which in the story operates like a dividing line between the sordid reality of Teodelina Vilar and the marvelous world of the Zahir, different things in different moments in history:

(In Gujarat, at the end of the eighteenth century, the Zahir was a tiger; in Java it was a blind man in the Surakarta mosque, stoned by the faithful; in Persia, an astrolabe that Nadir Shah ordered thrown into the sea; in the prisons of Madhdi, in 1892, a small sailor's compass, wrapped in a shred of cloth from a turban, that Rudolf Karl von Slatin touched; in the synagogue in Córdoba, according to Zotenberg, a vein in the marble of one of the twelve hundred pillars; in the ghetto in Tetuán, the bottom of a well.) (Borges, 242)

He will narrate his experience of *how he cannot forget the Zahir*, how gradually the only thing that he will be able to think of is the Zahir. He will narrate, even if thanks to the Zahir, he is not who he used to be, “even if only partially he is still Borges.” The reference to the decadent, common-place life of his beloved strikes a stark contrast, yet an uncanny similar one with what he narrates as the unbearable experience with the diabolic coin. The parallelism between Teodelina Villar, in her own way also “a coin of common circulation,” and the *Zahir*, is more than a mere counterpoint the terms of which are external to each other. In effect, here the terrifying imminence of what is too late- arguably Teodelina's *recent*, untimely decease-, recurs in constant overlapping with a wondrous remembrance of what is to come- the appearance of the *Zahir* and the protagonist's gradual descent into a state that is reminiscent of the heavenly stupor of *La señora mayor*.

The narrator comes back from the funeral of a dear friend, Teodelina Villar, for whom he secretly cherished an unrequited love, and whom he nonetheless describes, like the female

characters of *Juan Muraña*, *La señora mayor* and *El duelo*, in rather condescending terms. Turning the character into an icon of the ephemeral, everything in the life of Teodelina Villar is vulgar and ordinary. Moreover, his description of her has the undertones of a gender-based commentary of class difference. She “sought the absolute, like Flaubert, but the absolute in the ephemeral.” (243) When she died, she “magically became what she had been twenty years before; her features recovered the authority that arrogance, money, youth, the awareness of being the *crème de la crème*, restrictions, a lack of imagination, and stolidity can give.” (243) Thanks to this ‘love,’ he became a *snob*, “the most sincere of Argentinian passions.”<sup>202</sup>

After buying a glass of beer (*una caña*) at an establishment where a game of cards was taking place, *to appease his pain* and *to forget* about the recent death of his beloved, and after receiving *as change* the *Zahir*, Borges decides to take a walk. The walk soon becomes a tortuous and mortifying labyrinth, in which the coin becomes the shifter for the emergence of an unstoppable train of cultural images from the past: geographic, historical and fictional. It is important to mention that this coin is likened by the narrator to an *obolus*, whose protean characteristic is to serve as a form of payment for a debt contracted by virtue of a belonging to, of being the property of a *cult*: a debt, and an obligation that must be paid *as a gift*.<sup>203</sup> Through the *Zahir*, all coins become an *obolus*:

The thought struck me that there is no coin that is not the symbol of all the coins that shine endlessly down throughout history and fable. I thought of Charon’s *obolus*; the alms that Belisarius went about begging for; Judas’ thirty pieces of silver; the drachmas of the courtesan Laïs; the ancient coin proffered by one of the Ephesian sleepers; the bright

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<sup>202</sup> Borges, 107. My translation.

<sup>203</sup> óbolo *s. m.* 1 *culto* Cantidad pequeña de dinero que se da como limosna o donativo para contribuir en algún fin. 2 Unidad de peso y moneda de plata que se usaron en la antigua Grecia. *Diccionario Manual de la Lengua Española Vox*.

coins of the wizard in the *1001 Nights*, which turned into disks of paper; Isaac Laquedem's inexhaustible denarius; the sixty thousand coins, one for every line of an epic, which Firdusi returned to a king because they were silver and not gold [ . . . ]  
(Borges, 244)

The ongoing (disavowed) duel for Teodelina gradually is confused with the agony (in itself a duel) that the narrator wages against the *Zahir*. The mortal insidiousness with which this monstrous catalogue of indirect references to fictional stories and historical episodes invades the narrator's mind, seems to be the correlate to the absolute, abject emptiness of consumptive goods with which Teodelina "practiced [her] continuous metamorphosis, as if to flee from herself."  
(106) In other words, Capitalism- its timeless, 'dark emptiness of irrelevance' emblemized by Teodelina's artifacts, proliferating by virtue of all domination over beings, is here revealed as the *sine qua non* for this marvelous cultural wealth. It is as if the belated abjection of a life populated by modern *bric à brac* provoked in the author this diarrhea-like litany of a cultural legacy that threatens to kill him, as it actually does.

Just as in *The Book of Sand*, eventually, he "prefers to loose it [the *Zahir*]." <sup>204</sup> He, Borges the reader, works on a story, which is *the story of a writer and his story*, to forget the *Zahir*:

The narrator is an ascetic who has renounced all commerce with mankind and lives on a kind of moor. (The name of the place is Gnitahidr.) Because of the simplicity and innocence of his life, he is judged by some to be an angel; that is a charitable sort of exaggeration, because no one is free of sin- he himself has cut his father's throat, though it is true that his father was a famous wizard who had used his magic to usurp an infinite treasure to himself. Protecting this treasure from cankerous human greed is the mission to which the narrator has devoted his life; day and night he stands guard over it. Soon, perhaps too soon, that watchfulness will come to an end: the stars have told him that the

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<sup>204</sup> Borges, *El Aleph*, 110.

sword that will sever it forever has already been forged. [ . . . ] one paragraph, offhandedly mentions “scales”; another says that the treasure he watches over is of red rings and gleaming gold. At the end, we realize that the ascetic is the serpent Fafnir and the treasure on which the creature lies coiled is the gold of the Nibelungen. The appearance of Sigurd ends the story. (Borges, 246)

In the midst of this iconography of delirium, the obsessive narrator remarks that money is “*Money is abstract*, [ . . . ] it is a repertoire of future times. It can be an evening just outside the city, or a Brahms melody, or maps, or chess, or coffee, or the words of Epictetus, which teach contempt for gold; it is a Proteus more changeable than the Proteus of the Isle of Pharos. (245) He finally traces the origin of his curse to an ancient Islamic superstition. He learns that he will become like Teodelina Villar’s sister’s friend (to say that he will become *like* Teodelina, as saying that all his antagonists in other stories are himself, would probably be too obvious). Like Teodelina, the narrator will perish soon, immersed in a timeless stupor that reminds one of *La señora mayor*. He will spend the rest of his life in a sort of dazed lucidity about which “it would be the same as maintaining that the pain is terrible for an *anesthetized* patient to whom his cranium is being opened.”<sup>205</sup>

The function of mere *exchange* attributed to this object is there onwards transferred from the *Zahir* to the narrator. He becomes a *mesmerized* and *hypnotized* victim to the automatisms of an undead figure that one usually attributes to the urban *flâneur*. It is the narrator who, through the relentless metonymy of his incessant identificatory substitutions, becomes a sort of *trans-historical flâneur*, looking *fascinated at the phantasmagoria, the dreamscape of high culture that has the opposite effect to that of Teodelina’s whims*. What is the meaning of this diabolical co-implication between this double stream of consumptive drive, as if the question of the *value* of a

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<sup>205</sup> Borges, 116. My translation.



cultural object could not be posited separately from this endless becoming-trivial, as if they were in the end the unconscious of each other?

In short, what I find interesting in this story is the way in which the ‘rawdy’ or ‘vain,’ if not altogether ‘barbaric’ elements of modern consumption that characterize the life of Teodelina- cars, luxurious apartments in fashionable neighborhoods, fashion design, in short, familiar allusions to the *urban life of high society* that one may find today in magazines such as *Hola!* and *Cosmopolitan*, connect and describe a line of affinity with the tumultuous encyclopedia of an apocryphal knowledge that invades the narrator’s persona to condemn him to perplexity- all revolving around the *same* coin, of which the lettered man is ultimately the embodiment. The ultimate thematic engine of the story is ciphered on the insight that, in the end, both realms, and not any one of them taken in isolation, constitute what we know as ‘culture,’ that they are like two jet-streams that shoot out from opposite sides of the same shattered mirror of one’s consciousness. This co-symmetry cannot be taken just metaphorically. One is, historically, the necessary correlate of the other, precisely like two sides of the same coin. The first, the realm of the sordid parade of commodities that cater to humans’ beastly appetites, is there to affirm the second, the realm of the cultured and ‘sublime,’ that procession of what, by virtue of their quasi-mythical antiquity that situates them in the very threshold that separates fiction from history, is considered the *possession* of a highly cultured man, a possession that becomes a matter of material collection, as if, in both cases, one were talking about a *dead thing*- literature, philosophy, history, a book, a coin, an expensive car, a fashion magazine, expensive women . . . The mortification is paradoxically provoked by the narrators’ automated evocation of the uncanny thing (the coin), and not, as one might usually expect, by the trivialities of Teodelina Vilar.

At the end of our reading, we are left with the uncomfortable impression that our cultural capital is, after all, some ‘thing,’ a shameful and execrable ‘artifact,’ useless, a mere collectible, or not even that- an obsolete, useless, apparatus that resembles in its sheer monster-like futility Baltasar’s wondrous cage. Furthermore, I would argue that this is the moment when the division between manual and intellectual labor reveals its historical implication with the constitution of the modern nation state. To the extent that what is always *interdicted* in Borges’ writing is the very metaphysical notion of ‘value’. He positions his own unconscious division alongside the function of the State: between legal and pure violence, if we take that the function of the State is to monopolize value and national meaning, by monopolizing violence. This is because the State functions as the legitimizing instance of authority over what embodies ‘the national’ as ultimately an aesthetic emotion, the amniotic fold which, through the performances of its own limits, confers them the status of sense, meaning, and regulates the libidinal *synaesthetic* homeostasis between the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’ in the national body. No ‘aura’ without the authority invested on and officiated by the uncanny priesthood of the State ideologue, since it is through his sanctioning that surplus value (as materialized death drive) can retain its hegemony over the human *sensorium*.<sup>206</sup> Through the State, the aporia within the signifier ‘culture’ (human groups ‘outside’ of the civilizational project of modernity/object of aesthetic fruition ‘within’ the national tale), is sublimated, internalized as ‘nation’: culture thereon becomes the set of policed and ritualized acting-outs, through which the nation performs itself by obsessively exorcising (and exporting) its ‘inner outsides’. Since ‘value’ is his symptom *par excellence*, the magical object in Borges’ tales is for that reason always *in excess* or *in lack* of it; it never ‘hits the mark,’

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<sup>206</sup> Terry Eagleton remarks that “the aesthetic began as a discourse on the body.” Eagleton, Terry. “The Ideology of the Aesthetic,” *Poetics Today*, p. 327-338.

because doing so would entail becoming a *dead thing*, pure exchange value, that is, money. For, at the end, the truth that Borges' stories conceal, at least inasmuch as it *informs* them, is the fundamental co-transparency between the flow of bodies/commodities- expensive cars and women, fashion design, magazines, etc.- and the diarrheic production, flow and exchange of knowledges- philosophy, science, history, *kabbala*, Sufism, Buddhism, literature . . . In other words, what cannot be seen, because it structures the whole aesthetic economy in Borges' writing, what *spaces* the fictional world in his stories, is the Law's very impossibility to subtract itself from its dead center as pure violence, which at the level of fiction- but fiction as truth-effect-, translates into the lettered man's impossibility to extricate himself from the nomadic barbarism that constitutes him.<sup>207</sup> It is not that it is not there, for us to see, because, after all, it drives his narrative, but because it is Borges' own *noli me legere*, his hidden division.<sup>208</sup> This impossibility is in turn projected *onto* the magical object. The 'disjunctive synthesis' that runs between the gaucho and the lettered man that live within the grammatical 'I' that is the narrator of most of Borges' short-stories, can only come to a momentary armistice by projecting itself on an object, who 'confesses' this secret in an uncontrollable flow of knowledge. This object does not have any other function than to reinstate the separation between them, and *hide* it quickly afterwards, deep within the archival vaults of the nation, those institutional sanctuaries of dead knowledge- the library, or in the cellar of a city slum, like *El Aleph*- where the Nation meets the State in mortal, incestuous embrace.

In his fiction, Borges lays bare this paradox, between the question of the Argentine State, as being already inscribed within the planetary logic of Capital, and what is properly its function

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<sup>207</sup> That is, perhaps, why he renounced writing in the baroque, because what the baroque enacts is Capital as a function of the Nation.

<sup>208</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. *L'espace littéraire*. "You will not read me."

as mediating agent between Capital and Nation. Even if Borges, the writer, positions himself subjectively as indisputable master, with respect to the triangular relation that unfolds between this cultural object (the short story), its readers, and the transatlantic cultural capital that we are supposed to take as self-evident, within the fictional universe of the story, Borges, the fictional reader, positions himself in the hysterical place of being a reader/writer in perpetual, ambiguous *becoming*; but this ‘hysterization’ of the cultural subject comes only at the price of a *displacement* that is itself double: within the story, it plays out in the projection of the narrator’s self-division onto an object that, as it were, ‘speaks’ to the narrator; this ambiguity is simultaneously projected on the cultural stage of a reader (literally, ‘I’ become Borges), and the short-story, that will partake of the same uncanny duplicity. In Borges’ fantastic narrative, we therefore witness a double torsional movement. On the one hand, this very ambiguity, the game of presences and absences, that Borges, the fictional reader, sets up as the one playing out *within* an object as commodity-fetish, which in Marxist terminology is the correlate of the very fault-line that runs along the division between manual and intellectual labor. Second, at the level in which we, as readers who do not recognize ourselves fully in our function as writers(others) to-come, partake of that experience, assist to the evanescent moment where the division between the reader and the writer- or between cultural consumer and producer- becomes, ever so momentarily, hard to establish. One may call the first moment the ‘Benjaminian’ element in Borges’ stories, insofar as one is purely within the ‘auratic’ at the moment where it is about to spill all over a pre-textual reality that is fictional. The second would be the properly ‘Marxist’ one, as it signals the moment where this overflow, looks, ‘reflects’ back to us, inasmuch as the division between intellectual and manual labor is suspended.

But there is, perhaps most importantly, a third torsional point, which describes a diagonal along the preceding two, one which we could perhaps call the properly ‘Kantian’ moment in Borges. This is the one that unravels the equally illusory division between subject (as perceptual, rational interiority) and object (as sensory condition of experience). The problem is that, even if the horizon of this triple upheaval at the crossroads of this dialectics is hinted at, it is never accomplished, for everything in Borges takes place within the expediency of a cultural object as mere regulatory artifact, where the hysterical symptom of the nation is the result of an internalization and a displacement. Aesthetic enjoyment, in the most ‘classical’ sense of the term, that is, as mere cathartic regulative idea within the police apparatus of the Capitalist Nation-State, is ultimately never questioned in Borges. And it colludes with what Susan Buck-Morss would call the *anaesthetic* function that culture acquired incrementally during the creation of a neurasthenic society during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe.<sup>209</sup> The creation of the techno-aesthetical apparatuses, which substituted drugs in their function of creating an autistic world of sensorial painlessness, conceivably had a late entrance in Latin America, and a very restricted diffusion within the recently independent nation-states. It can nevertheless be said that in Latin America this function was quickly adopted by all the epistemic bodies that were being imported by intellectual/economic elites who did their studies, almost without exception, in academic centers throughout Europe. The snapshot of the Old Man, watching Delgadinha in Márquez’s last novel, here acquires a deeper significance. In fact, it makes Octavio Paz’s affirmation that Latin American thought was only possible within the aesthetic realm reveals, again, more truth than he probably intended.<sup>210</sup> In fact, one can say that Borges brings this anaesthetic function of knowledge as techno-aesthetical apparatus to its very

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<sup>209</sup> Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics*.

<sup>210</sup> Márquez, *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*. See Chapter 1.

limits, only in order to render it all the more precious, precisely when it is at the point of being forever lost. Nevertheless, there is in the Borgesian text the lingering desire to preserve the function of the real *within* the fictional which, ‘if taken from behind’- probably the same way Benjamin wanted to use Ludwig Klages’ mystical Fascism for a Marxist purpose. This way of reading Borges as the dream-work of the function of the State can illuminate, and possibly resuscitate, fiction’s long lost historical function, in other words, the desire to preserve fiction (and aesthesis) as the site of a political truth.

In the next chapter, I will explore how Argentine writer Alain Pauls accomplishes just this, by positioning himself, and thereby his readers, subjectively within the discourse of the analyst, with respect to the cultural capital that he takes as its object of critique- the *testimonial*, as the discourse that signals the falsification and commodification to which the century’s ‘passion for the Real’ was submitted. This will necessarily entail, of course, a meta-critical commentary, which I will develop more fully in Chapters V and VII, on the implications relating to the fact that Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxism have become fictional dispositives of cultural subversion in Latin America. What is interesting in Alain Pauls’ novel *Historia del Llanto* is that the narrator turns the aesthetic device of the *testimonial* into the very protean device that in Márquez was only visible as an imaginary projection of a displacement of the national fantasy, in Vallejo was the very structuring principle that made of the relationship between Fernando and Alexis partake of an agony of the gift that staged the very function of the State, and in Borges became the object wherewith this agony became itself a magical/terrifying fetish.<sup>211</sup> This *subjective shift* with respect to the discourse that regiments the experience of Statist barbarism in Argentina, however minimal, is doubly significant, since it at once enables a kind of

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<sup>211</sup> See M. Mauss’ distinction between agonistic and non-agonistic gift.

writing that undermines and subverts the very discursive ether through which the narration progresses. On the other hand, it entails the elaboration of an interruptive *ethos* that structures the narration, in which the Western philosophical tradition of truth as being one that is extracted from an inert body, is revealed at the very moment of its ideological insertion into the State. Although it is not altogether apparent, the narrator's gesture with respect to the *testimonio* genre is therefore connatural to Montiel's "What is this thing?" Only this time, it is not done on an aesthetic object, but on the rhetorical mechanisms of legibility and aesthetization of the experience of State violence on actual living bodies, *sanctioned* by the State.

## Chapter 4

### The Limbos of Disaffection: The Repolitization of Affect in Alan Paul's *Historia del Llanto*

Is there really Truth and Lie?  
Or is there only New and Old,  
and Lie is simply Truth's Old Age?  
- C.P. Kavafis,

Knowledge, which goes so far  
as to accept horror in order to know it,  
reveals the horror of knowledge.  
- Maurice Blanchot

This is the way the World ends,  
not with a bang, but a whimper.  
-T.S. Elliot

If what underscores the situation described in Borges' *Utopia of a Tired Man*, in the face of what J.F Lyotard called the "administered life"<sup>212</sup> in post-modernity, is the total absence of discontent that characterizes subjectivity, that is, as an instance of violent disruption over the signifying texture of a given reality; if in this state of things it therefore becomes superfluous even to talk about history and culture, otherwise than as dead artifacts, then the anesthetized and atomized lives of Alan Pauls' protagonists, embodying the consummation of a post-modern utopia of subjugated wills, is perhaps not very far from the one described in Borges' tale. Pauls' is a world where individuals' actions come rarely forward as attempts at recuperating the trace of their lost political subjectivity. They live, using R. M. Rilke's words, in the vulgar immediacy of an "already interpreted world", since their meaning has been sequestered by the undifferentiating violence of the democracies of post-dictatorship consensus. These discourses' consensus, in their

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<sup>212</sup> In *The Inhuman: Lectures on Time*. Lyotard, Jean-François. *Lo inhumano: charlas sobre el tiempo*. Buenos Aires: Manantial, 1998. Specifically, I want to evoke Lyotard's opposition between "administered life" and the unthinkable that should be the space for thinking, for example: "to be in the disposition to embrace that which thought is not prepared to think, that is what can be properly called *thinking*." (30)



attempt at hegemonizing sense, flattens out every instance of agonistic tension with what Nelly Richard calls the “wounded matter of remembrance.” It is an intransitive immediacy that, in its monotonous uniformity, bespeaks the erasure of the most disturbing and dissatisfied parcel of historical memory, a flat immediacy that Beatriz Sarlo attributes to the repertoire of “convened signifieds” and “valorative relativisms” that forecloses the possibility of memory as “the laborious activity of an open process.”<sup>213</sup>

In his three novels- *Wasabi*, *Historia del llanto*, and *El pasado*- the author describes the mediocre, post-dictatorship lives of Argentine characters for whom nothing in the order of the New will or can ever emerge. Trapped in the imminent fear of a terrifying future that is, paradoxically, already too late, they stand out as the mesmerized inheritors of a missed chance. Not even the remembrance of the long gone possibility of anything remotely comparable, not to this order, but even to the trace of its forgetting, is ever allowed to emerge, however briefly. Like the corpses of disappeared militants, whose memory the new spirit of ‘transition’ and ‘conciliation’ soon wanted to submit to a second disappearance, the unbearable affective excesses of this memory lie entombed, crypted in the invisible limbo of a numbed disaffection. These morsels of memory that the discourses of domestication and taming of post-dictatorship could not integrate into the circulatory logic of the exchange-value of the dictatorship in Argentine society, as an experience implicating, with its brutalizing and disintegrating force, each of its members (and not only their most direct ‘victims’), nevertheless hover as a menace over the private lives of individuals for whom the signifier ‘dictatorship’ may not have meant, in a first moment at least, a debacle of sense and meaning, but rather its guarantor. Like absentminded spectators of this disaster, the characters of his novels live as if enthralled in the

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<sup>213</sup> Sarlo, Beatriz. *Escenas de la vida post-moderna*.

background monotony of an eternal present, itself spectral, from which they are barely capable of emerging truly as subjects, if only momentarily, to gasp a desperate, yet affirmative sigh of terror. Heroism there is reduced to the redundancy of petty gestures, melodramatic encounters, barely genuine outbursts of ennui, in short, a pantomime of fin de siècle lassitude. It is the ominous triumph of sense, imposed as a verdict on the melancholy name of that hidden, secret promise of an order of things' disavowed loss. That is what, in awe, they babble. Their defeat is absolute, because every word, including 'justice,' 'truth' or 'revolution,' has been appropriated, engulfed, and integrated into the relentless machinery of exchange and profit. It is therefore a dismal spectacle staged for the impotent witnessing of a tired present.

His novels depict a catastrophe tailored to the requirements of this epoch. The private melodrama of an individual caught up in a sort of narcissistic labyrinth made of a plethora of objects for individual consumption, emblemizes this epoch, to the extent that this individual's utter disaffection is a metaphor for its incapability of re-instituting an inter-subjective link between his/her private affairs and these affairs' political coefficient. As such, the stories in Paul's novels unfold in the double register of a *fundamental mistrust* of the capacity of words any longer to relate to things, in what would constitute a moment of transcendental connection-which affect would signal as such-, and the half-conscious, yet vital necessity of their protagonists to re-establish this link, in other words, a re-connecting that paradoxically requires the stepping into the terror of a violent short-circuit from the consumptive reality within which they seem to exist. Like free floating capital, human bodies have come to be possessed by no-less free-floating signifiers that follow the enjoying principle of their random coupling and

decoupling, a cancerous proliferation of signifiers whose expenditure is its sole value.<sup>214</sup> But there is a spectral vestige that haunts and undermines from ‘within’ this possession. It is, as it were, a ‘dispossessed’ haunting: an enduring discontent, which is like the prelude of a dormant fear that *refuses* to play along the pre-established channels of this situation of automated simulation. Or is this rather the affected remainder, in the lines of Rei Terada, the clandestine metaphor of a refusal, standing as the last bastion of an unbending will? <sup>215</sup>

Therefore, what is at stake, in the singular experience of this loss, is not so much the future understanding of a past always already understood, and experienced, *as* traumatic, by the coming generations. Rather, it is the gloomy enormity of what remains *incomprehensible*. It is that which, for the possibility of its eventual narrative insistence, allegorizes the shattering failure of paradigms of knowledge that, until then, would have had to bear the burden of that task. For whatever is, today, left to-come from that experience, lies already delimited by the ideological confines of the calculable and reasonable. In other words, what seems to be

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<sup>214</sup> These mechanisms, Jameson has more or less characterized as constituting the essence of late modernity: money seems to be the excremental remainder, soon to be re-introjected, of the operations performed by the formula Money-Merchandise- (Capitalized) Money; Discourse- Cultural Objects- (More) Discourse.) Jameson, Fredrick. “ Culture and Finance Capital”, 246-265. The relevant passage starts with a clarification (itself a re-territorialization) of Guattari/Deleuze’s oft abused(that is, de-territorialized) concept of *detrterritorialization*, and a concurrent analogy with the more mundane *decontextualization*: “The first and most fateful detrterritorialization is [ . . . ]: the axiomatic of Capitalism decodes the terms of the older pre-capitalist coding systems and ‘liberates’ them for new and more functional combinations. The resonance of the new term can be measured against an altogether more frivolous [ . . . ] word, decontextualization; it properly suggests that anything wrenched out of its context [ . . . ] will always be recontextualized in new areas and situations. But detrterritorialization is far more absolute than that [ . . . ] For it rather implies a new ontological and free-floating state, one in which the context [ . . . ] has definitively been suppressed in favor of the form, in which the inherent nature of the product no longer lies in any specific market, any specific set of consumers or social and individual needs, but rather in its transformation into that element which by definition has no context or territory, and indeed no use-value as such, namely money.” The implied analogy here is, of course, that of Languages- Cultural Bodies- [Re-territorialized] Languages. That is to say, if use-value is to money to what truth-value is to language in and of itself, what is lost in this parallel shift in the cultural metonymy of capitalist production is, therefore, the cultural Thing as the auratic vehicle of a repressed barbarism, and its concomitant repositioning as a mere intermediate by-product for the proliferation of languages carrying the promise for a further surplus enjoyment (plus-de-jouir) that only the endless process of detrterritorialization and reterritorialization can secure as such.

<sup>215</sup> Terada, Rei. *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the ‘Death of the Subject’*.

irrevocably lost in Paul's stories, is the future of the uncertain and unexpected that lingered in whatever was left to come, as radically incommensurable with that knowledge, from that past. It is therefore at the narrative underside of a cultural gift's affective ambiguity, as both a source of terror and wonder of something that somehow signified a failure of meaning, where the ethical and political stakes of a narrative of the post-dictatorship are played out today.

The figure of an undead symbolic *cyst*, a grotesque protuberance that grows out of control, projecting layers of sense around a deserted core of an untold grief, possibly constitutes an appropriate cultural allegory of this refusal- if not of late modernist agendas - just as it stands as the spectral cipher for its dialectical other, i.e. finance capital and its mechanisms of exclusive attribution of exchange value to the ever-accelerating flux and re-flux of money. But something seems to remain from this operation: an unexpected cumulus of unfathomable waste, an ocean of unusable objects and dejected wills, coming to constitute- quite literally, in both senses of the word- *a refuse*, menacing- with all the charge of terrified wonder that the refusal of this refuse bears-, "to irrupt into the present with the purpose of redeeming the memory of a captive temporality."<sup>216</sup> There is always something ominous and terrorizing in this return of an excremental gift from the underbelly of a society surrendered to this tyrannical imperative. The cancerous, out of control overgrowth of symbolic production that characterizes late modern culture is, in this sense, an appropriate metaphor for this terror.

If there is a paradox common to Latin American, post-dictatorial modernities, whatever their divergences, a paradox of which all the excesses of the Latin American Neo-Baroque could unequivocally stand as a cultural symptom, it is that the relationship that dictatorships effectively came to interrupt and foreclose in an act of amnesia-like violence. If this violence is the

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<sup>216</sup> Galende, Federico. "La insurrección de las sobras", 24.

lacerating, affective non-relation that binds, as its subjecting thread, the “words, with the things, the actions and relations they designate”<sup>217</sup>, what would a possible narrative of the experience of affective interruption of this radical distrust be like? Is it a relating of things that would come to disrupt this consumptive economy of immanent suspicion? If another name of this precarious non-relation is precisely the Subject, how could a history of affect be told, one that relates to a terrified interruption with a wondrous moment of creative transcendental reminiscence, in which a subject can finally re-*cognize* itself as the effect and cause of this truth? What is the nature of this temporality that this interruptive self-relating would subvert? What would the meaning be of an affect that is co-temporary with a ‘moment of truth,’ of which it is the sign? Stated more simply: can an affect- in all the physiological markers of excrescence the word designates-, as the mark-in-excess of a violent rupture of the signifier, and therefore, of a catastrophe of signification, have a story, in which something in the order of the gift could finally be witnessed, for what is to come, from the dejected ruins of an already consumed past?

### I. *Second Beginning: Terror*

Alan Paul’s novella *Historia del llanto* [2007], offers a good opportunity to address these questions since, by registering a series of unconscious ideological conversions in the life of its protagonist, it aligns a gesture of self-relating interruption with the formal exhaustions and labyrinth-like intricacies of the baroque style in which it is written.<sup>218</sup> By means of the novel’s

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<sup>217</sup> (I have in mind Bertolt Brecht’s excerpt from his *Writings About Politics And Society, 1932*: Not until words and concepts no longer have anything to do with the things, // the actions and relations they designate, // and one is able, either to change these without changing those, // or to change the words, leaving the things, the actions and relations unchanged.”) Quoted by Alain Badiou in *Le siècle*.

<sup>218</sup> Nelly Richard comments on the phenomenon of ideological conversion present in two emblematic figures of the testimonial in post-dictatorship in Chile, Luz Arce and María Alejandra Merino: “The general performative rule of the discourse of confession-conversion tells us that its word acts out the experience that it describes without further truth-proof (that it is telling the truth) than what is revealed by the subjective testimony of the person that talks. It is an interiority of consciousness, which dictates the private truth of confessions-conversions, and that truth does not have verifiable referent without the biographical intimacy of the personal relation that puts it into words. [ . . . ] The

baroquisms- significantly tortuous page-long sentences, with the insertion of numberless qualifying clauses that often undermine and put the intended denotation in a status of connoted suspicion, literally *from within*- a logic of anticipatory remembrance is put to work to animate a truly subversive mediation, deranging the circuit of sense in which the protagonist seems to be unconsciously trapped. My hypothesis is that this mediation re-naturalizes the relation between affect and truth, in order to offer a working-through of the narrative meaning of a collective experience, implicit in the act of storytelling, such as Walter Benjamin articulates it.<sup>219</sup> In the narrative staging of this logic of future anteriority- in which, by virtue of a discursive hypertrophy of a “long mess of treasured reasons” to which the narrator seems ruthlessly to be pushing his story of lament-, this often alluded-to objective causality of things implodes, revealing itself as ultimately subtended by the vestige of an unconscious enjoyment. This gesture of re-naturalization ultimately entails, quite explicitly, a *re-politization* of affect.<sup>220</sup>

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dignifying re-encounter with God that these texts narrate, motivates several moralizing re-encounters. [. . .] The moralizing re-conversion of both traitors pays the guilt of their betrayal to the roles pre-fixed by the familial Christian norm. [. . .]” (61-63)

<sup>219</sup> Here I want to invoke and relaunch the two main questions Walter Benjamin posited with respect to experience and literature, and which Idelber Avelar in turn rehearses in his essay “Experiencia y literatura en tiempos sombríos”: “When one analyzes the problematics of experience in post-dictatorship literature, it may be worth the while to re-posit two questions that Walter Benjamin asked during the 30’s: 1) What are personal experience’s conditions of transmissibility, in a society ruled by automatization and merchandise?; Who may be interested in narrating experience in a historical moment in which narration has been substituted by information?; 2) What role can literature have after its ties with collective memory have been severed? To the aesthetic subject that begins, let say, with Baudelaire, what remains from experience that is narratable?” Avelar, Idelber. “Bares desiertos y calles sin nombres”, 37.

<sup>220</sup> By the word ‘affect’ I generally intend to denote, without excluding my attention from, but also without circumscribing it to any post-structuralist, psychoanalytical, philosophical or otherwise critical-cultural referent, the space of excess that overwhelms and destabilizes the sheer materiality of the signifier and imparts a stylistic specificity to the body of the textual. This body paradoxically demarcates and fixes its limits, as a semantic unit, at the same time that it supplements, with an excess-in-loss- libidinal, granted, while also displaying a critically articulable correlate with a surplus of meaning- what the text signifies. About a text, one says that affects are not ‘visible,’ that they are not written. In other words, a text ‘provokes,’ ‘evokes,’ and never quite ‘writes,’ an affect. Affect is necessarily that which is not written, which cannot be written, since it localizes in the same knotting both the blindness and the insight of the author, and as such enables and threatens the written with an equally coveted and execrable return. As an argumentative corollary, the affective in the literary therefore connotes, thus understood, the Benjaminian ‘auratic,’ the aesthetic ‘glow’ by virtue of which a story transcends, just to keep it in reserve, its historical necessity, given that this transcendence can propose some promise of readability in the enthusiasm it stirs in its readers. For the description of someone who cries or laughs will hardly provoke those emotions in the reader.

Entering into the discussion of this novel warrants two preliminary observations: On the one hand, in terms of the thematic network that constitutes the bulk of the story, this is a novel where the word *duel* partakes of the entwining of the double argumentative parallel proposed by the two senses of the word. In other words, there is in the story an antagonism, inhering, like the Borgesian gauchos locked in deadly combat, the particular ‘inner world’ of the main character. It is important to keep in mind that this antagonism seems to be the compensatory reverse of a disavowed mourning over the substance of a lost political strife. As it turns out, the duplicity of this signifier unfolds in the novel through the iterative recasting of “an old dispute, whose substance is already history, but not its form,” (17-18) from the mere interstitial detail of a cultural article (specifically Akira Kurosawa’s *The Idiot*), towards the more allegorical one of the novel as rehearsing the story of a (non-)dupe, trapped in the ideological pitfalls of such *duplicity*. At the very limits of the dialectical reversal towards which the narration brings us, the singularity of an individual at war with his own fantasies of omnipotence- the only war of which he can legitimately think himself a veteran-, reveals itself as always already having a political dimension, so what is in the end perceived as lost (and un-mourned over) is the collective dimension of this universal aspect. How does this moment of interruptive re-subjection take place in the novel? One thing to keep in mind is that the story of how political affect is rescued from the tentacles of a discourse-for-profit necessarily entails a violent, illegal act of symbolic torsion that, paradoxically, has the status of an ethical imperative in the story. This violent moment therefore coincides with a moment of affective overflow, on something that exacts the telling of a story *for the other*.<sup>221</sup> So the fundamental question is, not so much whether the lament is ‘fake’ or ‘true,’ but rather “*who laments?*”, as a correlate of a “*who speaks?*”, a *who* that is

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<sup>221</sup> Slavoj Žižek reminds us that “the ethical action requires the experience of the trauma to be symbolically repeated and reformulated,” (211) and that “the phantasm, by definition, bears the structure of a story that has to be told.” (275) Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*.

only so in its becoming-*what*. For the story seems to pendulate between two mutually cancelling logics. Either: there *has* to be a ‘story’ behind any moment of affective overflow, a story that calls for an attentive ear, even if this story cannot just be assumed to ‘be there’ as a past experience always already burdened by a monolithic grid of things signified; or the ruse activated by a sudden, enigmatic overflow of affect, retrospectively erecting and sculpting the mnemonic signposts, as if it traced the pathways of an umbilical cord through fragmented layers of past events, after which a story, and a subject, *will have emerged*.

On the other hand, from a formal perspective, the story is told in the form of an inexorable imminence, caught in the dilemma of a ‘resistance’ against and a ‘resolve’ towards a final and definitive ‘letting go,’ which precedes the act of crying, for it narrates the terror of an unbearable excrescence returning from a secret interiority. There is, for the protagonist, something unbearably unpleasant, terrifying, filthy and ultimately obscene in this “letting everything out, like the spring”, to the extent that he cannot help but see something in the order of an unforgivable knavery in becoming such a “candid idiot.” The double meaning of his restraint over ‘a venom’ that he refuses to take- all those instances of intimate confessions that make of him an easy Ear for all sorts of unspoken grievances and disavowed desires-, but which at the same time he feels the unbearable compulsion to ‘pour over,’ can only be understood in its dimension of an ethical necessity.

What is, therefore, the double ideological subtext of this ethical necessity that ambiguously confers to this story the affective tone of an excruciating antagonism, that is, a duel taking place in the theatrical backstage of the protagonist’s Communist persona, an ‘intimate’ confession torn between an imperative *and* an injunction, a command to tell a secret, always



already undermined by a prohibition to tell it? What are the narrative coordinates of this subtext (who are its actors?), within which this novel ‘appears’ as a public event, of everything in the order of the consumptive carnival that this appearance puts, or does not put, into circulation? What, in other words, underlies this cultural object, in terms of a regime of discourses that capitalize on an experience of defeat, pain and loss turned into an obscene spectacle, most particularly the institutional pathways of an “industry of the sensible” (41) through which the literary genre of the *testimonio* transits?

The narration itself explicitly suggests that this subtext can correspondingly be designated by the name of a very particular kind of gift: a *gag*- both in the sense of an act of choking, and of a heavy handed practical joke that provokes, in the protagonist, a terrifying reaction against, coupled with an irresistible compulsion to “let everything out, like the spring.” The power of this double interpretation seems to emanate from the symbolic wealth of a knavery (named “Transition to Democracy”) being celebrated over the remnants of a lost battle: a battle, the memory of which the losing side stands as its only impotent witness, and a struggle totally lost from sight, rendered totally invisible, as battle that is, *the substance of which may have been lost, while the form still persists.*

This knavery invokes the terms of *a pact* over an antagonism. The rules of this pact were violated, the mined field of a political struggle turned, by virtue of a betrayal that was also the object of a pact, into a festering graveyard of shattered illusions, unspoken humiliations, and officially sanctioned barbarism. It is a hoax, in short, that seems to have every intention of turning the subjects that belonged to the ranks of its losing side into a bouquet of *candid idiots*. This impossible ethical imperative, which early on in the story reveals the formal contours of this *gag*, comes disguised with the formula, in itself worthy of every suspicion of an intimation, with

which a father constantly enjoins, and tortures, his son: *Come on, tell me what is going on. Express yourself* [“Vamos, decime qué te pasa. Expresate.”]; and with which the lyrics of a lullaby written by a rehabilitated protest singer, haunts him ever since he heard it. This singer is someone whom the narrator describes, in an act of ambiguous self-identification, as “a consummate ideologue of proximity”: *One has to take everything out, like the spring . . .*

The story in question is the retrospective account of a young, post-Dirty War, upper class son of Argentine divorcés. The story alternates between a series of prolepses and flashbacks in the protagonist’s life. Since, in his desperate search for understanding, as the song goes, “what went on”, the narrative voice situates the protagonist in the emergence of a ‘present’ that each of these displays twice, this tensional alternation between a past and a future- a past that bears the enigmatic marks of a “too early”, and a future bearing the terror of a “too late”. There is a logic of future anteriority that ensues and that the narrator intends, at the same time, to stage and interrupt. The story unfolds, put otherwise, in the backdrop of an *amorous rupture* that will resonate in its adolescent untimeliness throughout the novel as being since always political and happening ‘from within’ the simulations and farcical acting-outs of a shameful, dirty little secret that such rupture allegorizes.<sup>223</sup> The narrator describes, put differently, the life of a child that is the premature, yet belated product of a *failed love story*, which in itself metaphorizes the failure of an interclass pact (his father belonged to the middle-class, while his mother belonged to the Argentine business elite). That love story was always too late, because it was too soon: arguably because it could not contemporize with its own untimeliness. The protagonist therefore

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<sup>223</sup> In all probability one of the many allusions in the novel to the pre-dictatorship chiasm of Peronist populism into a right wing and left wing peronism, in the years preceding and following Jorge Rafael Videla’s military junta power grab. It is important to remember that Peronism, originally a populist movement organized around the interests of the rural and urban working class, was later to split, ‘from within,’ in an exemplary case of chiasmatic ideological self-evacuation which the novel, to a great extent, thematizes.

incarnates the insistence of an antagonism unfolding over the memory of this amorous pact and its ruins. In other words, his seemingly private dilemmas are those of an old struggle that preserves its form, or as the narrator says about a familial dispute between him and his father on Akira Kurosawa's film *The Idiot*, "the contents of which are history, but not its form."

The opening pages depict a child clad in a Superman costume, shattering the glass door leading to the balcony of his grandparents' apartment in the upscale *Ortega y Gasset* building. This child is endowed with an extraordinary capacity for listening- "at an age in which children despair to talk, he can spend hours listening." (7) This capacity for listening is the unmistakable sign of a sensibility that his parents and in particular his father admire in him: "who only has eyes for pain and is absolutely, irreparably blind to anything that is not pain" (19) which in him is "what is normally called 'inner' world and apparently defines rather odd creatures, [and which] he has in considerably more developed stage than most of the kids of his age." (8) Interestingly, this talent to listen to the secret pains of others is also the source of a *treasurable pleasure*, for which he seems to be willing to sacrifice everything: "[ . . . ] nobody will take from him the pleasure that shakes him whenever someone turns him/herself *inside out, like a glove*, tempted by the availability of his ear, which not only is there, at anyone's reach, but which also seems to talk, to talk a silent language and say: *Come on, tell me, talk to me.*" (62) [My emphasis]

The protagonist's preferred form of joke, we learn early enough, is the *gag*. This is of utmost significance, because there is always something particularly ugly and terrifying about a *gag*, by virtue of which it always provokes a hysterical laughter (that is, like a cry of terror turned 'inside-out'). More significantly, in this *gag* he sees condensed the double Hamletian scene of

seduction and fear of a Voice pouring onto his ear confessions, stories about others' disavowed longings, private pains and secret sufferings:

In that *gag*, which never stops from exerting on him a mysterious magnetism, he finds the visible spirit of the drawing, albeit mitigated by the comical and caricaturesque, an incarnation of the scene of auricular poisoning. (21-22)

Said differently, it is this imminence that provides the narration with its double value, implicit in a *gag*: this history of lament is like the imminent terror of a suppressed, yet inevitable vomit, and this, by a "candid idiot". But this *gag* can also be a heavy-handed joke, something that is too difficult to 'swallow,' like the belated terror of an unwanted gift, under the folds of which there is, for the protagonist and the reader, perhaps, nothing save the clean slate of an affective void. Like the Borgesian aleph or book of sand, the pharmakon that these confessions pour into him is, at the same time, execrable *venom* and *coveted* treasure.

Significantly, the first conversion in this history of lament takes place at the moment when the protagonist realizes that his fits of uncontrollable crying are spectacle for his father. In the presence of his father, there is the almost automatic compulsion to cry, but this compulsion seems to come accompanied by the irrepressible need to confer some content that retrospectively *legitimizes* that crying, as if the price to pay for those outbursts, for the intense enjoyment that he must have derived in hearing all these stories, was, in turn, an enthusiastic, yet necessarily distorted re-telling, a 'report' of the story (after coming back, "like a good soldier, from the battlefield of Pain") of which confession he is, because of his belated prematurity, a joyful, yet baffled witness. There is, put otherwise, the need, which is presented in the story as a debt contracted with his father, "to associate the grin of crying with the invisible reason that might be causing it." [24]

I want to bring to the reader's attention, for the decisive effects it has in the course of events, the simultaneously retrospective and proleptic nature of the relation entertained by the protagonist between the two most saliently recurring scenes of his childhood, in which storytelling associates with affect in a sort of frustrated race of mutual contemporization: we have, at one level, the superman comic tales, explicitly moments of narcissistic identification with an imaginary figure of omnipotence. On the other hand, we have those (ultimately mysterious) moments in which an adult surreptitiously approaches him, in a parenthesis of absolute helplessness, to pour 'venom' into his ears, as if he were a mute witness, the passive and inexhaustible receptacle of secret stories about personal regrets, failed dreams, lingering wishes, etc. These are stories, most remarkably, that he in all probability could not have cared about, because he could not understand- too soon for him- their true dimension, but which for that reason must have constituted moments of tremendous anxiety, given the urgency and the agony with which most probably these must have been told. The story therefore seems to unfold around the question: What is the relation between the enjoyment of stories about impossible heroisms, and the involuntary spectacle of symbolic tears to which the other characters submitted him, if not that the future meanings of what may remain from the indelible memory of those premature confessions are already infected by the enjoyment he cannot help but associate with a comic book tale? Is it not here a concrete situation, an insight that the private melodrama that tears apart individuals is after all not so private, that there are cultural markers that inflect, as it were, from earliest childhood, our relation with our so-called private world? Is it not, also, the case that not only the infant and teenage individual's reality is informed by pop culture myths, but that even all the adults that surround him- their adulthood fantasies and dreams, their ambitions- also continue to be the meaning-effects of the same childish and idiotic machinery of sense? In other

words, we are as much the ideological construct of those artifacts as they are the product of our fantasies of omnipotence. Cannot the idiotic remnants of a superman-clad child, or an Obélix, be discerned in the petty complaints and demands of a grandfather who “wanted to leave everyone and everything behind and live his own life in Mar del Plata” [27-28], or in his pill-addicted, affection-starved mother, with all her battalion of manicurists, masseuses, acupuncturists, and cosmetic specialists? This insight about how late modern subjects’ signifying/affective universe as being ultimately overdetermined by *pop Ur-narratives*- superman comic book tales, *Obélix*,<sup>224</sup> *The Idiot*, American T.V. series, soap-operas, etc.-, is probably what is at stake in the narrator’s remark about the ultimate causal undecidability between the stories the child passes on to his visiting father and their affective flipside:

[ . . . ] - *they are not stories, they are tears*. If the story that his son tributes [*ofrenda*] to his father is a token of his sensitivity, of the degree of proximity that he is capable of establishing with any adult, crying is the proof, the masterwork, the monument, that the father encourages and celebrates and protects, as if it were a unique flame, priceless, that, if extinguished, will not rekindle ever again. [ . . . ] As always, *hard to know what is cause and what effect*. (30) [My emphasis]

As if he needed to give legitimacy to those moments of affective overflow, he often feels the compulsion to embark in

[ . . . ] a long mess of treasured reasons, hidden since who knows when, and not in the babbling language one would expect of a creature, but an organic monologue, articulated, so consistent that his father, for a moment, would swear that he talks asleep and with his eyes open [ . . . ] (35)

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<sup>224</sup> Famous French comic book and T.V. series about Asterix’s best friend. He is noteworthy because of his superhuman strength.

Later on, he restrains his tears in front of his father, in the name of the sacred character of a sensibility of which he, thereafter, is not capable. This novel, to the extent in which it stages this dialectical turning “inside-out, like a glove” of an affective, self-evacuating mistrust, is the story of a disowned grief over the ‘real’ of an object, the essence of which still remains to be recognized by the protagonist as being always already lost. It is as if this superlative eloquence, the precocious hypertrophy of a language, came to encrypt the numbed, shameful site of an unnamable pain/pleasure. Soon enough, this secret sensitivity passes from being a gift, generously and spontaneously offered to everyone, into a “sort of coin, an instrument of transaction with which he buys and pays for things [. . . and] with which he buys his father’s admiration.” (32) This realization signals the first moment of the protagonist’s ideological *conversion*, in which this sensibility passes from being a sign of something real into the theater for an Other. The important thing is that this “change of sign” (53), as the song goes, the character, like the protest singer, “did not understand anything.” (51) From then onwards, his relation with what otherwise is still the illusion of *his* secret gift of hyperbolic sensitivity for the misery of others, the sign, as it were, of his ‘inner’ wholeness and purity, being, as it still is for him, the name of an “idiotic and hidden nucleus”, the *nausea* of a truth that he recognizes, “*with a kind of wondered terror*” (45), in the refrain of the protest singer’s song- *one has to let everything out, like the spring . . .* - is nonetheless one of *absolute mistrust*. This decoy of mistrust and attraction will henceforth determine the protagonist’s relation with others, both objects and subjects. Ultimately, this mistrust constitutes the battlefield of a struggle waged ‘inside’ him over this refrain’s true message, a duel between what this phrase denotes and what its message connotes, particularly after everything “changes of sign”, after something ugly has corroded its way into the surface to deform the (supposedly previous) uniformity of his reality.

The story of this mistrust moves forward through the incessant thematic rehearsal of phrases and scenes allusive to the imminence of this dialectic spinning, threatening to return to the protagonist's amnesic present, like the vengeance of an inevitable vomit or like an uncontrollable fit of weeping, all the inedible affective wreck of morsels from the repressed violence of a "complicated" and "impossible to sum up" past, told by his father in "vague" and "imprecise" terms: the act of breaking through the glass window of a child dressed in a superman uniform (8); the moments of *turning inside-out, like a glove*, that define the most significant moments in the life of the protagonist; *the thinning out of the (fingers') membranes that ought to separate the inside from the outside* (15); the reference to an ongoing antagonism with his father over Akira Kurosawa's *The Idiot* (17-18); the encounter with a protest singer recently returning from exile; his break-up with the daughter of an upper-class, right-wing Chilean family, etc.

## II. The Protest Singer, that Candid Idiot

The episode of the Argentine protest singer who returns, after seven years in exile, to perform a concert for a small public of old 'route companions' [*compañeros de ruta*], captures very clearly this moment of surreptitious transcoding of a discourse of political struggle and social solidarity into the neo-liberal mold of a discourse of exchange and profit. The protagonist is invited at the last minute by his father to attend the concert. It is already *too late*, but the son acquiesces. The protagonist has the impression of attending, not an illegal concert, but a "*hybrid* event, all the more disturbing, in which 'the clandestine,' maybe not to scare and altogether loose its prestiges, has acquiesced to confuse itself with 'the exclusive.' " (37) The space in which the concert takes place metaphorizes the ideological duplicity within which the antagonism unfolds:



[ . . . ] to him, formed in the dialectic of the mass and the cell, it is an ominous sign that the *pub*'s calculated penumbra, the fake antique of its wood coverings, the radiant air of those women, dressed in white and of those tanned men who carry long glasses in their hands, reproduce to the letter the atmosphere, the scenery and the protagonists of the graphic advertisements for cigarette or whiskey brands that occupy the back-cover of fashion magazines that six years ago denounced the singer as a menace and demanded the prohibition of his songs. (38)

During the concert he hears the lyrics of the song that will, again, “turn him inside out, like a glove”:

Come on, tell me/ Everything that is happening to you now/ Because otherwise, when your soul is alone, it cries/ One has to let everything out/ Like the spring/ No one wants that something dies inside/ To talk looking at each other's eyes/ To let everything you can outside/ So that new things are born inside / New, new, new, new . . . <sup>225</sup>

There he has “his first political revelation”, the first great political event of his life:

He listens to those verses and discovers what is the cause, the cause for which he militates since he has use of reason, from the age when kids despair to talk and he, on the contrary, to listen, and the discovery that inundates him with a kind of *wondered terror*, so disconcerting and new, on the other hand, that he loses the rest of the strophe [ . . . ] He understands everything. It is maybe the great event of his life: that which reveals the truth of the cause for which he has always militated, is at the same time and for ever that

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<sup>225</sup> The song is titled *Soy pan, soy paz, soy más*, written by Piero de Benedictis, an Italian Argentine. Here the complete text: “Yo soy, yo soy, yo soy./Soy agua, playa, cielo, casa blanca./ Soy mar Atlántico, viento de América/ Soy un montón de cosas santas/ Mezcladas con cosas humanas./ Como te explico cosas mundanas/ Fui niño, cuna, teta, techo, manta./ Más miedo, cuco, grito, llanto, raza./ Después mezclaron las palabras./ O se escapaban las miradas./ Algo paso / No entendí nada./Vamos decime, contame/ Todo lo que a vos te esta pasando ahora/ Porque si no cuando esta tu alma sola llora / Hay que sacarlo todo afuera/ como la primavera / Nadie quiere que adentro algo se muera / Hablar mirándose a los ojos/ saca lo que se puede afuera / Para que adentro nazcan cosas/ nuevas, nuevas, nuevas, nuevas . . . // Soy pan, soy paz, soy más/ Soy la que esta por acá // No quiero más de lo que quieres dar uhhhh./ Hoy se te da, hoy se te quita/ Igual que con la margarita./ Igual al mar./ Igual la vida, la vida, la vida, la vida . . .

which revolts his stomach the most. From then onwards, he calls it *the nausea*. (45-46)  
[my emphasis]

The witnessing of this discovery, not merely of a private life, 'revealed' as rendering it narratively 'intelligible,' or as being the 'cause' both of the protagonist's convictions and angst, but most crucially, the very phantasmagoric arrangement that sustains the illusion of a private realm, unravels to stage, for the character and for the reader, a 'moment of truth,' itself terrifying and wondrous. Instead of signifying a causal link- a link with which the protagonist is pathologically obsessed - it renders visible the amnesia-like violence- the *nausea*- on which this causality finds its predicative possibilities: he will eventually retrace this *nausea* to an episode of utter abject helplessness and love, coming, literally, from the scent of sandalwood and mint emanating from a left-wing female militant infiltrated in a male Army officer's uniform.

The purely phantasmal texture of a meaning retroactively attributed to these scenes is corroded by the terror of a later meaning- the imminent, yet belated nausea- that eats its way from within the first:

Too late. The nausea, he can detest it, whenever he wants: that won't keep it from working on him [ . . . ] with patience, firm foot, blind trust in the future, with the certainty that time is always on its side, on nausea's side, like the oxide works until it perforates that on which it works. (49)

All the values that the protest singer embodies, the phantom of their traumatic truth, were always inflected, corroded and evacuated by the ideological texture of a culture of consumption. This is the source of the ambiguity that he experiences- the mixture of repulsion and attraction- what *annoys* him about the song, and what attracts him about the *aura* of the protest singer in general, since:

[ . . . ] the values that he [the protest singer] defends, the clothes that he uses, everything seems to him [the protagonist] vitiated, vitiated with the singular pestilence, so toxic, of those delicacies that, beyond a certain temporal threshold, when they decompose, irradiate a reeking bestiality, still hard to conceive in the things in which putrefaction is the only state of existence possible. (47)

It is an *anamnesic* moment, and as such, a second moment of ideological conversion, consisting in a revelation that he *can no longer* ignore- precisely when that is what he desperately attempts to do from then onwards- the disturbing ambiguity of the affective index on which his radical suspicion against that reality is grounded: his suspicion is sustained and undermined by virtue of the despicable treasure, the quintessence of a sensibility that is only *his* and no one else's, of which this song is the emblem.

### III. Comandante Sylvia, his Mother

But another event in his life will have to come definitely to shatter his (already emptied out) dreamlike disillusionment. At the age of thirteen his life, which until then had been an impeccable model of left-wing disciplined readership, unravels by the witnessing on T.V. of a political event that quickens in him a dormant, yet lingering suspicion, not simply about the self-evacuated nature of the ideological crystal in which he lives immersed, as it were, in a dream-like state of affective disenchantment (until then, he seems to have lived his whole life under the catchphrase: “ ‘I’ has been duped before, no one is going to take this ‘I’ again for a candid idiot; ‘I’ knows already that all this is a hoax”). Most importantly, it is an unavoidable suspicion about the true subjective implications of his suspicion against absolutely everything that betrays, in others, any kind of affective excess. In other words, it marks the moment when the protagonist is forced to cast a suspicious gaze against his suspicions: it is a self-relating suspicion. The event in

question is the bombardment of the Casa de la Moneda in Chile, and the subsequent assassination of democratically elected Socialist president Salvador Allende, on September 11, 1973, during the CIA-backed military coup led by General Augusto Pinochet. In front of the screen, while watching his friend's attack of uncontrollable weeping, he finds himself utterly incapable of any emotion. He wonders why he cannot feel anything at the sight of an event whose consequences and meanings he nonetheless *understands* so well, perhaps better than anyone else, because, even at his relatively young age, he prides himself among his older companions with his *seamless* Communist knowledge. In fact, he is someone who "at thirteen reads and understands, and even contradicts, with grounds that would put the most experimented militants against the wall, some classics of twentieth century political literature." [84]

From that encounter with History, being shown on a black and white T.V. screen onwards, he will become an automat, at the same time escaping and besieging the knot of the enigma ciphered in that event. After this moment, his readings increasingly acquire the character of an uncontrollable compulsion to understand and to disown the cause for his inability to cry:

At fourteen he has given himself up to a Marxist rapacity that does not leave puppet with its head [que no deja muñeco sin cabeza]: Fanon, Michael Löwy, Marta Harnecker, Armand Mattelart, the couple Dorman-Jofré, [ . . . ] [115-116]

This is an exemplary instance in the novel in which the testimonial of a third-person narrator allows himself crucial *interruptions* about the dialectical relation between (a communist) knowledge, of which at this point there only remains its empty carapace, and experience, to which the character remains, until the very last pages, literally blind. For these authors

[ . . . ] show him the point to which Superman, the ironman whom he has always idolized, whom he still idolizes in that kind of second life, slightly out of phase, *that runs parallel* to the life in which he burns his eyelashes [se quema las pestañas] with Latin American revolutionary thought, is in truth incompatible with that life and one of its number one enemies, an *enemy in disguise* and therefore a thousand times more dangerous than the ones who accept that a uniform gives them away as such. [ . . . ] (115-116) [My emphasis.]

This suspicion, even if it initially posits itself as an enlightened rebellion against the truthfulness and sincerity of others' suffering and existential angst, has been secretly transforming itself into a suspicion against his political convictions:

At fourteen, he is as incapable of taking the step and entering into action, as he is incapable of taking his eyes from everything that celebrates it around him, images, texts, periodicals, books, first person testimonials, vibrant version, full of blood, black powder and courage, from all that that unfolds with pontifical severity in the pages of Theonios Santos, André Gunder Frank, or Ernest Mandel [ . . . ] (115- 116)

As a signifier of enlightened (revolutionary) reason, he has come, in the words of Rebecca Comay, to incarnate the obscure object of lost faith in a political cause that he attacks on others, in what constitutes in the story a moment of true dialectical (self-) reversal.<sup>226</sup> Not only is the pressing questioning about the *real cause* of his political alignments put into motion in this

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<sup>226</sup> I only want to bring to notice the affinity of the dynamics I am trying to describe in these lines, and Rebecca Comay's commentary on what she calls "absolute freedom [ . . . ] terror as infinite melancholia of a self that knows no other", of which the self-cancelling nature of revolutionary suspicion is one of its features: "Paranoia is another feature. In the universe of the will, difference can be visible only as opposition itself becomes indistinguishable from treason: according to Hegel's own synopsis all distinction as such eventually assumes the insidious appearance of a *complot aristocratique*. Anti-revolution becomes legible as only counterrevolution just as foreign war and civil war come conceptually to coalesce. The enemy is always already inside the gate, and Polyneices is the prototype of the disowned other: the outside on the inside is the foreign body engendered through the repression that violently and summarily expels it. The law of suspects is thus for Hegel not a distortion of or contingent deviation from the revolution but its essential outcome [ . . . ]"; as well as on the Hegelian distinction between melancholia and mourning: "The constitutive melancholia afflicting insight condemns it to disown the violence it perpetrates on a faith whose grief is matched only by insight's own manic jubilation: enlightenment fails to register faith's losses as, in truth, its very own." Comay, Rebecca. "Dead Right: Hegel and the Terror," 381-382.

moment, but also, the not less anguishing question about the causal relation between the sheer physical event of crying and the subtending meaning of this act. This act verifies a moment of evacuation, and is accompanied by a tensional oscillation in the chronological compass of the text: it will be already too late, because it was always too early. His adolescence- his not being old enough to understand, but not being young enough *not to owe* to understand- makes of him the emblem of this historical untimeliness.

In the story of the terrified distance-making from the abject monsters of affected intimation - his mother, his grandparents, his father and his father's friends, the housemaid, locker concierge- that come to haunt him and pour *the venom* of their desires, their secret woes, weaknesses, and bitterness into his ear, from his suspecting gaze cast on the upper-class reality that surrounds him and which he despises and fears so much, in the fearful labyrinth that is the character's atomized subjectivity, there is the flip-side, like the turning "inside-out, like a glove", of *another story*: the story of a besieging, of a closing-in, of the corralling and ultimately a confrontation against the *nausea* of another monster, incapable of experiencing anything resembling, however distantly, any kind of emotion, an enjoying monster of empty knowledge whom he, at the very end of the novel, finally recognizes, in shame, as his own self, reflected in the private inferno of a scared-to-death mother, crying alone in the darkness of a room.

The protagonist's resistance against any affective excesses, any act of self-complacent approach or implicating intimacy from the others, responds, in principle, to the fact that all affective manifestations, their possible meanings and their lost opportunities, have become exclusive property, the private territory for the monopoly of neoliberal marketing policies of mass culture, to the point that they have to a large degree become the object of suspicion by anyone who can see beyond the fake sentimentalism of soap operas or reality T.V.

shows, the true obscenity of financial profit and social control.<sup>227</sup> They implicate a truth that has an aftertaste synonymous with facile ideological accommodation, carnivalesque enjoyment, or worse, political capitulation, and ultimately betrayal and defeat. This state of things, as it is described in the novel, belongs, therefore, to the register of a generalized half-avowed suspicion with regard to the farce, the masquerade, the cover-up, the ‘inner’ theater of appearances and simulation, from which the protagonist thinks himself exempt.<sup>228</sup>

From then on, it is easy for the protagonist to fall prey to the antics of an automatism, to a not less acted-out reactive resistance against affect that often assumes the form of a proto-Fascist cynicism, underscoring the ideological ruses of those affected instances against which he revolts. Thus, his reticence, which is still a simulation, a spectacle, a representation, not for his real father, in whom he cannot see anything other than the idiotic adolescence of a stillborn ideological cause, the betrayal that represents, for him, his father’s ‘petit bourgeois’ life, his visits to the Country Clubs in Mar del Plata, in which he used to dive into semi-public pools to ‘rescue’ the objects that his father threw. It is, rather, a spectacle for that as yet nameless, omnipotent image of *uniformity* that still *forms* his reality, even though “he does not believe in it”.

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<sup>227</sup> Here it might be worth mentioning Nelly Richards’ acerbic attack against the Chilean period of so-called Transition’s and Consensus’ obscene appropriations and reductions of the signifiers’ violent sites of the dictatorship’s unspeakabilities, in the taming and evacuating thrust towards the very consumption of the memory of the dictatorship: “The experience of post-dictatorship ties the individual and collective memory to the figures of absence, loss, suppression, disappearance. Figures surrounded by the shadows of a duel in suspense. [ . . . ] The present of the Consensus takes advantage from the social discomfort towards memory and from self-censorship with which its protagonists cut the threads between a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ to protect its ‘now’ from comparisons and divorce it from any anteriority [ . . . ] The government of the Consensus begun by exhibiting its mark of distance and rupture from the world of antagonisms of dictatorship, while neo-liberal democracy needed to reinforce the accomplice hegemony of the market to guarantee the ‘reproducibility’ of the modernizing politics of the military regime.[ . . . ] the present of the Consensus had to defend its political ‘novelty’ [ . . . ] silencing the ‘not-new’ (the inherited) of its economic-military forms of continuity with the past; hiding this perversion of times which entwines continuity and rupture under the disguise of self-affirmation as *actuality*, thanks to the exhibitionist pose of a tricked present.” Richard, *Residuos*, 40.

<sup>228</sup> In relation to this, Nelly Richard quotes Carlos J. Ossia as saying: “ One of the tactical moments of the Transition is simulaton: to simulate not to have what one has.” Richard, *Residuos*, 51.

This image seems to be subtended, eroded by the disquieting abjection he perceives in the crevices of Comandante Sylvia's uniform, an E.R.P. militant infiltrated into the building as an Argentine Army officer, who occasionally takes care of him while his mother is away on one of her romantic outings.<sup>229</sup> Sylvia's is a disguise whose *irregularities* metaphorize a truth's terror that hides behind a crumbling uniformity, malfunctioning, as the signifying machinery that is the narration of the *gag* we are being presented with:

Once again the same fascination, the dazzle (*encandilamiento*), the stupor in which those flat fabrics, homogeneous, clean from the least irregularity, whose otherworldly terseness, it only occurs to him to compare with the metal car-work [ . . . ] of the spaceships inside which the invaders travel.<sup>230</sup> Nevertheless, during the second scanning, his eyes, let themselves be surprised by a dissonance, something that seems to make noise in the bottom of the military suit [ . . . ] The fold of military jacket, unwoven, lets out a languid tongue from underneath its rim. [ . . . ]

Everything changes, evidently. Because if the uniform-jewel is already a signal of falsity, a trap-façade, what is not, then, a failed uniform? He can't believe it. (76-77)

This 'malfunctioning' of the uniform takes place both in the feminine figure who occupies for him the place of an absent, sedative-addicted mother, the epitome of the decadent and "vicious race" he so much abhors, and in Comandante Sylvia's disguise, wearing the uniform of an Argentine Army (male) officer.

The narration therefore suggests a symmetry between the figure of the protagonist's mother and Comandante Sylvia that parallels the series of oppositional terms (inside/outside, secret/public, truth/lie, disguise/exposure, etc.) that are played out in the story ultimately to

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<sup>229</sup> E.R.P.: Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (People's Revolutionary Army).

<sup>230</sup> *The Invaders*: in allusion to the 1960's science fiction T.V series *The Invaders*, itself a paranoid fictionalization of the 'red menace' that predated on North American consciousness.



torsion and liquidate their usual referential mooring. Both women wear disguises, and consequently threaten/promise to be more than what they present themselves to be. What the mother hides is the mask that Comandante Sylvia displays, to hide and mis-represent what the first flaunts, in turn, as a cover-up for her disavowed obscenity. Comandante Sylvia's masquerade bears the attributes of generic, impersonal anonymity of a military uniform, and all the signifying chain it puts into motion with regard to an official discourse's sinister reverse of foundational barbarity. Even though the text is not explicit about this, it does make it hard for the reader not to picture the mother accordingly: European fashion design clothing, frequent visits to manicurists and masseuses, leisure time and drug taking as the symbols par excellence of social standing.

The final effect is that, by presenting these signs in ambiguous juxtaposition, the narration catalyzes the precarious interplay between abstract, empty form and concrete substance. The numbed 'undeadness' of the mother, her being 'buried alive' ["muerta en vida"], incites poignant irony, when confronted by the larger-than-life image of Comandante Sylvia's being for death. The secret space of pain and terror of the failed mother- the *lightless bedroom* in which she buries herself- strangely echoes Sylvia's exposed, mutilated and deformed corpse. The ugly nothing that suppurates underneath the mother's fashionable elegance elicits irony when related to the ethical beauty that teems underneath Sylvia's sober uniform. The 'disappeared' mother, de-familiarized to her son's eyes by her own escape, 're-appears' in Comandante Sylvia, an absolute stranger. The erotic aura of regal sophistication and female cleanliness surrounding the first cannot but betray its derisive and sinister fold, when evoked in the presence of the military austerity of the latter. This invites pondering on the actual referential status of words such as 'authenticity,' 'properness,' 'goodness,' and 'beautiful'. Ultimately, this pondering

obliges us to cast a gaze of suspicion on the usual meaning of the words ‘humanity’ and ‘dignity’: there is a surreptitious shift from the common sense meaning of the word to the more etymological sense of the term. From being the reactive sign of mere material wealth and power, *dignity* passes through a Nietzschean inversion in which it re-directs its denotative power to its etymological origin. His mother’s imposture, therefore, has more to do with the attributes of a class that benefited from this discourse: the signs of human dignity, decency, individualism, bodily (as a sign of moral) cleanliness. All of this seems to evoke a reified version of the bourgeois-humanist understanding of dignity, if we look to the Latin root *dignitas*, that is to say, as rank, and therefore posit the problem of dignity within the enabling constraints of its ethical dimension, and relate this dimension to the violent hierarchical upheaval that seems to be at stake in the confrontation between the two characters. A poignant questioning about the true meaning of an individual’s human superiority in relation to her neighbour is consequently reinstated as only having any meaning within the creative realm of life-affirming, non-reactive values. In brief, the tension between them perfectly renders concrete the idea of the total divorce between the word and its referents, and the contingency on which this relation is after all necessarily predicated: ‘mother’ does not anymore point toward the site of that woman over there, who ran away in horror, in spite of appearances; ‘stranger,’ in whom the protagonist sees with terror an alien almost at the point of revealing its true identity, is not the one who protects him and teaches him the true meaning of caring for another, but embodies all those other convened signs which that terrorized being, infiltrated as her mother, wears. In short, the difference that separates the mother from Sylvia is the same that separates mere decency from virtuosity.

Years later, the protagonist tries to remind his mother about the incident in the elevator, when he vomits, revolted by Sylvia’s scent. What is, in view of the above-stated remarks, the

true meaning of this scene? He constantly reminds her mother about that occasion, of her desertion, her face of horror, of how that stranger was the one who took over, who cradled and soothed the child in her legs, with a lullaby, encouraging him to “let everything out, like the spring.” The exculpatory answer the mother gives is the amnesia of a whole generation of Argentines who deny the memory of their tacit complicity with the atrocities committed in the name of their class privileges: “I was not there [ . . . ] It was not with me” (*Yo no estaba allí [ . . . ] Conmigo no fue*) (81). The disguised figure of Comandante Sylvia, dressed in a military uniform, is therefore worth noticing in at least two juxtaposed senses: it infiltrates and explodes, in one single move, the ready-made scripts of sexual identities *and* of socioeconomic distinctions.<sup>231</sup> The final effect, within the specific constellation of meaning in the story, is that the opposition of ‘false’ and ‘authentic’ is unhinged: it is the mother, not Comandante Sylvia, who is in the end suspect of imposture, the alien, the one who is actually performing a travesty, a perverse hide and seek game that echoes the dissimulations of the class that she represents.

His mistrust of uniforms also partakes of this affective ambiguity. To the imminence of the terror implicit in seeing behind a disguise someone who is not who she seems to be, is the correlate of that other image, the woman who, “dressed, nonetheless as his mother, sufficiently resembling his mother to be able to pass for his mother,” (80) is not a mother at all to him. (But the problem is that the authenticity and truthfulness implicit in this terror is itself already sifted, perverted, deformed, by the ideological grid of a T.V. series narrating the imminence of a revelation that never actualizes itself, about the *true* face of the alien entities that parasitize on

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<sup>231</sup> Richard notes that: “ Clothing, the styles of fashion, are one of the parlances through which cultural identities are expressed in a dialogue of voices (canonical or parodying) with the given discourse of social class and sexual representation. Cultural identities account for themselves by selecting, amongst various types of the presentation of the body in society, ways of dressing that talk about its roles, gender, positions, showing lifestyles and customs that are redesigned by images from everywhere in directions traversed by the pathways of multinational commerce.” *Residuos*, 111. [My translation.]

human bodies to carry out their mission of conquering planet Earth. This revelation, the series “owes it to him” (70). )

In this interpretational key, to cry, can signify the re-turn, the “turning inside-out like a glove”, of the terror of that closeness to something that perhaps he always knew, a knowledge that somehow he ignored and forgot, because *that* with which the industrial oligarch, the man who was submitted to the torment of the electric prod one day accosts him (“That, *because you were never tied to a metal elastic, while two guys electrified your balls with a cattle prod.*” (56) [ . . . ] (“*That*, what would he have wanted to say with *that*?”) and ruins the novelty of his idyll with the woman who has just turned his life “inside out, like a glove”, is what does not allow him affectively to implicate himself in that act of knowing better than anyone, in other words, to conduct himself, to maneuver through the labyrinth of communist knowledge. *That* was perhaps the trap that his idiotic enjoyment (*Eso*) tricks him with. *That* is the horror of an unknowable knowledge, the perplexed insight that secretly played him ruses and which kept him at a distance from the dangerous ‘kryptonite,’ the source of all of Superman’s fears, from that which he believed crowned him as the “prince of Proximity”. *That* was the key to what effectively distanced him from the affective knot that represents in his life the nearness to that thing in which the enigma is ciphered, the mystery that riddled him, source of all his discontent, but which was at the same time fundamentally constitutive of his subjectivity, and allowed him to know and to enjoy himself in his knowledge, as the *invincible superman and possessor of a communist savoir*. The measure to which the role he chose to play as the perfect communist remains intact, is the measure in which that enjoying other will screen him from the horror of that ‘filthy’ thing, before whose uncanny presence he had to deal with an unbearable anxiety that

would later find a ghostly splitting: first, it would be remembered as an unnamable fear that this ambiguous presence- the female features of Comandante Sylvia's body showing through the *irregularities* in the male disguise of a military officer's uniform- would "grab his hand, and put it in her cunt." (124) In his memory, it is evoked as an anguishing repulsion, but nothing impedes us to conjecture that it could have been *as well* an overwhelming desire to slide his hand inside Comandante Sylvia's cunt. His addictive, devouring fascination for books on Communism, which he consumes with as much delight as he used to read the comic fables of Superman, and for which he pays with his weekly allowance, seems to have, retrospectively, its origin in that moment of perplexing unveiling, from then on constitutively enigmatic and disturbing. It is, ultimately, the "*idiotic and hidden core that not even himself has been able to name.*" (44)

#### IV. *Capital in itself is consumption for itself*

The Gordian knot of that enjoyment, the closure of his epistemic automatisms, unravels when he sees, in one of the many adventure stories that he consumes from the magazine *La causa peronista (The Peronist Cause)*, the picture of Comandante Sylvia's bullet-ridden, tortured and mutilated corpse. Only then can he make a disruptive connection between his epistemophilia and his mistrust of uniforms and what they represent. This horrific picture is, literally, the true form of the communist alien that "*Invaders* still owed to him" (70), that is, to the extent that the American T.V. series was the cultural representation of a whole era subdued by anti-communist paranoia.

This is the moment where the causal chain breaks, the navel where all his reality, all his compulsions to read and to know everything, better than anyone, his prodigious ability to understand the chains of cause and effect that "link a simple workers' strike with the debacle of

Socialist Democracy in Latin America” [85], is finally caught in collusion with the core of his consumptive enjoyments. He then realizes that all his acts of reading, which he thinks of as acts of interposing something in the order of a fiction between him and some irreducible ‘real’ in him- the *nausea*- were at the same time desperate gestures of diving into the non-existing *real* of his ideological authenticity (and with respect to this, we should recall that, deep within, he thought of himself as an *impostor*, in comparison to his older friends). That is, the objective, hardcore ‘real’ of his political convictions, upon which all his knowledge is predicated, is paradoxically the abyss of a contingent, substanceless matter that *emerges* from the interstices of his subjectivity. This *aura*, that which gives him the halo of ‘sanctity’ is at the same time the execrable enjoyment of an omnipotent Other. The only real is, quite literally, this *interstitial malfunctioning* of sense that the novel stages, written as it is in a state of delirious insight. It is, at this point, when he realizes that, in the end, the ‘real’ of the sensitivity on which his political convictions were sustained, was always already a fiction, a comic book tale of an improbable superhero, very much like the implausible candid idiot incarnated in the character of Comandante Silvia.

It is, also, the moment when he ‘realizes’ that he has since always been part of the neo-liberal simulacra against which he revolts. In other words, he understands that he reads communist textbooks, magazines on militant left-wing struggles, and so on, in the same consumptive key of narcissistically absorbed spectatorship with which he reads the epic heroisms of a comic book tale. By being elevated to the status of the unattainable Thing, Marxist knowledge shows itself to be another disguise, another uniform, another lure of omnipotence. It is a knowledge that remains unknowable to “*that he*” (73) that only by virtue of a ruse the reader could possibly identify with the protagonist. Instead, this knowledge appears in the novel as quite

literally being the product of a secret monetary transaction, a *tacit pact* that echoes the sinister deal with dictatorial barbarity of the class to which he belongs:

[ . . . ] even though *to buy* is a figure of speech because, what one finds, instead of the classic exchange of product for money about which the books by the Trotskyist economist Ernest Mandel exact an in-depth interrogation, to its deepest workings, so as to denaturalize it and finish with the illusion that its terms, always unfair, are fatal, is rather the tacit pact of including the magazine in the family account, where at the beginning of each month *The Peronist Cause*, as often also *Red Star*, or *The Combatant*, *erpian* [from E.R.P.] press organs whose conjunctural reports, so severe and scientific that those of *The Peronist Cause*, in comparison, sound like the daydreams of picaresque fables, he reads with rather laborious attention and enthusiasm, as someone following the best crash course of armed struggle by correspondence, liquates its price in the total balance to which the monthly consumption of dailies, feminine publications, perfectly bourgeois reviews of actuality [ . . . ] (120-121)

The catch is that, at the level of the underlying syntax inhering the double logic of this structure, in elevating Communism to the Thing *qua* unattributable Cause, there is a concomitant reduction of communist knowledge into mere use-value, and ultimately not much difference between the junky who uses his rich family's allowance for his daily fix (as in James Borough's eponymous novel *Junky*) and the communist amateur who is inadvertently bought into this 'tacit pact'. Both inadvertently subtend a metaphysics of knowledge that is entirely subsumed within the looped automatisms of a pleasure principle. Both equally embody the tyrannical demand for the unattainable Thing that characterizes advanced Capitalism. This Thing is turned, in both cases, into the addictive anti-object, a sort of 'Kantian capital in itself': In turning communist knowledge into a drug, that is, into *capital in itself*, the protagonist has also turned it into the embodiment of *consumption for itself*.

V. *To Cry or to Make Cry*

In an exemplary, because unique, case of interstitial, proleptic retrospection, the narration invokes the memory of the protagonist's future romantic encounter with an ex-political prisoner, a former 'erpian' who was lucky enough to have been freed. The narrator intimates how, after the memory of Allende's assassination is merely an inert accumulation of facts- "names, sequences of events, figures, *everything that he systematically forgets from personal tragedies*" (98)-, the protagonist will be the one who makes others cry, since he soon discovers that "to possess pain, is to become indestructible." (100) He meets the woman in some indeterminate foreign city, and almost unconsciously falls in love with her, that is, as soon as he realizes the impossibility of their love. He moves in with her when the time in his hotel is over. One day, when the two are lying in bed naked, she gets up to give him something to drink, he notices a scar on her calf, and in a shameless moment of supreme cruelty, barely disguised in the form of authentic curiosity, shares a remark with her. Soon, most probably after "having been turned inside out, like a glove" by his remark, and obeying the obscene mandate implicit in the demand for a confession- *Come on, tell me, express yourself*- that accompanies it, she tells him the story of her captivity and torture. Letting "everything out, like the spring," she finally breaks down in tears. What ensues is the typical confessional theater that replicates the scene of the torture chamber, and in which the protagonist performs, with hypocritical impunity, the self-assigned moral role of the priest who hears the fiction of a truth and confers the false gift of an unnecessary pardon, for a sin she never committed. In short, he shamelessly absolves her in a moment of false communion.

This scene might be worth comparing, because of what transpires from both their similarities and their differences, to Jean Jacques Rousseau's encounter with Zulettia, the phallic



Venetian courtesan who most probably removed in the enlightened Genevan thinker his most cherished fantasies about how a possible incarnation might be like the philosopher's ideal of an independent, modern, free thinking individual who only cared about his/her personal gratification and happiness. In stepping into the courtesan's boudoir, where Rousseau must have seen a "temple erected to the Venus of Modernity and Democracy", he noticed a pair of guns lying on a mantel somewhere in the room and, in a clumsy impulse of chauvinistic gallantry, he blurted out that he knew of more potent guns for a dame like her.<sup>232</sup> In the same spirit, she riposted that the guns were there to shoot any man unable to please her in bed as she deserved. During the erotic preamble, he narrates his experience: "I felt a mortal shiver that ran through my veins; my legs failed me and, feeling I was going to faint, I started crying like a child." Once in bed, naked, and perhaps secretly humiliated by this moment of emotive breakdown and Edipical terror, he found a perfect opportunity for retaliation in Zuletta's lacking one of her nipples. He probably saw in this lack a chance to return to her the shaming coin of the instance of symbolic subtraction that the almost perfect conjunction of power, beauty and violence incarnated in Zuletta's image must have provoked in him. He mentioned it to her- "oh, but you seem to be missing one"- she ignored it and continued playing, but he kept on mentioning it, at which point she lost patience, got dressed and, fan in hand, told him: "Little Johnny, please leave women alone, and go study some Math."<sup>233</sup>

The two scenes are similar, in that they both stage moments of calculated narcissistic cruelty (barely) varnished as compassion. Both scenes depict a man who pours the venom of his

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<sup>232</sup> I owe much to Juan Duchesne Winter's Prologue to his *Ciudadano insano: ensayos bestiales sobre cultura y literatura (Insane Citizen: Bestial Essays On Culture and Literature)*, for the pertinence and the theoretical insight of this passage. p.11-12.

<sup>233</sup> The passage in question is in Book VII of Rousseau's *Confessions*, and Zulletta's exact response was: "Zanetto, lascia le donne, e studia la matematica."

own insecurities into an unsuspecting ear. Both men project the terrified monsters of all their castration complexes and anxieties regarding their scared omnipotence, translating them onto a disowned evidence of abnormality in another's body. In other words, both *disown* their symbolic monstrosity and *disavow* its constitutive lack by imposing the instance of their traumatic narrative on the vestiges of a lingering extortive violence perpetrated on a real body. Both men hide their terror behind their meanness, with a supplemental accumulation of knowledge emblemized, in the first, by an obsession to reduce collective memory to the empty shell of quantitative data, and in the latter, by his insistence in mistaking beauty (and therefore truth, of which beauty must be the symbol) for arithmetic symmetry (2 nipples, instead of, say, 1.268072 nipples).

The crucial difference is that, in the first anecdote, the protagonist gets away with murder, for the erpian falls into the trap, playing along with his game of confession and shame. In the second case, Rousseau's back-handed words unexpectedly misfire, since Zuletta refuses to pay, with a spectacle of confession and shame, the affective price of his false gift, and instead *refuses to own what does not belong to her*, "turning inside out, like a glove" Rousseau's covert disavowal, making him see, and own, the venom secreting from the words of a man who is *too much in the sun (son)*, as Hamlet would say.

## VI. *The Enemy Within the Gates*

At this point, a final remark, without which an important part of the novel's allegorical dimension would in my view be lost: As I hope is clear from the passages discussed so far, the character's intimate life is paradoxically told by a third person narrator, along the ethical lines of a disguise that prevails throughout the rest of the story, probably in the name of a call for

discretion and distance that the genre of the testimonial, through its abusive commodification, often did not achieve. It is as if, in this third person confession, there was the message that there is hardly anything closer to an *imposture* than the attempt to narrate a confession from the alibi of a self-transparent ‘I,’ and that the only ethically valid way to talk about oneself is to treat this ‘I’ as literally (re-)constituted by fragments contingently put together, as if one were dealing with a perfect stranger, with all the masks and disguises one assumes in life, from an impersonal narrative voice of terrified shame that also is, inevitably, a disguise. (Therefore, the narrator at least once calls the protagonist with a more appropriately demonstrative “*that he*” [“*ese él*”].)

In other words, one cannot ignore the two semantic layers within which an ethical imperative and an obscene demand work together in the story to activate a self-cancelling ethical grain. It is important to keep this in mind since, in its self-devouring negativity, this novel is, as I hope to have made evident in my discussion so far, *both* a testimonial and a denunciation of such. In the confession of the truth that this testimonial narrates- its implicit claim of veracity beyond any means of verifiability, from the fictional semblance every narration has to assume- and since this real is traversed from the very beginning by this refusal of a narrator to assume the mask of a perfect temporal circularity between the object of narration (the disintegrated ‘I’ of a past subjective identity) and the subject of this confession (the ‘I’ that recuperates those scattered fragments and offers them, in their representation as a whole, in a self-identical present), there is something that re-appropriates the very site of this disavowed, stupid enjoyment from its other side. If repentance is the dialectical reverse of guilt, and if this pair describes an axis the dynamics of which are governed by a secret enjoyment; if, therefore, the logics that a knowledge produced and re-produced by this scene is already the flipside of an unconscious knowledge of a shameful *deed*; if it is equally true that a testimony, as an ideological machine, functions by

virtue of a reiterative transposition of the signs re-constituting the barbarity of this scene of guilt from the taming and normalizing site of its repentance, is it any less true that there is, necessarily, another line of tension that intersects and interrupts the Catholic ideology this logic endorses?

It is worth recalling, in regard to this, that this text summons, either directly or by association, a plethora of signifiers that conglomerate around and connect to structure a field of meaning that was of common circulation during the experience of the dictatorship, more or less directly remitting, as well, to the state of things during the years of “Transition” and “Consensus” in Chile and Argentina. Some of them are: clandestine movements, infiltration, secrecy, the search for ‘objective’ truths, the torture of bodies and its resistances, acts of physical and ideological gagging, extortions, blackmailing, impostures, breaks-through, confessions, betrayals and the unending spectacle of their corresponding confessions, the loss of integrity and the pains and shames of disintegration, disappearances, etc. They allude, ultimately, to the genre of the testimonial, as almost obligatory when talking about the experience of dictatorship, arguably the only officially sanctioned genre to confer cultural significance to this reality. These signifiers therefore assume in the novel the function of what Roman Jakobson called ‘indexical shifters,’ by virtue of which they occupy at any given moment more than one semantic field, to create a veritable Escher drawing effect, an organic palimpsest in which the difference between what is denoted (the ‘objective’ bit of information) and what is connoted (the ‘true’ message behind it) unravels.

The important thing here is that this distinction (ultimately the irreducible gap between the subject of enunciation and the subject of the statement) replicates, at the level of objective experience, the very formal gap standing between a *private realm* (the protagonist’s often

mentioned precious interiority, his precocious capacity to cry, his secret reasons for being a communist connoisseur, etc.), which paradoxically stands as the ‘external’ wrapping of the gift of terror emblemized by the confession in the novel, and a *barbaric domain*, which nonetheless comes already entombed, in other words *hidden, while it is nonetheless shown*, and rendered invisible by the forestage of the protagonist’s melodrama. My point is that this hidden domain of political barbarity reappears as an incessant *return* that invades and *terrifies*, in the novel, what was the actual cultural atmosphere permeating post-dictatorship Argentina. The phantasmal scenario that constitutes the very stuff of critique by Richard, Franco, Sarlo, Avelar and many others: the spectacle of private guilts and performed regrets, made public for the enjoying gaze of a consumptive Other, the show of ideological conversions and reconversions, convenient lies and half-truths, deceptions and disclosures, indults, tacit or explicit conspiracies of silence and cover-ups, travesties and disguises, simulations and dissimulations, and finally the horrific return from the past, of a barbarous act- in the form of a fuzzy, barely distinguishable, black and white image<sup>234</sup> of a communist militant’s disintegrated body- done under the pretext of the preservation of integrity of a body national. And most specially, there is the dark room of an unbearable shame of a generation that became (voluntary or involuntary) witness, accomplice and victim to this, represented by the secret sobbing of an undead mother, hidden in “a house gagged (*amordazada*) by darkness” (124), who says to her son, in word and deed, “I don’t want light”

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<sup>234</sup> In relation to the *poor quality* of Comandante Sylvia’s picture, much can be said, particularly when put into dialogue with graphic Chilean artist Eugenio Dittborn’s archival collection of photographic stills. About this collection, Richard observes: “The disturbance effected by these images is due to the visual anachronism of the temporality consigned in a pose that shows itself undisturbed to every anticipation of future, as well as to photographic past participle of black and white portraits, already almost untranslatable to the language of international market, overexcited as it is by so much publicitary rhetoric. [ . . . ] *The work evokes thus the multitude of burials and exhumations to which each image is exposed*, delaying pasts [*pretéritos*] apparently sealed under the crypt of remembrance towards mobile conjunctures that operate a *retro*-reading of its open-ended significations; re-temporalizing the mnemonic trace of the past so that the actuality of its event and emergency shakes the historicist continuity of the tradition with the disruptive intervention of its time-now (Benjamin).” Richard, *Residuos*, 97, 99. [My emphasis and translation.]

(“No quiero luz”).<sup>235</sup> The point is: this scenario unfolds in the novel, but it has always already become absorbed by the autistic melodrama of a private individual at war with himself. Its secrecy is the best evidence of its publicity, since it is, in the end, a dirty little secret shared by all. And is this not a possible variant of the good old Sartrean concept of (perverse) inauthenticity: “we all secretly know, as members of a class and representatives of its privileges, our participation in the atrocities committed during those years, but let us just pretend it was not so . . .”?

In other words, all these signifiers acquire, in their deployment, their capacity to co-implicate the double value of private and public discourses: what *infiltrates*, for example, is the nausea about the protagonist’s secret truth, as much as Comandante Sylvia’s secret identity. There is an *extortion*, that is, at one level, the extortion of the protagonist’s father asking him to “express himself”, at another level, the one that was perpetrated on tortured bodies, and at yet another, more allegorical level, and most importantly, *the one the author perpetrates on the narrative canon of the testimonial*.

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<sup>235</sup> Nelly Richard comments on the emblematic case of General Manuel Contreras, the principal suspect in the row of criminal processes instituted for human rights violations of political detainees. The publication of the two autobiographies by former militant-turned-into-DINA-informants Luz Arce and Marcia Alejandra Merino, *El infierno (The Inferno)* and *Mi verdad (My Truth)*, emerged as *the cultural correlates* to the criminal procedures instituted against the perpetrators of state terrorism. Richard’s argument is that the theater of confession was replicated, with the added obscenity that it was now in connivance with the official discourse of transitory democracy: “During his stay at the Talcahuano military hospital, General Contreras was taken to diverse medical centers, to be submitted to the exams that would confirm the maladies susceptible of delaying his incarceration. Several times, images of General Contreras were shown on T.V., reduced to the condition of examined, put under unconceivable relations of formal analogy with the situation of the bodies destined to be tortured: the transfers from precinct to precinct- getting naked- submitting the body to forced positions- being the object of the fragmenting action of machines- to be corporeally investigated in search of a truth. [ . . . ] The takes of General Contreras being radiographed, and of his radiographies exhibited on the screen which showed the organic and visceral detail of tissues invaded by the sickness, took the *morbid (malsano)* to the inquisitive transparency of a close-up, over the morbid interiorities and depths of bodily zones, semi-avowable and obscenely penetrated by the news. The *sickly* body was televisively remitted to the whole chain of semantic associations that link the imaginary of tumoral diseases to the pathological figures of the suspect and the malign, making such associations inevitably to slide and translate from the body (scene of the proliferation of the abnormal) to the mind (agent of the unworthy). The echo, diabolically resounding, of the expression ‘contra-natura’ that was applied to the intestinal transits of the patient and which was repeated by all national media, communicated thus the latent subtext of a protracted moral judgment about the inhumanity of the patient which could be, at last, named through a single word: “degeneration”. A word that elevated- unofficially- the corporeal symptom to the figurative rank of denouncing metaphor.” [My translation]

The meaning of this imperative to talk, to express oneself (*Come on tell me, express yourself . . .*) that the protagonist receives with horror, the significance of this gesture of intimation with which the father *torments* the child, acquires at this point its true allegorical dimension, since the narration turns this foundational terror over against the already codified body within which this injunction operates effectively to transform the memory of the experience of political struggle, death and defeat into the spectacle of a *candid idiot*. One can understand the full implications and the true allegorical value of those hesitations, of the irrepressible impulse both to “let everything out, like the spring” and not to do it, whatever the price, only in the context of the ethical dilemma in which an Argentine writer must be caught, given the unavoidable imperative, on the one hand, to convey in a truthful narrative the experience of a political defeat that bore, since its very beginnings, the abject and terrifying traits of a barbarity done in the name of civilization;<sup>236</sup> and the impossibility, on the other hand, to narrate it otherwise than in the language of guilt and repentance, of the hypocritical sanctification implicit in the discursive and ideological premises already imposed and officialized by the perpetrators of those barbarities. Put differently, this is a situation in which there is the double-tongued monster of an ethical demand for a political redress of this barbarity’s memory, perpetrated on an Other, so as to re-create performatively its barbarity, *and* a resistance, at any price, and the obscene cultural demand for a specific narrative formula through which the first demand is, in an act of preemptive calculation, to be sanctioned, regulated and ultimately consumed.

This is probably also the moment where the full-fledged allegorical nerve of the words *divorce* and *failed love story* becomes evident, since these layers have been perversely

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<sup>236</sup> One should recall, for example, the ready-made justification someone like Pinochet or Videla brandished when questioned by journalists about the necessity for so much state-of-exception barbarity: “The Nation (as the embodiment of Modern Civilization) must be saved, at any price.”

superimposed to constitute the triumph of the market of pain and death that succeeded in divorcing the forms of affect from the mnemonic substance of its truth. Can one not find, condensed in this imperative (“come on tell me, express yourself”), on the one hand, *the main adagio of the torturers and the repressive machinery to which they belonged, during their ritual of pain infliction and humiliation on the prisoners*; and, on the other hand, in a second movement, is not this injunction again *shamelessly recast by the discourses of ‘democratic’ ‘reconciliation’ and ‘transition,’ following the dictatorship, according to which the mandate of the terror of the torture chamber was perversely transposed into the exhibitionist travesty of a gag, a hoax, the melodrama of a testimonial, to be read and re-created, as it were, in a reality T.V show*? Is this not, then, the full allegorical meaning of the phrase “one has to let everything out, like the spring”, which publicly enjoins the protagonist to *express himself*, as if it were a matter of *singing*, given that *cantar*, in Spanish, also has the moral connotations of a confession and a betrayal?<sup>237</sup>

Through the tortuous meanderings of a narration that constantly overturns its nodal points of meaning, the narrator transfers the violence done *on* a body, tortured and tormented, often to the point of betrayal, in the name of a truth supposed-to-be objective, unequivocal and monolithic, to a violence done *on* the text, as the site of the most treacherous and deceiving activity there can be when it comes to speaking about truths: language. This dialectic decantation of the Western logic of knowledge production as being co-symmetrical with a repressive

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<sup>237</sup> It is Idelber Avelar, in his essay *From Plato to Pinochet: Torture, Confession, and the History of Truth*, who has traced the act of body torturing to the sexual metaphor implicit in the Platonic conception of truth as a preexisting entity, having to be extracted, via the penetrating (read violent) power of reason (*logos*), from a passive receptacle (*chôra*), etc. Avelar, *The Letter of Violence*, 25-49. Invoking Elaine Scarry, Avelar notes that “ ‘The transformation of body into voice’ is the operation carried out by the torturer: His body is not present. He monopolizes the world, the voice, and the self. [ . . . ] the torturer has no body, only a voice, and the tortured subject has no voice, only a body. The executioner becomes first and foremost a voice, while the tortured subject has been converted into a body: “ the very voice of the torturer, the demand or the question itself, is obviously, whatever its content, an act of wounding.”



machinery of statist suppression, is perpetrated in the novel in order to trace a line of affective re-*subjectivation* to its truth. To the barbarity inflicted on an abducted body, social or physical, from which a pre-existing corpus of objective information (names, locations, dates, numbers, plans, etc.) is supposed to emanate intact and in a state of transparent semantic *uniformity*, corresponding to the simulated uniformity of a project of modernization, Alan Pauls opposes in this novel the violence and torment done *on* the textual conventions of this narrative, and its becoming co-transparent to the imperative of consumption, into which it so easily lets itself be engulfed. That is to say, a violence re-enacted and perpetrated on the text of a testimonial narrative *about* the (itself violent) melodramatization, trivialization, and re-presentation of this barbarity, in order to extract from it, in a ruthless act of extortion, a subjectified, horrific truth that a discursive constellation pertaining to the culture of spectacle proper to post-dictatorship- with all the dissimulations and simulations that characterize the neo-liberal marketing of this experience- pretends to erase. Is not this story, then, the history of a protagonist named Lament?<sup>238</sup> It is like the story his father is trying to tell him about his personal past, also “a ‘long story,’ ‘complicated,’ ‘impossible to sum up,’” [ . . . ] “a relation that multiplies the periphrases, the marches and countermarches, the suspensive points, a series of disquieting terms, ‘hide-outs’ (*aguantaderos*), [ . . . ] that are left floating in him like fluorescent buoys, vestiges of an incalculable submerged world.” (42) What can otherwise be the allegorical meaning of a story that seems to unfold by submitting a sanctioned discourse of exhibitionist confession and repentance to the same torturing mechanisms of truth extraction that were used on actual bodies: infiltration, barbaric violence, extortion, imposture, terror, and humiliation? Is not the resulting narrative the lament of a tortured and fragmented body that confesses, in shame and terror, its unspeakable truth? By submitting this discourse, and therefore, in a way, the subjectivity of

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<sup>238</sup> The protagonist is not given a proper name in the story.

which is supposed to be its narcissistic reflection, to the same process of violence, it ‘infiltrates,’ ‘abducts,’ ‘terrifies,’ ‘tortures,’ ‘rapes’ and ‘humiliates’ it, tears off its uniforms and reveals its naked truth, putting it to shame and condemning it to silence. What could be a better vengeance from political and historical iniquity than this ruthless hostage-taking and gagging of a cultural body-discourse, so as to make it take “everything out, like the spring”, therefore returning to its modern visage of tamed uniformity its barbarous founding Thing?

According to this interpretation, in this novel, Pauls transposes the deceptive code of the confessional scene of guilt and repentance that every testimony prefigures, recasting it into the affective ‘receptacle’ of an unbearable *shame*, by traversing and undermining such a scene with a substrate of affective tension with respect to the secret enjoyment that feeds on its Catholic, moralizing and self-recuperative dimension. This novel is, as a cultural object embedded in a certain historical juncture, itself a *gag*- a terrifying gift that threatens to give, at the same time, less and more than what it promises-, to the extent that it represents an instance of radical ideological rupture with the genre, as well as with everything it convokes, by way of our expectations as cultural consumers, and in line with the discourses of “transition to democracy”, “reconciliation” and “concertation” sanctioned by national officialdom that, to a great extent, turned this genre into one of its privileged cultural object-symptoms. In this sense, this novel turns the genre of the testimony “inside out, like a glove”, thereby returning to it- and here I want to reiterate in a more concrete form Heidegger’s epigraph with which the third chapter opens- the ontological essence of “the basic disposition of the other beginning, which reveals behind all progress and all domination over beings a dark emptiness of irrelevance,” in other words, terror, which is its truth.

By way of a conclusion, one should recall at this point a real-life scene taken from the 1970 film documentary, explicitly produced for a North American audience, *Brazil: A Report on Torture*, about a group of former left-wing Brazilian prisoners, eventually liberated and flown to Allende's Chile, in exchange for the abducted (and probably also tortured) Swiss ambassador.<sup>240</sup> In response to one of the interviewers, a young and particularly attractive woman describes, after a brief but meaningful hesitation, in minute detail her personal experience of torture: what follow are morbid specifics about her (and her female friends') being submitted to all sorts of brutal procedures- being inserted electric prods and wires in her nipples, vagina and anus, being beaten, insulted and then raped, submitted to mock executions, involuntary urinating and defecating, being beaten to the frenzied rhythm of a *macumba* song, etc. During the session (not of torture, but of the interview), her features were very peaceful; there was no display of pathos in her face, no show of pain or sentimentalism. She tells the experience about the nightmare of her own torture with a mixture of unrehearsed, matter-of-fact simplicity and clinical coldness, even with a very courteous smile on her face, almost as if she was only describing a routine surgical procedure performed on a perfect stranger. In a second moment in the film, the interviewer proceeds to ask about the circumstances that eventually led to their detention, *therefore implying, in this unconscious chronological inversion of events, that what was really important and of utmost interest was the fact of torture in itself, and not the circumstances that surrounded it.* The woman narrates the circumstances of her predicament, up to the moment of her detention and torture. After a brief and uncomfortable silence, she looks inquisitively at the interviewer, and in a marvelous mixture of naughty innocence and flirtatious zing, asks him the obvious: "I think I have already told you what came next. What, do you want me to tell you again?" All there is contained in the order of brave irony and affirmative subversion in this instant, all that is left

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<sup>240</sup> Landau, Saul & Haskell Wexler *Brazil: A Report on Torture*, 1971.

unsaid, yet connoted, in terms of the secret spectacle of sado-masochistic re-enactment (What, are we having fun yet? How is your hard-on going?, etc.), tells, with so much less, so much more than the objective *facts* and *figures* about the truth behind the unconscious trans-coding that replicates, at the level of the discourse, what once took place at the level of the body. But what is really crucial not to miss about this scene is that it suggests a rare moment of violent discursive/ideological shift, very similar to what is fundamentally at play in Paul's novel: from the perverse logic that binds the semantic coupling *resistance/confession/truth-as-information/silence/rehabilitation (about the naked fact of torture)* to their affective parallel of *fear/pain/humiliation/shame/ justice-as-pity*, the tone in her words and her facial expression conspire to *trespass* the domain of that enjoying logic, and gives it its long overdue truth.

Here, again, the daemonic image of an *undead* woman, whose itinerary we have been trying to trace in the past three chapters, returns to haunt our reading. By positioning *testimonial* narrative in the place of the hysterical subject, two shattered bodies are made visible here: on the side of 'bare life,' the image of the terrified woman hiding in the darkness of a bedroom. Her numbed existence, too, partakes of the bareness and misery of a body reduced to the mere pulsating action of thingness. Moreover, this thingness is the allegorical condition of a whole nation. On the side of the letter (symbolic death), the ugliness of a barbaric truth of a discursive machinery of meaning-production that, in its very turning into the brute *hyle* from which a surplus of non-sense (truth) will be extracted, ends up reflecting back upon us a terrified subject. This is similar to José Montiel's brutal question "What is *this* thing?"

Taken together, what is produced is shame, and this shame, the affect of castration, unveils the master signifier, or rather the master, as the very signifier of castration- the ideologue, the shadow figure of the statesman, the abject agency mediating between the *bandido* and the *caudillo*. But, contrary to Borges, where this daemonic undeadness is projected onto an uncanny object, in Pauls this undeadness is attributed to cultural capital (in his case, bearing the proper noun *testimonio*), which reveals itself, first as hysterical, and afterwards as empty, mute, shocked, devoid of any value. Furthermore, that instant of death occurs at the very moment when the division subject(as reader)/object(as text) is suspended, however momentarily.

### Part III- The Corporeal Paradox

Communism without economic basis is *empty*, while communism without moral basis is *blind*. – Kojin Karatani, *Parallax on Kant and Marx*.

Ever since the French Revolution, when it becomes the sole depositary of sovereignty, the people is transformed into an embarrassing presence, and misery and exclusion appear for the first time as an altogether intolerable scandal. Our age is nothing but the implacable and methodical attempt to overcome the division dividing the people, to eliminate radically the people that is excluded. This attempt brings together, according to different modalities and horizons, Right and Left, capitalist countries and socialist countries, which are united in the project – which is in the last analysis futile but which has been partially realized in all industrialized countries – of producing a single and undivided people. The obsession with development is as effective as it is in our time because it coincides with the biopolitical project to produce an undivided people. -Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.

This meeting, this *chance*, this contagion, more intense than any immunitarian cordon, is the community of those that manifestly do not have it, when not losing it, and losing themselves in the very same process of flowing away from it. [ . . . ] If existence cannot be sacrificed, how are we to think the originary opening to it? How are we to fight the immunization of life without making it do death's work? How are we to break doan the wall of the individual while at the same time saving the singular gift that the individual carries? -Roberto Esposito, *Communitas*.

## Chapter 5

### Metastases of the Boom: Politics and the Corporeal in the Cuban Neo-Baroque

“*Not* subjects. Or subjects of their own proper lack, of the lack of the proper. Subjects of a radical impropriety that coincides with an absolute contingency or just simply ‘coincides’”  
- Roberto Esposito, *Communitas*.

In what has the USSR, knowledge is the King. You would not be too happy there.  
- Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*.

Let us reconsider the case of Cuba, in the years shortly following the Revolution, and its virulent, one could also add allergic, autoimmune persecution against intellectuals who were, in one way or another, considered ideologically disaffected from the promises of a new state of things, who were subsequently *persecuted, ostracized, besieged, banished* from the New Body politic, when not *contained, quarantined*, or submitted to the spectacle of public confessions, in order to make them confess the ‘hidden truth’ of their capitalist stain. They were as *persona non grata*, with a disagreeable (disgusting, monstrous) mask: many of them would find themselves forced to enact, first by coercion, and afterwards as a matter of mere ethical affirmation, a confession that ran along that chain of equivalences: *homosexual = decadent = capitalist = enemy*. Some of them committed suicide, as if reproducing, in their own bodies, that same replication that was taking place, like a cancer, within the new body political- modernity *negating* the power of its own realization by refusing to find it in *ecstasy*, outside of itself. It was an *ecstasy*, a revolutionary *élan* that had initially proclaimed its return to itself from the cells and foci of the Sierra Maestra, spilling over into the streets of Havana. By positing itself as the very excess of modernity, the imperial outside of Capitalism a few years before now became an inside on its own right. This jubilant revolutionary orgasm had to end, like any other orgasm, with a dismal sense of guilt: *post-coitum, animal triste*.

What remained outside the logic of production and reproduction of this new *comunitas*, could not exist in ecstasy, *outside of itself*, even if it was this exteriority- what Alain Badiou calls *hors place*- that gave the revolutionary moment its foundational mystique. Since the enemy *outside* could only become visible *inside*, this New Body, which was, at one at the same time, to be the new abode, the authentic and only interiority of the New Man, was to be cleansed of the disease of Capitalism- without remainders- if the revolutionary spirit was to remain healthy. While being outside the revolution, Capitalism was a disease that needed to be kept at a visible distance, obsessively exorcised from the State's own body. If the New Man could speak, it was with the forms inherited from the Old Man, and those forms still spoke of *value, content, substance, control, and discipline*.

Moreover, we should engage in a process of exhumation of that Archive, from the unreadable that remains outside of the dialectics unfolding between these two narratives. It is certainly plausible, for example, to *read* that hatred as running along the same symptomatic lines of a *lingering* misogyny and homophobia that just found in the signifier 'disaffected gay intellectuals' the perfect metonymy for its homicidal pretexts. Under this reading, this 'disaffection' was only the true inverted message coming from a blind knavery: it revealed the true monstrosity of homophobia beneath the grandiose varnish of disciplined revolutionary militancy. True: It is also plausible, to read that production as the *indexing* of a perverse, degenerating and degenerate, consuming and self-consuming, destructive and self-destructive, in short a nihilistic tendency in the subjects that Capital *reproduces*. The accusatory finger was directed against this secret remainder whose truth needed to be extracted and brought to light



through a ruthless hermeneutics of suspicion. In the cultural arena, the other war that kept going on, well beyond the war that jubilantly marked its end, precisely, *with the fall of a wall*, was a war that distributed its quota of friends and enemies, victors and defeated. From the standpoint of the nascent communist Cuban State: the likes of Virgilio Piñera, Severo Sarduy, Heberto Padilla, Reynaldo Arenas, and José Lezama Lima identified themselves- as much as they were the objects of the other's identifications- in a loop of a tautology of disaffection ("I became anti-revolutionary, just because you wrongly considered me anti-revolutionary; you were already disaffected, because you consider yourself *always already* outside the program traced for a communist state of things.")-, and taken as representatives of the old, decadent forms of the colonial regime, a 'darker side of Western Modernity' at the service of its 'brighter' side; a side that had a name whose statist form threatened to *engulf, devour, hegemonize, and totalize* the entire field of human reality with the demon of its uncontrollable warrior son, negating and excluding any other form of human coexistence.<sup>241</sup> They therefore fell *outside*, were *in excess of*, the *comunitas* of the New Man that was being forged, the *limits* of which were being welded along the lines of a communist State, the utopian promise of the new *comunitas*, that was, from then onwards destined to be, if it was *to be* at all, an absolute 'outside' from the Empire. Absolutely, uncompromisingly without Capitalism, the historical realization of modernity could only happen outside modernity, outside civilization, and outside ideology. Communism thus became an absolute outside that needed to exorcise and evacuated itself of all its capitalist insides.

From the standpoint of the *other side* (presumably the more 'enlightened' one): this persecution, this exclusionary logics, the systematic rendering *invisible* of the *foreign* and therefore *threatening* bodies to the new social contract of this new body political, this

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<sup>241</sup> In reference to Walter Mignolo's *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*.

*eradication* from the symbolic field that created the rhetorical conditions for the future *expulsion* of those bodies, prepared the rhetorical ground, the body of language from which those ‘outsiders’ of modernity had to be cast off, that is, through a ferocious, unrelenting and insidious visibilization and identification, without remainders, *with the Enemy*, and everything that henceforth ensued- obsessive filings and pro-filings (*carpeteos*), secret and not-so-secret recordings and surveillances, ideological ‘re-education,’ in short the *other* Holy Inquisition, the system of checks and balances that defined the institutional dictates of a nation in a chronic state of *siege-*, was only explainable due to the internal dynamics of an *inherently* backwards, chauvinistic, and homophobic tendency in the region. The Caribbean and Latin American cultures were inherently allergic, *immune*, to *other* sexual identities, to *other* forms of dealing with the animal’s civilizational irreducibility to the human.

It seemed that *excrement* often surged from the innards of this epistemic corpse that was, in the form of an insult, barely disguised as the fear of the Capitalist other. Naturally, regardless of the truths that could be fairly distributed along both sides of this blame game, of its uncontrollable reproduction, its marketing, its underground circulation, distribution and consumption, there was something that remained unsaid, a quotient of truth that did not let itself be ingested so easily into this narrative.

One needs, at this point, also to rehearse, however schematically, the theological-political language by virtue of which former medicinal student Ernesto Che Guevara, during the formative years of the communist insurrection against Fulgencio Batista’s regime, imparted the whole enterprise with the character and semantic flair of an immunological *telos* that would eventually be subsumed within the coming revolutionary State. From key pages of *Pasajes de la*

*guerra revolucionaria* and *La guerra de guerrillas*, it can be seen that the *revolutionary way* (*la vía insurreccional*), ran along two parallel chains of association that seemed to be oblivious of each other, while sustaining a tacit dialectics around notions of statist legitimacy and authority, national autonomy and autochthony. Albeit not always explicitly, the strategic core of the revolutionary armed struggle betrays the metaphorical undergirding of an *infection*, being *inoculated* into the *inert*, ideologically *comatose* body politic of the Cuban countryside (the imaginary locus of the Nation, the site where the lost traces of politics as the radical openness of co-munal possibilities could still be found), which would eventually *spread throughout* the urban space, once it had been jolted back into political life. Having gone through a process of *purification*, proving himself in a sort of ascetic *cleansing* of all vestiges of bourgeois consciousness - which included a disastrous first invasion and an agonizing moment of heroic survival and reorganization-, the revolutionary, *born-again* combatant would penetrate the countryside, where the seed could be planted on the fertile ground of the oppressed peasantry.<sup>242</sup> The *insurreccional foci* (*el foquismo guerrillero*), the urban *cell*, the *mother column* (*columna madre*), from which all other cells derived- that is, *autotelically*, projecting onto its narrative the contours of a fantasy of self sufficiency that was like all fantasies, a fantasy of the phallus - was supposed to create an *infection*, a revolutionary *contagion* in the island's countryside, which would eventually *spill over* to the urban centers, and eventually reach the heart of economic and political control.<sup>243</sup> This revolutionary way was, nonetheless, charged with the highest spiritual

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<sup>242</sup> The theory of the focus is developed by Guevara in *La guerra de guerrillas*. For a thorough account, interpretation, and critique of this theory, as well as how it was applied elsewhere in Latin America, and of the revolutionary process in Latin America in general, see Duchesne-Winter, Juan. *La guerrilla narrada: acción, acontecimiento, sujeto*.

<sup>243</sup> Guevara, Ernesto 'Che'. *La Guerra de guerrillas*. Websource: <http://www.librodot.com>. Lines before, Guevara had stressed the *natural national knowledge* incarnated in the person of Camilo: "Fidel has already said it, [Camilo] *did not have the culture of the books*, he had the *natural intelligence of the people*, which had chosen him among thousands to put him in that privileged place, through blows of audacity [ . . . ] Camilo and the other Camilos (those who haven't arrived, and those still to come), are the indices of the people's forces, the highest expression of what a

mission of justice and selflessness: the being-for-death of the perfect warrior was the highest mark of his *immortality* (the life and death of Camilo Cienfuegos is the literary emblem here), of his holy vocation for the highest moral order, his being *larger than life*, precisely because he represented the *undivided, formless, unbounded, oceanic substance*, the pure voice of the proletarian consciousness, radically with-out knowledge and with-out limits: therefore, “we are not going to *encase* him, *imprison* him into any *mold*, that is, kill him.”<sup>244</sup> The utopian teleology of Marxist revolution, besides underscoring the individual’s submission to an *ascetic* process of transcendental depuration from the old ways, whereby its members would *purge* themselves from their capitalist self, was also a *farmakon*- both a medicine and a venom- that was necessary to instill into their soul in order to forge the revolutionary subject.<sup>245</sup> When the guerrilleros were still in that ambiguous stage of precarious legitimation and authority, and therefore, where the line that separates a group of *bandidos* from an army of revolutionary heroes was hard, if not impossible, to establish, the rhetorical maneuvers necessary to impart a sense of *mythical* finality to their enterprise- most crucially whenever the application of revolutionary justice *within* the group, like in the incident of *chino* Wong or Eutimio Guerra, occasioned an uncanny sense of

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nation can give [ . . . ]” (2-3) [My translation and emphasis.] With regards to the autotelic fantasy at work within the bio-political activation of the *focus* within the rural guerrilla in the Cuban revolutionary epic, Duchesne clarifies: “A considerable political and insurrectional ferment, created by a diversity of political forces, with varied inclinations and ideological trajectories, however diffuse, was already awaiting the expeditionaries led by Fidel Castro when they arrived to the coasts of Cuba, and it went on to complement the effort throughout the whole war, orchestrating a definitive unitary impulse with the “Pact of Caracas” in July of 1958. This belies any presupposition that the case of Cuba could be read under the light of the second principle stated by Guevara in *La guerra de guerrillas*, as an example of a guerrilla column, which *by itself creates its own conditions of development*, such as many ended up understanding [Guevara’s] concept of *focus*.” (23) [My translation and emphasis]

<sup>244</sup> Duchesne writes: “[ . . . ] whoever arrogates supremacy to himself is the most authentic, according to an ethical regime of legitimation of authority, that should undergo the decisive ordeal of superhuman resistance. [ . . . ] Only they [the most authentic revolutionaries] are effectively capable of resisting dehydration, hunger, exhaustion, sleep deprivation, infected wounds, disorientation, isolation, fear of death and torture, and above all, the temptation to abandon an extremely arduous enterprise, devoid of any material compensation, and to which they were only bound by ethical commitment.” (49) [My translation.]

<sup>245</sup> And this *farmakon* displayed its maximum aporetic duplicity most effectively in the moment of a *guerrillero*’s heroic death and its subsequent narrativization: “In the ethics of truth and immortality that is being constituted in these episodes, the best that can happen to a character to receive the benediction of such an exacting pen as Guevara’s, is to die in a *state of heroism*, just like the Christian hagiographies demanded from their protagonists to die in a ‘state of sanctity’.” (50) [My translation.]

sacred abjection-, the *lettered* intervention of the military leader was decisive. This would impart the *deed* with an ethical sense of spiritual transcendence and physical orientation.<sup>246</sup> In a radical being *outside of the nomos*, given therefore to the utmost state of geographical and psychological *disorientation*, this eccentric voyage towards the foundational myth, they had to establish an exorbitant sense of *communion*, seeing themselves as the orphaned offspring of a tyrannical father.<sup>247</sup> This brotherly communion could have meant, as it actually did more than once, *both* an act of barbarism and civilization, where the highest ethical orientation could only materialize as the result of a strict regime of prophylaxis, symbolic and physical, upon the body biological.

Deep in the jungles of the Sierra Maestra, the uncontrollable, nomadic war machine was always in a state of dangerous proximity with respect to the function of statist re-formation that the high command took upon itself. The group of guerrilleros, which will have become the future communist State, was since its inception, already engaged in a ferocious battle with the barbaric forms of Capitalism *within* their rank and file. Lest they become another group of *bandidos*, a situation of abject undeadness not unlike the one in which the F.A.R.C. and *Sendero Luminoso* found themselves years later, the group actualized its ends through a sort of spiritualized biopolitics, in which the sanctification of the revolutionary hero in a battle to the death with the

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<sup>246</sup> The cases of deserter *el Chino* and traitor Eutimio Guerra are exemplary, as they serve to illustrate the punctual concentration of the double character (symbolic and biological) by which, not just the physical safety, but most emphatically *the ethical integrity* of the group is safeguarded through a literary recounting of the biological suppression of its corrupted individuals. This is the lesson Guevara draws from both incidents, the *farmakon* which he re-creates to the troops in order to exorcise from them the specter of abject criminality.

<sup>247</sup> In regards to this con-fusion of two distinct positionings with regards to the structural extimacy, the symbolic void within a fixed state of things that the concept of the *focus* comes to designate, Duchesne observes: "It is his excessive preoccupation with the necessity of positing *ab initio* the sum total of the political and social antagonisms, that leads Guevara to confuse the focus as the necessary effect of a strategy, with the focus as *causa prima* of the revolution." (24) [My translation.]

capitalist enemy was the simultaneous accomplishment of a double projective movement of symbolic evacuation and physical re-embodiment.<sup>248</sup>

In the next two chapters, a reading of Severo Sarduy's *Cobra* and Virgilio Piñera's *La Carne de René* will enable an entrance into the logic of the drive- of Capital's two bodies, symbolic and biological-, where the very corporeal symptom of the modern *letrado* becomes visible, as the principle that structures the baroque economy of these two writers. The baroque as a cultural formation will thus be looked at from the standpoint of the 'dream work' of Capital. This symbolic economy- an evacuation of content in its virulent materialization into form- reflects the function of Capital as the distributive principle whereby a double surplus of 'empty' knowledge and formless, 'bare life' is simultaneously reproduced at the two opposing sides of the same divide civilization/barbarism. In its (ultimately irrational) obsession with *producing*, at once, a revolutionary subject, *depurated* from any barbaric stain, and a scientific knowledge whose only value could nonetheless be realized by its technological instrumentalization, the Cuban Communist State *internalized* Capital's drive, by repressing and making invisible its function in the form of the academic discourse (where Capital, death drive, occupies the place of the hidden master). This symptom, of which Capital is the name, is corporeal, to the extent that it derives its operative power from the specular co-implication between the mastery of language and the mastery of one's own body, insofar as this co-implication (between body and language mastery) is also grafted on a narcissistic mis-recognition that partakes of the same libidinal

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<sup>248</sup> With regards to this paradox, Duchesne writes: "Does this cut suspended on the abyss not imply a *return* and relapse (*recaída*) on the power of myth submitted to the myth of power, that is, the re-turn to the cruel Law, without mediations which sustains despotic and arbitrary power, exclusively legitimated on the myth of its force? [ . . . ] whoever goes into the jungle with a weapon, in order to create a power alternative to the existing state, is going to come upon the imperative of using the weapon, that is, of *validating* the law of force, of which he has taken charge by ignoring the institutions of the existing state" (55) [My translation.]

economy of a constitutive inadequation, of a subject's belatedness and anticipation with respect to the Other: what, on the side of the object, both the Capitalist and the Communist modes of production are unable to grasp, for different reasons, is the very logic of *lack* and *excess* that sustains the logic of production and consumption. What, on the side of the subject, is the place where the supplemental displacement of this inadequacy unfolds, when the State, in the name of revolutionary (Christian) love, becomes the ventriloquist and translator of the nation's true revolutionary voice?

Under the spell of the academic discourse, the bureaucratic apparatus of the communist State submits the Nation- the masses, its excessive object of revolutionary love- to the production of the subject of science, only that it is useless, it cannot be reintegrated into circulation, instrumentalized into technology, the way it is done in capitalist systems, since it is this instrumentalization that drives technological innovation as the very pre-condition of surplus accumulation. It instead produces a surplus of revolutionary subjects- subjects of science- who embody scientific knowledge and its technological *savoir faire* that historically came to be, precisely as a result of merchantilist plunder and dispossession at another geographical space. The ambiguous relation that scientific research, however nobly and disinterestedly it wants to phrase its intentions, entertains with financial exploits in the colonial possessions overseas is historically undeniable, and this neocolonial structure survives nowadays in multiple forms. Therefore, all the prohibitions that could have been imposed on this drive by the Communist State only serve to fuel it, since it is through the State's prohibitions that Capital accomplishes its function as the drive to overcome them. As David Harvey has stated, by its very nature, Capital cannot abide its own limits (and the imposition of those limits by force of law is precisely the

function of the State).<sup>250</sup> The very moment the State, as representative of a self-contained communist National body, identifies itself with the new revolutionary humanity that Che Guevara wanted to construct in *El Hombre Nuevo*, its mechanisms (law creating violence), become a matter of obsessive rituals of exorcisms, the incessant disavowal of this irreducible barbaric stain that was its own.

I would like to propose, if only as a working hypothesis, that this is the surplus of truth (Capital as repressed, internalized drive) that the Neo-Baroque, such as Sarduy and Piñera came to express it, gives to those particular forms of statist, ‘actually existing communisms’. The bio-political form is what could be appreciated in its full measure only at the level of geopolitics: the autoimmune, self-devouring relationship that communist nation-states entertained with their own populations (at the symbolic level, the theatrical exorcism of the capitalist ‘demon’ that always lurked, *camouflaged* in uncanny transvestism, within each individual), is the historical correlate to the externalization, in the form of the barbarous war machine, of the same logic, this time unleashed against actual bodies, national and individual, of *other* groups beyond the frontiers of the imperial powers. This type of folding into itself of the death drive, the uncontrollable *metastasis* of a knowledge devouring its own entrails is, I would argue, the movement that lies at the heart of the baroque phenomenon, considered at the triple intersection of economics (crisis of credit and interest, either inflationary or depressive), politics (crisis of state authority and its means of legitimation) and culture (crisis of the form-content relation, of the nation’s *langage*). One could even go as far as to say that the baroque delineates the very limits of the subject’s

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<sup>250</sup> See Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neo-liberalism*.



self-intelligibility and its relation with culture in modernity.<sup>251</sup> The constitutive asynchrony- the premature belatedness with respect to itself that punctuates the moments of verification of such intelligibility, can therefore be traced back to the displacement of the consumptive automatism towards the self-containment of the *irreducible, hard-kernel* of Capitalism *within* the national subject- incarnated in the *dark cabinet* of the bureaucratic apparatuses whose function was to delve into, register and collect the unfathomable reaches of the communist subject's soul. My working hypothesis can be thus rephrased: the phenomenon known as the *baroque culture* is the dream-work of the function of *crisis* creation and transcending of Capital, when such function is internalized within the mechanisms of the State (law creation, law upholding). The baroque culture and its objects are ultimately the screen image of the *nomos* of the State, put at the service of the nomadic war machine of international capital within the boundaries of the nation. This movement is ever-expansive, and self-perpetuating. The baroque is ultimately Capital put to work *within* the State, but *without* Empire.

I do not mean to deny that there are obvious and crucial differences between the two historical periods, and I do not want to ignore the historical (and political) specificity of either of them. But even someone like Mabel Moraña, who is so keen to preserve the historical uniqueness of the baroque phenomenon, also attaches to the Latin American colonial baroque an anti-statist, subversive index that is totally absent from its peninsular version, where the baroque became a means of reasserting ideological state control and self-legitimacy over emerging

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<sup>251</sup> This is probably the epicenter of the *difference* between Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt regarding the concept of agency and sovereign decision, which Giorgio Agamben has rehearsed in *The State of Exception*. That the baroque is the extreme realization of modernity's triple intersection of the Capital, State and Nation is, on the other hand, the contention of a wide range of thinkers, from Eugenio D'Ors, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Lacan, to more recently Gregg Lambert, who sums up the itinerary of the theoretical contributions by the most relevant thinkers of the subject. See Lambert, Gregg. *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture*..

economic interests within a fragmenting aristocracy. It is perhaps important to recall that the Caribbean Neo-Baroque of the twentieth century was born, like the first one, out of a similar *crisis* of legitimacy and authority of the modern state (this time democratic parliamentarism), a crisis that also signaled, necessarily, a crisis of transnational capitalism (consumer goods capitalism).<sup>252</sup> This double crisis, which was also taking place at the moment of the triumph of the Cuban revolution, signified a debacle of meaning that is, at least formally, not very different from the one that took place in the sixteenth century. It also displays the deflationary character of a political defeat, from the moment that Spain, by becoming the first empire of modernity, also had to learn the hard way how to make do with the contradictions, the pitfalls and conundrums of mediating between the unpredictable, capricious, nomadic dynamics of global capital and the emerging European nations (very well contained in the proverbial phrase ‘Spain is poor, because it is rich’). Furthermore, the debates around the properly European or American historical origins of the classical baroque become moot, once one starts to recognize the baroque as a cultural phenomenon that symptomatized the very structuring function of Capital (death drive in the form of *interest* and *credit*) as a device of *crisis*-creation and overcoming that implicated both hemispheres in its expansive movement around the planet.

As a preliminary step, it is therefore indispensable to determine the singular nature that Sarduy and Piñera entertained with the dynamics of cultural production, circulation and consumption, as well as with the concrete form it assumed during the period preceding and succeeding the revolution, for it is only in doing so that a better understanding can be acquired of the role that such cultural formation assumed within the island. This relation is better detected, I think, by shedding light on how the theological-political aporiae at the heart of notions of

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<sup>252</sup> Maravall, Antonio. *The Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure*.

*legitimacy, authority, authoctony* and *autonomy*- which became so central in the communist reformulation of the State's function of establishing ideological hegemony-, played out in the cultural international game, and how Sarduy's and Piñera's most emblematic work represents both a displacement and staging of those impasses towards the cultural.

### I. *Taking the Boom from Behind*

The cultural playfield where this battle unfolded was the Latin American *Boom*. If, as Bret Levinson argues, the Boom was, above anything else, an Ideological State Apparatus, what is the precise relation that Severo Sarduy entertained with it? There is probably no other author closer to the epicenter of the Latin American Boom than Severo Sarduy, if by this term we understand the privileged place of inscription of the debates about modernism and post-modernism that unfolded in Latin America during the fifties and sixties.<sup>253</sup> Sarduy's work can be accordingly looked at as condensing much of the split (and also, in a way, a continuation) from the traditional literary practices that signified the Boom generation. If the Boom is characterized by an "employment of modernist, experimental techniques to disrupt the conventions of characterization and narration that governed the regionalist telluric novels of the Latin American tradition (exemplified by Gallego's *Doña Barbara* [1929] and Rivera's *La vorágine* [1924])", Sarduy is in the paradoxical position of representing *both* the most thorough accomplishment of writing the formal prescriptive foundations of the Boom, *and* expressing the strongest critical reserve about such practices. For Sarduy "[Boom] writing remains in the service of an experience other than itself,' be it external reality or inner subjective privacy (*'le vécu, quel*

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<sup>253</sup> See Hallward, Peter. Hallward, Peter. *Absolutely Post-colonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific*, 258.

*mot!*)- Magical Realism itself being merely the ‘bastard solution’ that mixes the two. Sarduy objects strongly to the Boom novelists’ alleged ‘lack of rigorous thinking about writing [ . . . ], the ‘critical impressionism they indulge in’”, because ““everything they do is subjective, idealistic, without method or seriousness.””<sup>255</sup> This reserve can be understood as reflective of a justified suspicion towards the Boom writers’ generalized lack of a mediated understanding of the material conditions that determined their writing. In a movement that they generally saw as a radical break, Sarduy could not help but see a continuation that was largely unconscious of its own self. In that sense, a cultural thing such as *Cobra* (José Montiel would say: “What is *that* thing?) can legitimately be seen as the immemorial written relay of that continuation, insofar as it opens up a space lost in a sort of metaphysical timelessness that designates the confines of the Boom’s (and the Latin American *Lettered City*’s) unconscious. While effectively embarking on the formal experimentation and stylistic innovations that characterized Boom writers in such a rigorously radical and uncompromising way as to become an exemplary source for many of them, Sarduy also knew how to preserve and be faithful to a highly consistent critical and theoretical distance with respect to his own writing, and therefore to the general writing constraints that defined his moment. This aloofness, in the best of cases, only a few others dared to assume.<sup>256</sup> This self-reflexive critical angle, needless to say, also entailed a tacit but remarkable distance from his subjective positioning within the ideological coordinates of the

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<sup>255</sup> Hallward. from Interview with Claude Fell, 7, quoted in *Absolutely*.

<sup>256</sup> Hallward mentions, among those who took Sarduy as the model for the Boom, Juan Goytisolo, Philip Sollers and Roberto González Echevarría: “Perhaps more than the work of any other Latin American writer, Sarduy’s fiction is invoked to illustrate patterns and suggest shifts across the field in genera. Juan Goytisolo finds Sarduy that ‘example of extreme rigour, both literary and moral, which allows us to measure the work and ‘development’ [carrera] of the writers of our time; [he is our] point of reference’. For *Tel Quel* critic Philippe Sollers, Sarduy’s work is ‘representative of the enormous possibilities of Latin American writing, offering us an absolutely free play of signifiers, narrative, cultural, aesthetic’. As a rule, ‘Sarduy is generally thought of as the epitome of the neo-baroque writer of Latin America,’ ‘without parallels in what is called neo-baroque Latin American narrative’. According to Sarduy’s friend and most insightful reader, Roberto González Echevarría, his ‘*Cobra* seeks to incarnate nothing less than the subconscious of Hispano-American narrative’ as a whole, while for his translator the same novel represents, in many ways, the culmination of the New Latin American novel’. ” Hallward, 258.

time and place to which he belonged. Therefore, no other writer of the Boom brought the conditions of inscription in the history of Latin American literature to the limits of its own possibilities, and paradoxically to the point that his work brought its subsequent readings to the threshold of a turning point that would allow an articulation of the *hidden truth* of the Boom, a reading in which the writing of those conditions would provide the space for their subversion.

The argument can be made that he was able to do this because of the proximity he entertained with the theoretical apparatus that informed his literary career (Lacanian analysis/French structuralism), as well as his experience of isolation in the singular context of the earlier years of the Socialist Revolution, not merely because of his being gay, but also because this position brought him into painful contact with the transvestism, performativity and ultimately the *queerness* implicated in being a Caribbean intellectual, who- like the evaded slave Tí Noel in Alejo Carpentier's *El Reino de este mundo*-, has to engage in a different metamorphosis in order to survive.<sup>257</sup> This not only enabled him, but also compelled him, to engage in this exercise of traversing distantiation.<sup>258</sup> It is this particular radical assumption of a self-referential liminality that is the object of my interest in this chapter, a liminality, to be sure

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<sup>257</sup> See San Miguel, Pedro. *Los desvaríos de Tí Noel*.

<sup>258</sup> Echevarría brings up the same idea of a distant proximity in Sarduy's *Cobra*, for example: "Whiteness is death, absence, the empty page on which will be inscribed, as excess, Sarduy's later work, which both *distances* him from *and returns* him [that is, brings him back to, and to what was already near from the beginning] to the Cuban literary tradition. [ . . . ] There appear in the accounts of these voyages decisive historical events such as the Chinese Revolution, the Cuban Revolution, and even the more recent upheavals in Iran. Despite or perhaps *the obvious remoteness* of such places and accounts, Sarduy's works are *a return* to and *recovery* of the work of Lezama [ . . . ] This process of historical recovery, of re-cobrar, takes as its point of departure *the most remote* of the components that make up Cuban culture: the oriental elements, the significance of which I shall sketch in the following pages, and which immediately reveal its Lezaman slant: *that which is farthest away is really closest by*. This proximity in distance is reached through an 'oblique experience,' a dizzying form of Lezaman indirection." González Echevarría, Roberto. *Celestina's Brood: Continuities of the Baroque in Spanish and Latin American Literature*, 212-213. Hallward also echoes Echevarría's diagnosis when, for example he observes that " Verbal transformations veer between a *maximum proximity* or over-determination- as when, before castrating Cobra, Ktazob 'hoist[s] an overwhelming cigar whose tip he amputated with his sharpened cigar cutter'[ . . .]- and a *maximum distance* or estrangement, as when Pup [ . . . ], stewed for nine days *n* once and 'passive substances'. Emerges a 'spherical all-day lollipop for big-headed carnival mannequins.'" Hallward, 294. (My emphases)

with respect to his own positioning regarding the ethics that constitutes the body of his work- it can be said that the Boom ends, thanks to Severo Sarduy, with a whimper.

In his literary corpus, the foldings and unfoldings of an impassible alternation between different discourses (scientific, anthropological, psychoanalytic, etc.) denotes a constant, if only obliquely declared, preoccupation with the discursive subterfuges of ideology, as this concept plays out in *cultural production* (with the phenomenon of the Boom as its concrete referent). This assertion acquires some significance if one bears in mind that, if there ever was a literary work of the period that is radically, absolutely *inedible*, ever refractory to *both* the international circulation of cultural goods *and* its insertion into the canon to which it nonetheless belonged entertaining a kind of uncomfortable inner outerness, this is the work of Severo Sarduy (and also, for different reasons, Virgilio Piñera). Moreover, Sarduy's *Cobra*- but also Piñera's *René's Flesh*- are difficult, if not altogether *impenetrable* texts to any kind of critical mapping out. In other words, these two literary works stand as symptoms of a radical refusal to circulate as values. To delve into the meaning of this refusal to mean something (to display any kind of knowledge-value), when it is viewed from a *queer* perspective, will be my aim in these pages.

Perhaps a quote by him might be useful at this point, to settle the issue once and for all, if not regarding a politics of sexual (dis-)identification,<sup>259</sup> at least to clarify what was the position *his sexuality*, and decidedly not his condition of *sexuated being*, occupied in his intellectual life:

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<sup>259</sup> Judith Butler has already made the discernment that I want to emphasize here: “ Lastly, a mobilization of the categories of sex within political discourse will be haunted in some ways by the very instabilities that the categories effectively produce and foreclose. Although the political discourses that mobilize identity categories tend to cultivate identifications in the service of a political goal, it may be that the persistence of *disidentification* with those regulatory norms by which sexual difference is materialized that both feminist and queer politics are mobilized. Such collective mobilizations can facilitate a reconceptualization of which bodies matter, and which bodies are yet to emerge as critical matters of concern.” Butler, Judith. Bodies that Matter.

Homosexuality? If I don't talk about that too frequently it is because, for me, *it is strictly a matter of personal taste*. I don't grant it any connotation, any value, positive or negative. I don't think that it represents any subversion, or a virtue. It is like being diabetic, or philatelic. Something that does not deserve the least commentary. [My emphasis]<sup>260</sup>

There is in this passage a tacit warning against the temptation to turn any debate between politics and sex into the pretext for a sort of cartographic entrenchment of discourses on and about sexual identities within configurations of recurrent topoi of individual liberties, while in the same movement ignoring the foundational, that is, real difference between being sexuated and grafting that division on any normalized discourse. In a strangely prophetic manner, Sarduy's *Cobra* constitutes the most radical denouncement, through parody, of any politics based on sexual identities- or on cultural politics *tout court*-, on any positive predication of whatever means being a 'true' macho, or gay, or lesbian or any category on which the compact knot of sexuation builds its originating triumvirate between the forgotten wound of a real disjointed body, an inverse imaginary projection of those fragments into the jubilant aspiration of a possible oneness, and the necessary, but for that reason superfluous cut of the symbol, as well as the mortifying dialectics of enjoyment that ensues- as if he wanted to remind us of the inverse relation between an economy of meaning and a libidinal one, on which the evacuated center of the cogitating subject depends. For and against the Latin American *Archive*, Sarduy accomplishes, at the cultural level, nothing less than the subversion of the (Latin American) subject of the unconscious, if only to include himself in that subversion. The paradox lies in the fact that, more than just another external reflection of the *furious* Neo-Baroque that he

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<sup>260</sup> Sarduy, *Autorretratos*, in *Severo Sarduy: Obra Completa*, 14. "¿La homosexualidad? Si no hablo de eso con frecuencia es porque, para mí es un asunto, estrictamente, de gusto personal. No le otorgo ninguna connotación, ningún valor, ni positivo ni negativo. No creo que represente una subversion, ni una virtud. Es como ser diabético, o filatélico. Algo que no merece ni el menor comentario." (My translation.)

propounded, this distant proximity belonged to the ethics dictated by that discourse, perhaps because he understood the small but crucial difference involved in submerging oneself in the master discourse of the times, to write from the signifiers that sutured those discourses, while at the same time knowing that this is never an ideologically and politically neutral task. In Sarduy this obliquity, by virtue *and* in spite of the extreme to which Sarduy writes and thus embodies his affirmative insertion into his time, nonetheless acquires an epochal dimension that, despite appearances, signals the assumption of a different kind of Latin American cultural subjectivity.<sup>262</sup> Therefore, in this chapter I attempt to offer a look at his work as a sign of the paradoxical gaze to which he invites the reader, in which the author forces the experience of reading into an understanding of the destructive violence inherent in any kind of writing, just as, to use Badiou's words, he chose to assume, with all the discipline, rigor and fidelity that only a militant is capable of, that patience, that passivity required to submit, to subject oneself to the conditions of a truth whose procedure puts one on the *path* to the other side of psychoanalysis that is none other than a continuously deterritorializing one, one that does not stop with the disappearance of one's body, but also a deterritorialization that commands a reading in the double register of the parodical. It is in this register, which is ultimately the register of the undecidable, the register of a partial gaze, that the true critical dimension of this distant proximity can be articulated. This binary logic of parody, to borrow from Julio Ramos, necessarily turns against itself.<sup>263</sup> Most

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<sup>262</sup> For example, when he states that: "I do not, quite obviously, believe that the subject [in *Cobra*] is annulled, in part because language, no matter how tautological it may be, can speak of itself only indirectly, and one of the tangential themes it needs in order to bring forth a discourse about itself is the subject and its history." Echevarría, *Celestina's Brood*, 220.

<sup>263</sup> I refer specifically to Julio Ramos' definition of parody as "a binary logic [ . . . ] wherein what is American (or Argentine in Sarmiento) signifies a blind spot within the Western field of knowledge. Sarmiento's erratic use of European knowledge would thus appear to parody (involuntarily) the cited model's *plenitude*. The logic of parody tends to represent and classify any distinct productivity or field of signification that emerges out of the European model in terms of a lack, or even as an *inversion* of the (badly) *imitated* structure, thereby reestablishing the prevalence of mimetic representation that parody had initially sought to dismantle. The inversion of a structure naturalizes its field of operations, reaffirming the hierarchies of the structure in question as the horizon and limit of



importantly, this is the point where the (Kantian) question of the ethical universality of revolutionary values, touches on the question of *mere taste*. This *disgusting* remainder, which was the blind spot, what the revolutionary doctrine of the *focus* left *out of focus*, is paradoxically what founds any community, given that its foundation has not been already trapped into its fetishist appropriation.

Therefore, today more than ever, in the name of a critique that applies to all the proliferating territorializations around sexual identities, it is probably necessary to relaunch the radical universal irreducibility of the *queer* to whatever belongs in the order of an established sexual identity.<sup>264</sup> The positive predications that any discourse on being gay or lesbian convokes, just as any discourse on being straight, is a violent hypostasis that partakes, in the rhetorical violence implicit in the representation of that identity's image, of the exclusionary gesture of the symbolic, which entails a forgetting that signals the quantum of enjoyment that the subject buys for himself. Being *queer*, on the contrary, is always radically grounded on the unfamiliar, the unconditional gift of excrement with which the excluded *other* responds to this violence.<sup>265</sup>

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its critique, without going beyond them. In the same way, parody figures in the logic of mimesis as its inverse, a position that only reinforces the double-bind logic of the model and its other." Ramos, Julio. *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth Century Latin America*, 7.

<sup>264</sup> Those who lash out at Freud for his apparent gender prejudices, tend to forget too easily that it was Freud himself- who was far from being unawares of the homicidal dangers of narcissistic identification when it plays out in the political field, and who was on the other hand, not a communist libertarian by any sight-, who postulates the very universality of *sex* by positing it at its dialectical intersection with the (for him purely synaesthetic, *sensorial*) concept of the *uncanny* [*unheimlich*]. It is as if, for him, the very *uncanny* (read *queer*) effect of a work of art, was what sustained, as its ex-orbitant otherness, the very sexual division upon which a subject's libidinal relation with reality (its division between 'good' and 'bad' objects) fully attained its operative dimension. See Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*.

<sup>265</sup> And it is most probably no coincidence that Roberto Esposito recurs to an aesthetic (literary) exemplification- specifically an interpretation of Paul Celan's *Niemandsrose*- to punctuate *with a movement that belongs entirely to the realm of literary criticism* (taste), the philosophical argument of the radical impropriety [*queerness*] of the universal *munus*: "The community is not a mode of being, much less a 'making' of the individual subject. It isn't the subject's expansion or multiplication, but its exposure to what interrupts the closing and turns it inside out: a dizziness, a syncope, a spasm in the continuity of the subject. The common 'rose' of its being 'no subject'. No one's rose [*Niemandsrose*], or even better, 'no person's rose [*rose de personne*], as the greatest poet of the twentieth century would have said about community, abandoning himself to the ultimate *munus*." Esposito, *Communitas*, 7-8.

Puerto Rican queer and Lacanian scholar Rubén Ríos Ávila, summing up the work of Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, and Eve Kosofsky on the subject, is very much to the point, when he stresses the political and ethical necessity in refraining from obfuscating the distinction between any sexual identity, which is ultimately an act of violent exclusion in the name of what is familiar, and what Lacan termed *sexuation*,<sup>266</sup> which delineates the space of the irreducibly uncanny subtending the *queer*:

There is in being *queer* a permanent enemy of the family, an other radically strange to the familial picture. The queer is what menaces to displace the very model of the family as the origin of all institutions, including the nation. This assertion results particularly disturbing in the context of the minority politics of our times. [ . . . ] The defense [of the civil gay rights] cannot make us blind to an equally important fact. The foundation of the concept of a ‘gay’ family necessarily leaves outside its jurisdiction the most intimate and disturbing element of the homosexual desire, that absolutely queer libidinal charge on which the very subject of sexual difference is founded. As gay rights prosper, a culture of diversity consolidates itself that includes the claims of another minority finally addressed, but also concurrently erodes a practice of desire that is potent and important because it resists being institutionalized, because it resists becoming part of a civil society, of society as an extended metaphor of the family.<sup>267</sup>

Further elaborating on the ideas of Argentine gay writer and activist Néstor Perlongher in his article *Matan a una marica (A Faggot is Being Killed)* cited in Ávila’s article, one can assert

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<sup>266</sup> As opposed to simply being sexed, or even worse, to having a “sexuality”.

<sup>267</sup> Ríos-Ávila, Rubén. “Queer Nation”, *Puerto Rico Caribe: Zonas poéticas del trauma*, Revista Iberoamericana, Núm. 229, Octubre-Diciembre 2009. Vol. LXXV. “Hay en lo *queer* un enemigo permanente de la familia, un otro radicalmente ajeno al cuadro familiar. Lo queer es lo que amenaza con desplazar el modelo mismo de la familia como origen de todas las instituciones, incluyendo la nación. Este aserto resulta particularmente perturbador en el contexto de las políticas minoritarias de estos tiempos. [ . . . ] La defensa de [los derechos civiles gay], no puede, sin embargo, cegarnos ante un hecho igualmente importante. La fundación de un concepto gay de la familia deja, por necesidad, fuera de su jurisdicción, lo más íntimo y perturbador del deseo homosexual, esa carga libidinal netamente *queer* en la que se origina el sujeto mismo de la diferencia sexual. A medida que prosperan los derechos, se va consolidando una cultura de la diversidad que incluye los reclamos finalmente atendidos, de otra minoría pero también se va erosionando una práctica de deseo que es potente e importante, precisamente porque se resiste a institucionalizarse, se resiste a formar parte de la sociedad civil, a la sociedad como metáfora extendida de la familia.” (1135-1136) [My translation.]

that anal *jouissance* is the shameful, dirty, unconfessed secret of any hetero-normative society, because there is in the reading of that pious prudery a terrifying insight into the enjoying correlate between representation and what Lacan once called, regarding human groups' awkward relations to excrement, an 'unfathomable waste,' which in Modernity surpasses any transgressive relation to the Law, that is, where it does not make anymore sense to talk about desire.<sup>268</sup> At work in Ávila's assertions is the fundamental insight that being gay can at the end of the day be just as hetero-normative as being straight, in the taming that involves its social disciplining within the minority politics of today.<sup>269</sup> That we derive a particularly immense, unbounded pleasure in the discharge of our excrements, or conversely in anal intercourse, simply cannot be, to those for whom the idea is too traumatic that our sense of reality is grounded on the sublime nonsense, on the ocean of shit that needs to be hidden at all costs from all our acts of representation, so the imaginary One on which we predicate our obscene fantasies can be left alone in its enjoyment. Let us postulate, then, that Sarduy's furious Neo-Baroque is the representation of the intense anality that is hidden from the accumulation of this surplus of knowledge that conforms the successful cultural capital named the Latin American Boom. Let us posit that *Cobra* literarily buggers the Boom, takes it from behind, in its secretly anal, unconfessedly *queer* enjoyment, and brings the exhibitionist enjoyment of this phantasm to its very limits, the limits where "the Boom is being bugged (*Sodomizan al Boom*)" becomes an act of self-buggery.

To understand better how this buggery and self-buggery unfolds in Sarduy's work, it would be useful to look at several instances where different figures of the bodily or the corporeal intersect with formal, linguistic procedures in the composition of his work, particularly in *Cobra*.

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<sup>268</sup> Perlongher, Néstor. "Matan a una marica". "A certain organization of the individual condemns the anus to the exclusive function of excretion- and not to enjoyment." 35-40. (My translation.)

<sup>269</sup> This is also the concern that U.S. playwright Tony Kushner voices in his diptic *Angels in America*.

This novel not only offers in a distilled form the ‘essence’ of Sarduy’s literary project of a furious baroque, but particularly of the Caribbean Neo-Baroque as he, and even the Latin American Boom in general, since in it the ethics of writing that it subtends comes to a dialogue with the ethics to which it submits its reader.<sup>270</sup> It is this inherent impossibility of the readerly subject to constitute him/herself in a novel such as this one that makes González Echevarría conclude that, in Sarduy’s later work, “there is no effort whatsoever at mimesis, no illusion of creating a fictional world that is a reflection of everyday reality.”<sup>271</sup>, and what makes Peter Hallward assert that “to make sense of Sarduy’s work requires recourse less to the conventional tools of literary criticism than to a bundle of concepts inspired by philosophy, religion, and cosmology: if Sarduy’s work flaunts its supreme *litterarité*, it does so in a most *self-consciously epistemological* sense. Above all else, literature is here a way of perceiving the true nature of reality beyond the trivial delusions of habit, with a rigour approaching that of an experimental science.”<sup>272</sup> This movement of *methodic* and *disciplined* indistinction undermines any attempt at a reading grounded on the univocal distinction between a subject and an object. In *Cobra* any

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<sup>270</sup> Echevarría accordingly writes that “*Cobra* is Sarduy’s most difficult work, the one that least surrenders to a reader mostly used to the Latin American novel of the Boom. Although the impact of *Cobra* on writers such as Juan Goytisolo and Carlos Fuentes was enormous, it has never reached as wide an audience as the novels of the Spaniard and Mexican, mainly because its Oriental theme and its insistence on portraying the world of transvestites made it too foreign to most. If the Boom constitutes the moment at which Latin American narrative reached worldwide popularity, *Cobra*, like *De donde son los cantantes*, is a work of the anti-Boom.” Echevarría, *Celestina’s Brood*, 221.

<sup>271</sup> Hallward, *Absolutely Post-colonial*.

<sup>272</sup> The entire passage perhaps deserves to be quoted here: “Sarduy notes in 1987 that if the ‘new carnivalization of the ‘neo-baroque’ has become an established fact of contemporary Latin American literature- a literature of fragmentation, innovation, inversion- ‘this neo-baroque lacks an epistemology of its own, and more, it lacks a reading that would be attentive to the substrato,’ to what produces it as fragmentation, dissemination, and so on. Sarduy’s many interviews, critical essays, and theoretical investigations provide a wealth of material for the elaboration of just such an epistemology. As in previous chapters, Deleuze and other contemporary thinkers (Barthes, Lacan, Baudrillard . . .) retain an immediate comparative relevance here, in keeping with Sarduy’s own prescription, ‘that it is not possible to think or establish dialogue [ . . . ] with the great constructions [*andamiajes*] of contemporary thought.’ And all of Sarduy’s work [ . . . ], critical or creative, is expressive of much the same epistemology, the same immediacy of void and place, whose guiding rule is the assumption that ‘what disappears in the symbolic order reappears in the real to hallucinate us’. [ . . . ] Writing in all its forms is an actualization of the Creatively real, rather than the mere manipulation of appearances (or, rather, it serves to incorporate the latter within the former). Writing is less a strictly aesthetic or artistic endeavour than an exercise in *Creative thought* in the Deleuzian sense.” Hallward, 257.

totalizing narrative within the horizon of meaning that such reading could furnish is doomed to failure.

We may recall here Freud's aporia regarding psychoanalytic discourse: human reality is ultimately sexuated. In other words, sexual difference in humans is real, but this sexuation is ultimately and irreducibly symbolic. Later, Jacques Lacan, in a movement that is at a *parallax* between the symbolic and the real, will rearticulate this truth, in the fundamental assertion that, if a subject is nothing but the objects of its representations, or if any object can be a mirror for the subject, then it is pertinent to ask oneself what is at stake in and what can be concluded from the commotion of the habitual specular relationship between the writing of a text and its reading, if it is not that of an imminence as to how meaning stands there, effectively as a *deed* that is never innocent, since it always involves a *turning away*, a *not wanting to know*. Sarduy compels the reader to read the text through the chafing of an oblique gaze, askance, sideways (in Spanish the corresponding phrase would be *de re-ojo*, or *con el rabo del ojo*, literally 'with the tail of the eye'), and therefore assume a protocol of reading that takes place in a space of legibility that I cannot but call *anamorphic*- very much like the astronomical technique of looking at (approaching, epistemologically penetrating) a very distant star *by not looking at it directly*, but by redirecting the gaze to a place of calculated distal proximity.<sup>273</sup> Keeping in mind that 'Nation' is, over and above anything else, an *emotion*, a function of 'aesthetics' or 'literature,' we can already begin to perceive the nerve of what is involved in this gesture, when the statist demands the Revolution imposed on the Cuban intelligentsia, regarding their role as cultural *producers* and *overseas emissaries*, responded to an ethical imperative of a *conferral*, a *donation* of voice,

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<sup>273</sup> And here it is hard to ignore the structural symmetry between *parallax* (as an epistemological form of anamorphic gaze), and anamorphosis (as an aesthetic form of parallax thinking).

to *class antagonism* and the proletarian masses. Therefore, the weight of Sarduy's gesture hinges entirely upon the fact that this *love affair* between the communist state and the proletarian masses, which represented, like a well polished *jewel*, the immaculate aspect of the Cuban nation, was completely oblivious of the pitfalls and contradictions, the imminent violences and knaveries that are involved in any process of identification. It was, therefore, a question of how, at the level of culture, Sarduy could have *recuperated* for the Cuban State, and for all utopian projects that misconception of Communism as a fixed state of things, that disgusting remainder of disidentification, *within* the epistemological immanence- all the fantasmagoria of western knowledge- of the financially successful machinery of marketing and exporting images about Latin America that was the Boom (and most particularly its supposed Marxist *ethos!*).

Parody becomes paramount in this project. In *Cobra*, discourse undergoes a series of tortuous changes, semantic extrapolations, sudden metamorphoses in connotation, a prosodic alchemy of stylistic and tonal interpenetration that *wanders* among historical moments, a multitudinous overlapping of discursive registers, all of which correlate to the transformation of Cobra's body into perfect, divine, *yet emptied out, dead beauty*. This becoming-beautiful therefore establishes a common domain with a certain becoming-beatific. But this relation is interestingly far from being one of absolute equivalence or correspondence. It is rather given in a constellation of semantic multiplicity of which a legion of discursive levels partake- ontological, epistemological, rhetorical, religious, historical, ideological, aesthetic, popular, musical, literary, painterly, mystical, theoretical -, without the possibility of any kind of hierarchical attribution among them, neither the possibility of any kind of unifying synthesis. Baruch Spinoza's concept of *impossibility* is perhaps the most felicitous one to represent what is at stake at the very

immediate level of reading that this novel offers: an infinite, all-encompassing plane of immanence, where the different embodiments of their discursive lines insensibly *affect* each other, within the absolute immanence of a *chaosmos* of multiple intersections of all the series without any outside. Not only what pertains to the distinctions of ‘literariness’ proper are at stake here. The hybridization of narrative procedures, the explosion of chronological forms of storytelling, the transgression and intermixture of much agreed-upon conventions of genres (Medieval, allegorical, Romantic, etc.) are also traversed, interspersed, refracted and overlapped by these other strata of knowledge, in a procedure of what Gilles Deleuze would have called disjunctive syntheses in a transcendental plane of immanence, in which there are ultimately no preferred loci of subjective captivation.<sup>274</sup> But what is the ultimate consequence of this, Sarduy’s radical inscription of his fidelity into the spirit of his time, if we keep in mind that it is by virtue of the operations of this plane of absolute immanence of enjoyment that Capitalism reaffirms itself as an ideological machinery of sense production? If one important aspect in Sarduy is his uncompromising rigor, this rigor takes him to the ultimate consequences of the thought procedures that constituted his time, and if his thinking about being Caribbean is a creative one, as he most probably wanted it to be, then its destructive aspect, the (not so) ‘clean slate’ of the Latin American political Left (in the form of Marxist leftism), is what actually reveals itself as the truth of this thought-as-creation. This creativity is predicated on a perverse, transgressive relation with that in which this being-created, this becoming-Cuban, Caribbean, and Latin American, is actualized in the form of a monumental *choteo*.

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<sup>274</sup> About this, Hallward remarks that “Sarduy’s novels, like those of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Kafka*, evoke rhizomatic spaces, ‘places that are not at all juxtaposed, that send the characters to the four corners of the earth’. Citing *Logique du sens*, Sarduy supports Deleuze’s ‘subversion of Platonism’ through the proliferations of ‘copies-icons or simulacra-phantasms’ [ . . . ] Again like Deleuze and Guattari, he works for the ‘destruction of the individual as metropole- the conscience or ‘soul’- with its colonies: voices, sex, etc. Dissolution of the I [ . . . ] Echoing Deleuze’s ‘world without other,’ he writes so as to let go ‘of the weigh of one’s self, of the punctual watchfulness of the Other in the omnipresent shape of the Law’.” Hallward, *Absolutely Post-Colonial*, 259.



The storyline of *Cobra* (1972), probably Sarduy's most furiously theoretical Neo-Baroque novel, one that belongs, together with *Maitreya* (1978), *Colibrí* (1984) and *Cocuyo* (1990), all belonging to his most experimental period, can be succinctly schematized: Cobra, a transvestite, also a drag queen artist who belongs to the performing troupe *Teatro Lírico de Muñecas* (*Lyrical Theater of Dolls*), embarks, together with her faithful companions- La Señora, Pup and, later, La Cadillac- on a *planetary, nomadic* journey of transformation and aesthetic perfection.<sup>275</sup> This journey, which is also described as a process of ascetic purification, takes them from Cuba's Habana through Spain, Morocco, China, India, Nepal, and finally Tibet, in order to reduce her huge and ugly feet, and possibly change her sex. In Morocco, they look for Doktor Ktazob, the only one who can reduce Cobra's feet, helping her attain, *by tearing up with a slash the superfluous*, that much-coveted beatific perfection. In what constitutes a parallel story, they also meet, on their way to their undeclared destination, with a gang of thugs and Buddhist monks, who initiate them in the mysteries of Tantric *ex-stasis*.<sup>276</sup> After this itinerary of dis-orientation, in which a series of transformations happen, emphatically not only within the confines of the characters' bodies, Cobra finally dies, having been turned into the perfection of a *diamond*. Her funeral takes place in a Buddhist setting, where she disappears under a clean Tibetan sky, eaten by vultures. This is the moment where the novel also reaches its end, thus

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<sup>275</sup> I draw much of this part of my analysis from Peter Hallward's periodization of Sarduy's writing who situates *Cobra* and *Maitreya* as marking a third period, in which an absolute deterritorializing impulse is at work, where reference to "things Cuban is only done by means to a radically singular realm. Both novels defy any attempt at a conventional plot summary; in both novels, as González Echevarría points out, 'there is no effort whatsoever at mimesis, no illusion of creating a fictional world that is a reflection of everyday reality.' " It is worth noting here, for the purpose of my analysis, the reference of the more or less legibility attributable of a literary work to the question of *mimesis*, that is to a work's accommodation to a model of readability. It is after all one of the oldest interpretive topos of the baroque, the one in which the classic horacian *Ut Pictura Poiesis* is substituted by the baroque *Teatrum Mundi*. This motive has not lost its explicative glow, and it most instead be retaken today, I think, with the benefit offered by the mediation of Lacanian analysis. *Absolutely Post-colonial*, 256.

<sup>276</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 473.



accomplishing the moment of metaphorical simultaneity between form (*Cobra*, the book that we are reading) and contents (*Cobra*, what happens to her in her baroque journey).<sup>277</sup> What remains of *Cobra* is almost nothing, but this almost nothing remains nonetheless as the insistence of an interrogation, if it is true that from this nothing, following Sarduy's theoretical cosmogonies, is where the absolute *All* springs forth. This also is the insistent question about the *almost* nothing of this double cut, *a cut on the cut*, so to speak, performed by a Dr. Ktazob, with clear references to the psychoanalytic scene, in the section that occupies *Cobra*'s transformation, a transformation that also belongs to the order of the error and the recuperation of that error.

The recuperation of what, if, as González Echevarría has noted, writing for Sarduy was an act of recuperation, and *Cobra* is his most recuperative novel? Inasmuch as the contents of this recuperation remain tied to what for Sarduy were still unsolved problems about Cuban, Caribbean and Latin American identity, it is worth asking what exactly endured in its demand for recuperation that Sarduy could not ignore?<sup>278</sup> With regard to this demand, the opening lines of *Cobra* introduce, with deceptive simplicity, the thematic engine of the novel: the recurrent questioning about a debt that must be recuperated, *una deuda re-Cobrada*, if only a debt that is always incurred by the sole fact of an embarking on what is arguably the most essential in human animals. This questioning emerges, notwithstanding, through the most artificial, inessential way: by naming the object as it is, in its 'given' naturalness, the object is frustrated since it is always lost. The violent cut by which the space of this debt has been opened explodes in a stream of non-sense on 'the other side of the crystal of reality,' maybe of what had to be kept unsaid in

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<sup>277</sup> For a more detailed summary of the novel, cf. Roberto González Echeverría's *Celestina's Brood*, 223-227.

<sup>278</sup> González Echevarría, Roberto. *La ruta de Severo Sarduy*. "En *Cobra* las mediaciones como *recobro* se hacen parte manifiesta del proceso de recuperación: cobra, recobro. *Cobra* es la obra de Sarduy que más conscientemente formula una teoría de la recuperación, y en el esquema global de su obra la más importante como toma de consciencia del proceso." (6)

order for this ‘naturalness’ to be visible in its ‘true’ being.<sup>279</sup> In short, writing and speaking are as always indebted to an act of self-recuperation, which *is* that desire for recuperation. In Sarduy’s works, as in Proust’s, to write is to recuperate, if only to recuperate the debt, the debt that was lost, irretrievably, by virtue of the very writing act itself. Therefore, a debt brought forth by a gift that, like any true gift, is always imposed by an Other with violence, always received, accepted, suffered by this Other with the patience of an imposed given, in the name of a Self-sameness that could satiate the demand to bridge this gap, which could mark nothing other than a moment of laceration, what belongs in the order of something that never takes place between two beings. At this point one can invoke all that is not visible, all that is effectually effaced, all the debt that is lost and therefore exponentially accrued on the credit by which these acts of stealing nonetheless persist as a given loan, as a gratuitous debt from the written deeds about what is Latin America for the Other. This being, it must be said, is evoked as a voice that *will have been said*, the Latin American voice that dictates its own being Latin American, univocal, unequivocal and undivided, a voice subsequently to be picked up and written by what will have become the Boom generation.

Cobra’s anabasis towards the perfection of sense that this voice invokes, which in reality is an exponential descent into the underground of non-sense, incarnates also the *original* error, the *dis-orienting* one that is the foundation of Columbus’s enterprise. For anything that could be said about *Cobra*’s parodying distance with regard to the Boom, is only possible to the extent that this connection can be made between this first originating error (the *foundational* error of the Baroque, and of Modernity), and the iteration of the impossibility that announces it, which

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<sup>279</sup> Or *blows up*, as when one blows up a photograph, until the units whose sum constitute the whole become visible, and for that reason the image disappears. To *explode* an image, is literally, to ‘zoom’ the gaze in until it becomes unreadable.

incessantly writes itself. Beyond and above, over and against any reference to any speech-act theory, the declaration that the “mouth acts” (*la boca obra*), announces itself as the emblem of this non-sensical point of suture between a consciousness that names the world, and an *affected* body that unconsciously *enacts* the remainder of that violence.<sup>280</sup> The act of naming is the deed, the crime, the only one to which the subsequent ones must be referred.<sup>281</sup> The utopia that will have been Latin America begins, therefore, with the error, the original sin of naming by which the mouth acts unconsciously, which for the Latin American subject begins with this disorienting one. Latin America is the delirium of this founding error, and *Cobra* might be said to be the furious writing of the revolutions, the crises and the upheavals that overlap to form the onion of this historical error’s delirium. From the geo-political revolution of the Spanish colonial enterprise, through to post-colonial struggles, from the foundation of the Cartesian *res cogitans* to the de-centering theories of Kepler, the Copernican revolution, the astronomical *Big Bang* and Psychoanalysis, the (non-)*All* that the bang of the *Boom* silently mediates cracks with the imminent precedence of its eventuality. It is an explosion that is nonetheless an implosion. For each quantum of actualization, for each calculated infinitesimal approach towards this being Cuban-Caribbean-Latin American, there is a sidereal explosion of non-sense that grows, like *Cobra*’s feet, monstrously, and it is this interstitial meta-stasis that *Cobra* affirms in the writing of this negative that is herself.

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<sup>280</sup> Luce Irigaray has noted the relation between the discourses that installs sexual difference in the world, and the espacement that this naming always already creates: “Pour que cette difference ait lieu d’être pensée et vecue, il faut reconsidérer toute la problématique de *l’espace* et du *temps*. Au commencement était l’espace. Ce qui se dit dans les théogonies. Le dieux, Dieu, crée- d’abord- *l’espace*. Et le temps est là, quasiment au service de l’espace. [ . . . ] Le temps deviendra *l’interiorité* du sujet lui-même. *L’espace*, son *exteriorité* [ . . . ] Ce qui s’inverse dans la difference sexuelle? Où le feminine est vécu comme espace mais souvent avec les connotations de gouffre et de nuit (Dieu étant l’espace-clarté?), le masculine comme temps.” Irigaray’s argument is that a hetero-normative discursive relation with the world necessarily inflects our spatial and temporal relations with it. Consequently, “un changement d’époque exige una mutation dans la perception et la conception de l’espace-temps, *l’habitation des lieux* et des *envelopes de l’identité*. Il suppose et entraîne une evolution ou transformation des formes, des rapports *matière-forme* et de l’intervalle *entre*: trilogie de la constitution du lieu.” Irigaray, Luce. *Éthique de la difference sexuelle*.

<sup>281</sup> Sarduy, 494. “Se re-cobra//Se enrosca. // (*La boca obra*)” (My translation.)

This initial ‘act of the mouth,’ comes as a casual commentary, an act of *indiscretion* said in the color of a *choteo* by the narrator, or in a sensationalistic, half-joking, half-gossipy manner, or as in jest, or even guffaw, at any rate not seriously at all, with the gravity that entails the saying of something that was supposed to remain inter-dicted, and this with the terrible innocence of a betrayal that does not know itself as such.<sup>282</sup> It is a declaration on how Cobra submits her monstrous feet to all sorts of procedures, in order to reduce them to the right point of proportionality with regard to the rest of her body, one that would bring her divine aura to a state of beatific perfection:

She’d set them in molds at daybreak, apply salt compresses, chastise them with successive baths of hot and cold water. She manufactured wire armors to put them in, shortening and twisting the threads again and again with pliers; she forced them with gags; she submitted them to crude mechanics; after smearing them with gum Arabic she bound them with cloth: they were mummies, children of Florentine medallions.

She attempted scrapings.

Resorted to magic.

Fell into orthopedic determinism. (Sarduy, 13-14)<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> There is, concerning this language emblematic of an identity desire for *cubanidad* and even more generally for a hispanic caribeñidad, the following commentary by Gustavo Pellón: “La escritura de Sarduy lo sacrifica todo al placer, al juego. Esto lo demuestra el exceso de significantes sin propósito (salvo el recalcar que los significantes no tienen referencia a una realidad), lo superfluo, lo contradictorio, el despilfarro, el choteo, el humor, y por último, el juego de palabras como motivación única de ciertos episodios (la trompa de Eustaquio en *Cobra*.” Pellón, Gustavo. ‘Juan Goytsolo y Severo Sarduy: Discurso e ideología,’ *Hispanic Review*, Vol. 56 No. 4 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 483-493. It should be added here that *choteo* also partakes of another meaning that, if not in Cuba, at least in Puerto Rico, has prevailed over this one, and that is connected to what will contribute a significant enchainment in the articulation of the truth that *Cobra* vehicles. *Chotear* can also mean *to betray*. A *chota* is one who has betrayed someone, by surrendering him to the authorities, of a crime of which he was, most probably an accomplice. A *chota* is someone who partakes of a secret about an illegal deed, most usually in the quality of an accomplice in crime.

<sup>283</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, in *Severo Sarduy: Obra Completa*. Ed. François Wahl & Gustavo Guerrero. Galaxia: Barcelona, 2008. 427. My translations will be refer to this Spanish edition. Los encerraba en hormas desde que amanecía, les aplicaba compresas de alumbre, los castigaba con baños sucesivos de agua fría y caliente. Los forzó con mordazas; los sometió a mecánicas groseras. Fabricó, para meterlos, armaduras de alambre cuyos hilos acortaba, retorciéndolos con alicates; después de embadurnarlos de goma arábiga los rodeo con ligaduras: eran momias, niños de medallones florentinos. // Intentó curetajos. // Acudió a la magia. // Cayó en el determinismo ortopédico.” Sarduy, Severo.

These first few lines prefigure a rhetorical amalgamation that will eventually explode and proliferate- this assertion should be understood quite literally, like the astronomical *Big Bang* with which Sarduy himself was so fascinated as to become itself a recurring theme in his work-<sup>284</sup> into a veritable galaxy of discourses that- jarringly, always at odds and in a state of dislocation - nonetheless superimpose and interpenetrate throughout the text. Science converges with magic and alchemy, (“intentó curetajes [ . . . ] acudió a la magia [ . . . ] cayó en el determinismo ortopédico”); religiosity intersects with profanity, for the carnivalesque<sup>285</sup> becomes translucent through the filigree of this religiosity; playfulness penetrates ritualistic gravity, producing an effect of parody, the effect of this heavy handed, even vulgar *choteo*, el *vacilón* that, in a way, is the novel, becomes the filigree through which a stone of solemnity transpires.<sup>286</sup> Throughout the novel, sanctity, beatitude, mysticism and ready-made wisdom, are intermingled with epigrammatic extrapolations on science,<sup>287</sup> prescriptions in the key of literary theory,<sup>288</sup> parodying commentaries on linguistics and psychoanalytic terminology, and echoes of Sarduy’s youth, as in the reference to Isidro el Repasador, as well as of important moments of modern history (The Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Cuban Revolution, and the more recent Iranian Revolution).

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*Cobra and Maitreya: Two Novels.* Trans. Suzanne Jill Levine. Unless otherwise stated, all English translations quoted will refer to this edition.

<sup>284</sup> See, for example, his essay titled *Big Bang*, in *Severo Sarduy: Obra Completa*. 197-177.

<sup>285</sup> In Spanish, *carnaval*; in Latin, *carne vale*, or *carne levare*, *el adiós o la despedida a la carne*, or alternatively, *Carna-baal*, in reference to the Caananite storm god Ba’al; respectively, in English, farewell to the flesh, or flesh dedicated in sacrifice to said deity.

<sup>286</sup> In Spanish, *filigrana*, commonly refers to an interlaced metal ornamentation, another crucial signifier in Sarduy’s work, since it is probably the metaphor that best sums up the ethics of the gaze that dominates his writing, one which could be described as *anamorphic*.

<sup>287</sup> Chapter II is preceded in its two subdivision, by an astronomical quote taken from a science magazine: “

<sup>288</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*. “La escritura es el arte de la elipsis (430), “La escritura es el arte de la disgresión. [ . . . ] (431) “La escritura es el arte de recrear la realidad. [ . . . ] (432) “La escritura es el arte de restituir la Historia. [ . . . ] (435).

The novel opens, therefore, with a motive that will repeat itself in the second chapter, that of Cobra submitting her feet to all sorts of treatments and painful ordeals, in order for them to *become smaller* (and therefore adjusted to the classical ideal of an aesthetic golden mean). It is thus that the narrator introduces the theme that was, as it were, obligatory within the intellectual circle within which Sarduy navigated, one that will acquire much currency in contemporary and subsequent theorizations of the literary: the experience of writing as coterminous with the corporeal; an experience, not of a mere thetic or antithetic relation to writing, if ever there was one, a kind of genealogical relation arising from within the question of the origin that an originating answer posits, a relation, therefore, that follows upon the traces left by an affiliating machinery of sense, in other words, the old story of the father and his son, of the creator (whose absence is metaphorized) and his (metonymically) created universe. It instantiates, on the contrary, an opening towards the experience of what belongs to the order of the *excessive* and *disastrous*, of what effectively exceeds the confines of the body, of what can be *seen*, recognized, mapped into the *cosmos* of a subject, and the supernumerary that exceeds the language upon which this grounding lack of correspondence is written. Therefore, there exists in this passage a radically centripetal experience that remains inscribed in the whole of Sarduy's work, an experience that fractures and banishes, in the stellar distance of that fracture, all readerly representations of totality, "like a river, like that continuous phrase, that incessant text that we inaugurate with our speech, and that only death concludes."<sup>289</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy linked this partialized discursiveness to an experience of laceration, a becoming infinitely distant, a

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<sup>289</sup> Sarduy, *Escrito sobre un cuerpo*, in *Severo Sarduy: Obra Completa*, 1127. The complete idea reads: "Comoun río, como esa frase continúa, ese texto incesante que inauguramos con el habla y que sólo la muerte concluye, así el pensamiento (que quizás no es más que esa frase y en nada la precede o desborda) fluye, monótono, errante, lineal, inconsciente de sí mismo: un su puro ejercicio. La introducción, en el fluir de ese pensamiento en ejercicio, de la conciencia del mal, provoca, con su irradiación de cuerpo extraño, una interrupción, un 'corte' que devuelve el pensamiento a sí mismo, como duplicado por un espejo, y lo reduce a esa interrogación sobre su ser que es, para Bataille, el sentido."

sidereal retreat with respect to what is supposed to be an infinitesimal advance, an infinite approximation, an endless nearing towards the model. For Cobra, the protagonist, is also the body upon which the imperative of a desire for literary accomplishment becomes the place for the realization of an artifice of the indiscernible, an effectuation done perfunctorily, as if by a sleigh of hand, in a constant baroque betrayal (*choteo barroco*), in order to open a singular point of indifferentiation between orthography and orthopedics, from the constitutive desire of the writer, the desire to write, whatever one sets out to write, *once and for all*, in a definitive, unequivocal, and final manner, on the clean slate that this model evokes, so to speak, which is, in the arbitrary closure of its finality, the only way possible that this could have taken place.

Cobra's journey takes place in the form of an inverted asceticism that repeats motives and alternates multiple discursive registers. This iterative propaedeutics of orgiastic torture is, like any apprenticeship, thus inscribed in the double register of a dis-course on the body, as well as a text that is also *its* body. This nonetheless takes place within the experience of a pause, a hesitation coming from a suspended moment, about something only half-done, half-accomplished, on Cobra's body. This body, like the novel, encapsulates more than the sum of its objects. It is a body that at the same time designates a work done on the text that is to become *Cobra*, inasmuch as it specifies the written world itself. This initial moment involves an act of violence: after her session with Dr. Ktazob, Cobra reappears in the street, through a door that opens automatically in the chapter titled *Iniciación*; she was "violently made up, the twigs painted on her mouth. The eye sockets were black and silvered with alumina, narrow between the eyebrows and afterwards prolonged by other spirals, pulverized paint and metal, up to the temples, up to the base of the nose, in wide edgings and arabesques like a swan's eyes, but of

more rich and nuanced colors; from the rim of the eyelid hanged, not eyebrows but fringes of minimal precious stones.”<sup>290</sup> The grotesque, even the monstrous and vulgar, communicates with the sublime, as if, again, Cobra betrayed the truly monstrous aspect of her becoming divinely perfect. Cobra’s transformation signals the moment of conversion, in which a painful apprenticeship becomes an apprenticeship of pain, on how to give this pain its right course, so that there is also a dis-course of a surplus of pain that traverses and connects all the discourses which congregate to form Cobra’s body.<sup>291</sup> *La Teórica (the Theoretician)* explains why the metaphor is there to cover up, with the subterfuge of a frustrated attempt, the impossibility of naming an equivalence without at the same time falling into the dividing institution of another opposite out of which a dis-coursed dose of pain sheds:

. . . The body, before reaching its lasting state [ . . . ] is a book in which the divine judgment is written; why not, in a case like the present one, in which most evidently in *Written on a Body* there has escaped a minor though annoying erratum, when they bore through, one cauterizes a marginal finger or the soft spot on their heads? And it is precisely in this hamlet [ . . . ] where I shall produce evidence, worthy of reverence, though to your eyes heretical remedy, because I know myself to be among dissecting experts, and all this skill, I believe, applies very much to the superfluities which thus I would baptize these inconsequential regalia of nature and malformations of the living.  
(48)

In order to reach its enduring state, the body, engraved with the characters of a divine dictate, has to be submitted to a heretical remedy. This heretical remedy, again, connects to the

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<sup>290</sup> Sarduy, 510.

<sup>291</sup> Sarduy, Cobra, 488-489. “Si su concentración, *ergo* si la transferencia del dolor es correcta, puedo hasta arrancarle un diente o trucidarla sin que experimente la menor molestia; la receptora, hélas, caerá redonda, atravesada por espasmos inexplicables. Un Instructor I ejercitará al sujeto S para que aprenda a emitir los dardos cáusticos; otro al chivo emisario para que no ofrezca resistencia. Así el alterador A podrá ejercer su fuerza modeladora sobre el Sujeto para convertirlo en Sujeto prima, fuerza cuyo vector lancinante padecerá, en este caso, la alteradita aleccionante, en receptora óptima (a) prima. Todo es representable por el gráfico de la mutación: Diamante [ . . . ] llegado el momento de la intervención y si la enana Blanca ha sido lo suficientemente debilitada, soldándola a una placa de amianto, canalizar correctamente el curso del dolor.”



act of writing, which donates an act of formidable violence on the *excrescences, malformations and gratuities of nature*. This approximation methodically subverts, perverts, and ultimately buggers the classical relation between nature and artifice, between body and text. In the end, and by virtue of this mediation, what is deformed, monstrous and in excess, is nature. What needs to be recuperated, violently, painfully and heretically, is therefore the excessive artifice that is only capable of imparting a sense of harmony and balance to this gratuitous chaos, of recuperating this *negligible but embarrassing errata, a mistaken offspring* that is described as *an escapee from what is written on a body*, itself an unequivocal allusion to another of Sarduy's texts (*Written on a Body*). This superfluous errata circulates, meanders throughout the text that will become *Cobra*. This nomadic remainder should be extirpated. But it also operates as more than just a mere point of inversion. This subversion and buggery is not univocal and external, but always double, a self-declared ruse, a heretical remedy that returns back and subverts itself, once again.

Cobra willfully participates in the sacred game of Science and disappears in it, in the enjoyment of the alchemy that induces its transformation, in which the depths of non-sense where everything is festering and decomposing, concur with a positivist discourse, with the outermost limits of its rationality, so that a parodying transmutation operates in the relation between transformed and transformer:

“ Trapped in transparent flasks, boughs sprouted everywhere, wide and granular leaves, pestilent dwarf shrubs, sick flowers whose petals minute and shiny larvae gnawed at, crumpled ferns in whose folds small translucent eggs lodged, in constant multiplication [ . . . ] The bathroom supplied that laboratory. In porcelain wash bowls, where spontaneous generation had already propagated fly larvae, tadpoles and- Nature boasts in its miracles- even toads [ . . . ] Under the sink, in a Mozarabic plate pomegranates fermented, and

beans that already had shoots and spirally striped grains, shagged like almonds, whose milk, upon souring, carpeted the smashed polygons of a yellowing hide.” (14-15) <sup>292</sup>

, even when the Romantics, “seeing that they did not get worst, their (the Romantics’) belief in Nature was restored, and they proscribed its perversion and meanness: Science.”<sup>293</sup> Cobra’s variegated nature, in which both the Romantics and the Classics lost themselves, whose encounters *La Buscona (The Procureess)* orchestrated according to “the order of certainty in ecstasy”, be it to “kiss her hands”, or “lick her clothing” or simply splendidly to contemplate her, this nature was already a creature of the classics, who thought that *She* was no other thing but a great divine machine- a discovered thing, found precisely, as object of research and penetration-, if not only because, already, the White Dwarf, the square root of Cobra, or *la Señora*, three fourths Cobra, were in themselves a means to practice that process of penetration, or in any case of demonstration- instances through which Cobra becomes, as if the transformation, that transfixing affirmation of the One, could not be given without the negativity that the Two always involves:

“ The Master gets ready.

Pup screams. Splashes. Big drops of thick ink flee toward the edges of Cobra’s body. Lightning. Rupture. Red branches that descend, forking rapidly along the sides of a triangle- the vertex torn out- over the white skin of the thighs, along the nickel surface, following the contours of the hips, forming puddles in the armpits, thin speeding threads over the shoulders, matting the hair: two streams of blood, down to the floor.

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<sup>292</sup> *Cobra*, 442-43. “Encerrados en frascos transparentes por todas partes retoñaban cepos, hojas anchas y granuladas, retorciéndose, pestilentes arbustos enanos, flores enfermas cuyos pétalos roían larvas diminutas y brillantes, helechos estrujados que en los pliegues albergaban huevecillos translúcidos, en multiplicación constante. [ . . . ] El cuarto de baño abastecía ese laboratorio. En palanganas de porcelana, donde ya la generación espontánea había prodigado gusarapos, renacuajos y- la naturaleza es fanfarrona en sus milagros- hasta sapos [ . . . ] bajo el lavabo, en un plato mozárabe fermentaban granadas, habas que ya tenían hijuelos y unos granos rayados en espiral, frisados como almendras [ . . . ]”

<sup>293</sup> *Cobra*, 446. “viendo que así no empeoraban, volvieron a creer en la Naturaleza y proscribieron su perversión y mezquindad: la Ciencia.” [My Translation.]

*Cobra's instructor*- "Equally destructive is the exercise of good and evil. You have eliminated in yourself compassion. With all your strength now, direct the pain toward the dwarf: she is diabolic, needy and ugly, what does it matter what happens to her? She is nothing but your waste, your gross residue, what comes off you formless, your look or your voice. Your excrement, your falsies, how disgusting! Body fallen from you that is no longer you." (Sarduy, 65)

Since Cobra is absence of center, becoming pure objectivity, the brute matter for Science's methods and instruments, she/he is *also* the very space where this metamorphosis takes place. Conversely, the world is the space of that metamorphosis that Cobra inhabits, in the same way in which she herself is pure *habitus*, costume of the world that attaches itself to itself in a constant banishment. This is scientific discourse, becoming pure subjectivity, illusionism, perversion of a larval impulse of division, confrontation, extraction, quest, introjection to the very insides of the dissecting gaze of the specialist. Being pure dermality, Cobra disappears in the instruments, methods, plasters, formulas, measurements and rituals of Science, but only to reappear in the very pretext of her simulation: minimal differential remainder, real strangeness of a reading whose proximity it conjures up in a cosmic exclamation. And this cosmic exclamation betrays itself in its cosmetic comicity, to the extent that there is always something of the order of the cosmic in parody.

The need to recuperate what is natural *beyond* the natural, always implicates an artificialization, but this artifice becomes, so to speak, the object of its own performance. It is a duplicity that accounts for the ultimate indiscernibility between the two domains, whereby writing becomes an act of orthopedics, a painful process of forcing nature into perfection, and of making of that process the thing that most closely pertains to nature, as when the Transformer "squinted his eyes, raised the harpoon, and stabbed him in his groin. After that, he suspended the

pendulum again and, always at the same height, began translating it over the dearly impaled body.”<sup>294</sup> This is a becoming invisible that paradoxically renders the mutual irreducibility most visible. Most importantly, this is where, from the radical outside that this kind of writing creates, human language and the human body find a common place of enunciation. And this enunciation is necessarily baroque, if it is to render visible the truth that displays the hiatus cadencing the dialectics between a pleasure and a reality principle.

But, this apprenticeship of pain, this method of “channeling the course of pain” is, interestingly enough, a way, however transgressive, towards a desired purity. Paradoxically, the text establishes a relation between pain and purity that begs a return to the question of how the psychoanalytical concept of *jouissance*, in the privileged function it had within the theoretical discourses that circulated at that moment, hints at a rather ambiguous ideological relation towards the structure, so that the *choteo*, the betrayal, that Sarduy performs in *Cobra*, turns against itself. Paradoxically, and in a seeming contravention of Sarduy’s furious Baroque, *Cobra*’s journey is a journey towards that purity, the absence of any stain of imperfection. It is not by chance, therefore, that the novel starts with a desire for the purity of perfection, whose resulting emblem at the end of the novel is, also not surprisingly, a lotus flower turned into a diamond, since their journey is ultimately a journey of, and an escape towards death. It is thus that wisdom-(as)-style, formal perfection, and death meet in the conjunction of the lotus flower with the diamond, contained in the closing invocation: “Que la flor de loto al Diamante advenga.”<sup>295</sup> The *sunyata* of Nirvana is encapsulated in the perfection only attainable in the realm of the dead. This diamond can be read interchangeably as a metaphor for death, the resting point

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<sup>294</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 445. “Apretó los ojos, alzó el arpón, y se lo clavó en plena ingle. Luego volvió a suspender el péndulo, y, siempre a la misma altura, lo fue trasladando sobre el cuerpo engarzado.”

<sup>295</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 584.

where *Cobra* finally reaches her destination, the moment where the body finally achieves its ‘enduring state,’ *and* the triumphal prevalence of the structure.

For that reason, two radically opposed readings superimpose themselves, which nonetheless should be kept in tension, since it is at their impossible mutual equidistance that the whole truth this text betrays should be located. It is true that we can understand the first lines inaugurating the novel as representing the emblematic instance of another cipher of discursive transposition in the novel, in this case of the act of speaking/writing, an act of speech that is, for the very reason that it is such, incomplete. And it is also true that this deterritorializing tactic that bridges literature and theory in a lapse of impassible contiguity, becomes intelligible, when we understand later in the novel the asymmetry that co-relates to this openness, when we get the result of *Cobra*’s final beatification, which is to say, of the saying of the author’s text becoming-complete, or the interpretation of the reader coming to the realization of a perfect circle, the paradox of her feet becoming ever uglier and more monstrous, or of the stream of non-sense and deformity being shot as the double current that overtakes the becoming-perfect, the becoming beatific of *Cobra*’s body:

The gods did not skimp on irony: the more they deteriorated, the more *Cobra*’s foundations rotted, the more beautiful was the rest of her body. Paleness transformed her. Her light blonde hemp curls fell- pre-Raphaelite spirals- revealing Orly half her face, an eye enlarged by blue, purple lines, tiny pearls. (17) <sup>296</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Sarduy, Severo. *Cobra*. en *Severo Sarduy: Obra Completa*, 446. “Los dioses no escatiman su ironía: *mientras más se deterioraban, mientras más se pudrían los cimientos de Cobra, más bello era el resto de su cuerpo*. La palidez la transformaba. Sus crespos rubísimos, de cáñamo, caían- espirales prerrafaelistas- descubriendo sólo una mitad de la cara, un ojo que agrandaban líneas azules, moradas, diminutas perlas.”

It is true, in consequence, that here, one can deliver a reading of this novel wherewith the symmetry of meaning betrays itself as only half attained, only partial, in other words, never actually realized. Therefore, this sort of perfunctory forgetting, of which Leo Bersani talks when speaking of Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*, the perfunctoriness necessary to maintain the illusion of wholeness, and therefore one in which any remainder of non-sense is forgotten, so the illusion of punctual meaning is achieved, is impossible to attain here. This is, precisely, what is being written in *Cobra*, incessantly, again and again.<sup>297</sup> Following along the lines of this reading, there is no metaphor, but sheer metonymical displacement, adjacencies that only precariously legitimize us to talk about analogy, or about a model. For each quantum of specifying utterance in the world, for each deed of the speaking will to deliver to the universal what belongs to the contingent, there is a torrent of non-sense, an oceanic flow of Being that falls on the other side of this cut, in the forgotten, insistent debt that accrues each time the punctuation of a credit line on what is being Latin American determines a point of semantic closure. This stream of non-sense conforms the knot that, in its compactness, in its interstitial intensity, is Cobra's body, the one that Sarduy untangles for and against the Boom. This knot is the Boom's unconscious entanglement, its entangled Other. All the telluric underground that grows exponentially in spite of Cobra's ascension is the chaotic web that constitutes the Other of its body. And this web must be untangled, this body must be undone by the violent, castrating cut executed on that *superfluous errata*:

The body, my esteemed lady, is inscribed in a web . . . – the pendulum rose to Pup's head- six flowers mark the middle line . . .” – and he lowered it, solemnly as if the rotations traced the windings of a snake around the spinal cord. From the flowers, and in all directions, forking, interweaving, threads branch outward . . . The man – over Pup's

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<sup>297</sup> Bersani, Leo. Bersani, Leo. “Beckett and the End of Literature.” in *Balzac to Beckett: Center and Circumference in French Fiction*.

sex organ the pendulum stopped- “is opaque, the skein is golden. A dark fringe, a continuous black line borders the figure, which glowing fibers cross . . . the shining cone hesitated, began to turn in the opposite direction. Ever one of his gestures, no matter how sudden or slight, reverberates in the entire texture, like the fright of a fish in its flagelli . . . Here, see, now here we must alter a shower, a nervous corolla, we must stimulate a Plexus, so that it will live . . . It is difficult to explain . . . certain almost invisible, almost unclassifiable beings, among animals and plants, once pricked, grow . . . (Sarduy 36-37)<sup>298</sup>

Still within the domain circumscribed by this first reading, the body, like a text, is itself inscribed in a web that is created by, as well as it creates, the objects of its reality. To alter one’s body means to alter the other. (Cobra becomes Pup to the second power, just as La Señora is three-fourths Cobra.<sup>299</sup> Alteration is, like the conversion scene with Pup and Cobra, a relational, perspectivist one, in which even the Transformer becomes the Transformed.<sup>300</sup>)

On her feet, Cobra dis-places, carnivalesque, solemn, procession-like, through the world’s surface, the mundane skin with which she dresses. In her route towards perfection, Cobra “marvels with [ . . . ] coarse ornaments and nuanced feathers. With cassava she wanted to dress, sculpt buskins to herself with woods bitten by sea turtles (*careyes*), to assemble a tall and elegant hat, like a garland, out of tobacco leaves, star apples and mangoes, fragile collars with *taíno* statuettes and bracelets that went jumping around in rumps to the surprise of gestures.”<sup>301</sup>

That surface *is Cobra*. This is why Cobra cannot cease moving. Her geographical translation and

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<sup>298</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 68. “El cuerpo, mi estimada, se inscribe en una red [ . . . ] Cada uno de sus gestos, por instantáneo o imperceptible que sea, repercute en la trama entera, como en los flagelos el susto de un pez . . . Aquí, ve, aquí hay que alterar una flor, una corola nerviosa, hay que estimular un plexo, para que viva . . . no sé cómo explicarle, ciertos seres casi invisibles, casi inclasificables, entre los animales y las plantas, una vez pinchados, crecen.”

<sup>299</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*. “limpia Pup, comenzaba la jerigonza del desdoblamiento. Podríamos, formalizándola hasta lo matemático, representar como sigue la relación entre ambos personajes:  $Cobra = Pup^2$  o bien  $Pup = \sqrt{Cobra}$ . Igual correspondencia entre la Señora y su reducción [ . . . ]”

<sup>300</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 463- 467.

<sup>301</sup> *Cobra*, 474. “Cobra quedó maravillada con tan burdos ornamentos y matizadas plumas. Con casabe quiso vestirse, con maderos mordidos por careyes esculpirse coturnos, con hojas de tabaco, caimitos y mangos armar un sombrero alto y jarifo como una giralda, con estatuillas taínas collares quebradizos y pulsos de fetiches frágiles que fueran saltando en ciscos a la sorpresa de los gestos.” [My translation.]

her physical transfiguration are but the two aspects of the same relational liminality in which the fissure that separates the subject from its objects is perfunctorily effaced.

Yet and again, in accordance with the disciplined method of the author, Sarduy's eccentric frenzy which is his route, *Cobra's* plot is woven very much like a *Bildungsroman* of sorts, of a discipleship, but one where the process of this formation, this *bildung*, flaunts its violence and arbitrariness. The allusions to a teacher/student relationship are significant, since they connect to the rigor that constitutes Sarduy's way, as well as the critique of the lack of it that Sarduy saw in his contemporaries. The section of the transformation of Cobra is also a lesson on how this transformation is going to be performed, where Dr. Ktazob explains the details of the operation to which Cobra and Pup, soon to become the White Dwarf, are going to be submitted. There is, further on, also *una lección de anatomía*, a lesson of anatomy that reminds the reader of Isidro el Repasador (Isidro the Reviewer), a biographical character of Sarduy's early days in Havana, a medicine student who never graduated, but rather used to conduct lessons of anatomy in an old movie theater or at his own home, where slides of different parts of the body were projected on the screen or on the wall.<sup>302</sup> Cobra's transformation is therefore one that involves some kind of apprenticeship regarding a knowledge that implicates that transformation. Cobra *is*, from the outside where this *is* can only execute its constative performance, what is natural, from the objectifying power of a scientific discourse that, in itself, the novel reveals as an effectuation of a subject that cannot see itself, in its interiority, in all that

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<sup>302</sup> Echevarría evokes the importance of this character in Sarduy's life in the following terms: "Obeso, en pantuflas, con verba encrespada, este personaje- estudiante nunca graduado de la Facultad de Medicina- 'preparaba' a estudiantes más jóvenes para los exámenes. En su casa mostraba diapositivas, recitando una y otra vez las partes del cuerpo, y vendía cursos mimeografiados a los aspirantes a médico. Irritado, imperioso, Isidro era una autoridad autodesignada que [presidia] sobre los arcanos de la anatomía y de su imagen en la oscuridad de las sesiones de diapositivas, era la irrisión de la autoridad. No poca es la importancia de este personaje en la ficción posterior de Sarduy, donde aparecerá bajo diferentes disfraces.



chaotic cosmos, but also is nature and artifice become indiscernible, purely internal to each other: “on the floor, arranged in an indecipherable order, there were, amidst cubes of an iridescent crystal, cups-crania, femur-flutes, scepters with rays, swastikas, wheels.”<sup>303</sup> Cobra’s transformation into a divinity, the epitome of perfection, therefore conforms to the protocols of a ritualized initiation that invokes a certain tradition in the West that stems back to the Greeks, and where the education of a person is intimately linked to the disciplining of the body. But it also connects, by way of a critique, with the literary tradition of Latin America that preceded the Boom.<sup>304</sup> Conversely, Sarduy’s route of distant proximity is not that of a cogitating fulcrum that produces *this* or *that* body of knowledge, but their jarring moment of intersection, a *bricolage*; in Spanish, the proper word would be *una chapuza*, or in its Caribbean version, *una chapuceria*, which brings echoes of *hechizería*, simulacra, a spell, in any case something that only exists by virtue of its effect, or even a *superchería*, a trickery, a fraud, a botched work of suturing deeds, a pastiche of an infinite multiplicity of series in which the skin of the world is produced, with strata of chains of signifiers, where the epistemological continent of Latin America as it is trafficked throughout the world by the Boom is *choteado*, and not just flaunted, by this co(s)mical explosion.

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<sup>303</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 510.

<sup>304</sup> Hallward also calls attention to this when he asserts that: “Just as the body flaunts its sexuality and mortality, so *Cobra*’s text flaunts its flamboyant intertextuality. Sarduy includes a list of credits for the Lyrical Theater of Dolls in an auto-pastiche: décor by Roland Barthes (*Leçon d’écriture*); *Cobra*’s costume by Flaubert (Queen of Sheba, in the *Tentation de Saint Antoine*); makeup by Giancarlo Marmorì (Storia de Vous); ‘the dwarf, Mabel and la Raba are the three women of Manuel Puig’s *Boquitas pintadas*’. Scattered through the text, we find allusions to ‘Lezamesque secretions’ [ . . . ]; ‘Chirrigueresque faith’ [ . . . ], a ‘Lezamesque purple’ [ . . . ], a ‘Churriqueresque cage,’ ‘Calderonian’ cats a ‘Faiyumesque’ mouth [ . . . ] The Madam struggles to control her ‘Benvenistean’ urges; ‘her favourite advice: be Brechtian’. More spectacularly, ‘out of a chewing gum machine, Don Luis de Cóngora emerges . . .’ [ . . . ], while William Borroughs composes ‘in hieroglyphs, the exhaustive biography of Ktazob’ [ . . . ] More, *Cobra* like Maitreya is laced with self-quotation, in addition to references to Sarduy’s other works. The Madam refers to *Escrito sobre un cuerpo* by name [ . . . ] while Tundra quotes from *De donde* [ . . . ] and the Trio Madam-Cobra-Pup run into *De donde*’s Auxilio and Socorro whom they find ‘more than simply textual’ [ . . . ]” Hallward, 293-294.

Beyond the mysticism and the violent purity that the protagonist seems to evoke in her cosmetic procession, *Cobra* is more than anything a continuous staging of the queer stain that inevitably sifts through the exclusionary violences of representation, what inevitably percolates through the badly stitched junctions of its body. What is 'impure,' because it belongs to 'other' domains historical, epistemological or rhetorical, accumulates out of this incapability to represent anymore, out of this collapse of modernity's representation of itself that paradoxically represents modernity's realization. In the text, the remainders, the ruins of failed modernities settle down, out of this laceration, to form a crust of fallen times and places. Through it, the attempts at finding the resting point of this utterance of perfection reveals its ultimate sterility, its phantasmagoria, where the world, "the squadron of the 'social' in its fixity, is already a photograph, a hologram of the primitive squadron, a wax museum, an assembly amidst prop demons, the utensils of a cheap circus that are disappearing in the bush, in the dust, under the earth, that nobody remembers, and that are only visible, because of the shadows' deepest green, in certain aerial pictures taken at sunset and after the snow."<sup>305</sup> A second kind of reading therefore necessarily starts stealthily to invade this one, since this, I think, is also the point where we can see *Cobra*, monumentally, astronomically, co(s)mically, betraying herself (in Spanish, *ella se traiciona*, and therefore, *se chotea a sí misma*), as a body being, not the disparate composite, the flaunting Frankenstein-like result of this *bricolage*, but nothing other than the finalization of the extraordinary deed, the act of utterance, by virtue of which this *bricolage* takes place. Although it is thus that the Latin American voice of the Boom betrays in Sarduy its constitutive monstrosity, not merely being a monster of the Magical Realist oxymoron, or the Marvelous Real perplexity that is Latin American essence, but the silent mediations that would have to remain repressed, so this other dissimulated monstrosity, the fixity of this mimetic deed,

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<sup>305</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 513.

would take place (in Spanish, again, the phrase is more revealing: *se le ven las costuras*; literally, *its stitches can be seen*). But, since Cobra's body cannot be distinguished from the world that surrounds it, since this world, in turn, is an oceanic composite of knowledges, a multitude of infinite particularities that in themselves do not constitute a national body, only except by virtue of the necessary cut out of the symbol that institutes a constituting fold, a mutually constitutive inside and outside that is always arbitrary, violent, genetic, destabilizing, and *inherently* erroneous, since always mistaken, instituting an incongruous instance of a disjointed body over all that is written about Latin America and what is the supposedly monolithic Latin American body of knowledge about itself, the writing of itself, free of divisions and antagonisms. And since this body is also indistinctively and interchangeably, even when jarringly, that of the text that bears the title *Cobra*, then the question becomes relevant as to what is the implication for this becoming indiscernible, between a text that con-fuses, dis-oriens our acts of reading, with regard to the habits of that reading, and with regard to what those habits render impossible to read, and as how this impossibility becomes visible in the constituting power of its enactment.

The ambiguity and dialectical convertibility in the text regarding notions of purity and hybridity is nothing short of perplexing. The writing of *Cobra* seems to be predicated on the deadlock of that aporia. The mystical connotations in *Cobra*, and the suggestion, the *choteo*, that there is also a mystical reading of psychoanalysis, cannot be ignored. What is actually being guffawed, mocked at? What secret does this text betray (*chotea*)? And, also what secret betrays (*chotea*) this text? It seems that there is another side of psychoanalysis, of which Sarduy wrote, *choteó*, ultimately its symptom. It is not surprising to find this connection clearly stated in Sarduy's work:

In *Kant avec Sade*, Jacques Lacan has pointed out how the sadist hero lacks a subject, it is a pure search of the object. The Kantian hero, if it exists, would be precisely the opposite for him there would not be any object to be reached, the only thing that would count would be morality without finality, it would be a pure subject.

Moral subject, the Kantian would be a sane (*sano; healthy*) hero; search of the object without subject, the sadist is a perverse hero.

The search of that object forever lost, but always present in its lure, reduces the sadist system to repetition.<sup>306</sup>

Sarduy, by incurring in a methodical and disciplined procedure of a disruptive, radical dis-orientation in the traditional codes of formal intelligibility, makes of the insensible obfuscation between language and body, and therefore between meaning and content, style and form, a very distinct and visible one. It is not so much the body as already constituted whereby this obfuscation expresses a solution, but the *bodily*, the *corporeal* as a problem, as the site of a problematic, unresolved tension between the dictates of the Cuban state to produce revolutionary cultural works, that is, devoid of any formal imbrication and complexity, of any remainder of formal expenditure.

By writing from within the paradoxes engendered by the psychoanalytic truth of the body's irreducible sexuation, Sarduy's writing effectively tests every single principled foundation, be it epistemic, theoretical or even ontological, upon which any protocol of critical

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<sup>306</sup> Sarduy, *Escrito sobre un cuerpo*, in *Severo Sarduy: Obra Completa*, 1124. "En *Kant avec Sade*, Jacques Lacan ha señalado cómo el héroe sádico carece de sujeto, es pura búsqueda del objeto. El héroe kantiano, si existiera, sería justamente lo contrario: para él no habría ningún objeto a que dar alcance, lo único que contaría sería la moral sin finalidad, sería sujeto puro. // Sujeto moral sin objeto, el kantiano sería un héroe sano; búsqueda del objeto sin sujeto, el sádico es un héroe perverso. // La búsqueda de ese objeto para siempre perdido, pero siempre presente en su engaño, reduce el sistema sádico a la repetición" [My translation].

reading could proceed. It is nonetheless here that the author comes, in my view, close to a complete overturning, and a betrayal, a *choteo*, in the double sense in which I have pretended to make the reader aware throughout these pages: at the level of politics that of betraying the irreducible *sadism* of the Cuban state; and the way this *sadism* translates, at the cultural level, into the equally brutal mechanisms of disciplining and punishment.

Sarduy hinted at the revolutionary quality of the baroque, when he asserted that:

To be baroque, today, I think, means to threaten, judge, and parody the bourgeois economy, based on the stingy- or as one says, 'rational' - administration of goods, at the very centre and foundation of this administration and everything it supports: language, the space of signs, the symbolic cement of society and the guarantee of its functioning, of its communication [. . .]. In the baroque, language, contrary to its domestic use, *is not the function of information but of pleasure*, it is an attack on moral and 'natural' good sense on which is based the whole ideology of consumption and accumulation.<sup>307</sup>

From this passage it appears that the opposition between the accumulation of information (knowledge?) and pleasure is posited as a purely external one. The paradoxical affirmation of the pleasure principle, once again, is here nonetheless very much present, which means that the path of the pleasure principle, where every division, every infinitesimal split on the Real that an utterance creates, marks the sublime release of yet another quantum of surplus-*jouissance*, ultimately signals the ascetic way of the Sadean mystic. The final disintegration of Cobra in the end, which reflects the limpidness of the Tibetan sky, could only hint at that: Cobra's body, which is, as the text's economy of meaning has been shown to support, the All and Whole of the represented *Cosmos* (the Real), disappears, comes to naught in the nothingness (of castration).

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<sup>307</sup> Interview with Fossey, as quoted in Hallward's *Absolutely Post-Colonial*, 276. [My emphasis]

The frenzied rhythm of the ‘narration’ accounts for a stoppage of the representational machine in the end. A reference to the biblical *Ecclesiastes*, also poetized by T.S. Eliot, clarifies, once more, Sarduy’s radical distant proximity with respect to his time:

En ritmo de bossa-nova:  
‘un tiempo de plenitud,  
un tiempo de decrepitud,  
un tiempo de afinamiento,  
un tiempo de espesamiento,  
un tiempo de vida,  
un tiempo de muerte,  
un tiempo de derrumbe,  
un tiempo de erección,  
un tiempo de yin,  
un tiempo de yang.’<sup>308</sup>

Of proximity, because the fusional, affective braiding of joyful, wise, fatal and definitive resignation, with a solemn, pseudo-existential disenchantment in the face of a defeat about a political real, is, as Idelber Avelar has made clear, a theme very proper to late modernism, and perhaps not even exclusive to Latin America. Of distance, since this ‘*disoriental*’ resignation is nonetheless predicated “al ritmo de un *bossa-nova*”, which is a form of warning against the ultimate unconfessed enjoyment, and therefore betrayal, in effect, *el choteo*, the (self-)mockery that lies hidden behind the writing of this pious acceptance and insertion of the conjunction of opposites into the beatific contemplation of the One, in the agony of its becoming Other. In this sense, Sarduy under-writes the joy and triumph of this carnival in a minor key. In it one can detect the nerve of an insistence for a mourning that subtends as its repressed truth those

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<sup>308</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 454. “To the rhythm of a bossa-nova; ‘a time for plenitude, a time for decrepitude, a time for refinement, a time for thickening, a time for life, a time for death, a time of collapse, a time for erection, a time for yin, a time for yang.’ [My translation.]

celebrations. As has been seen, the other side of this becoming infinitely divided by a tacit embarking in the imaginary pursuit of the impossibility of an ever-retreating enjoyment, is what one may call the *hard body* of the Real, which prefigures, in the end, a nihilistic experience. To run as fast as possible towards the nothingness of the limpid sky of a Tibetan monastery, to vanish in the cocoon of aesthetic contemplation, or to disappear in the clear slate of political silence, are in the end attitudes that partake of the same coefficient of (self-)betrayal, what remains of desire when it is turned against itself. Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, a sign of the defeat of a cause can be seen whenever the body that represents it turns all that violence against itself, in a sort of autoimmune/solipsistic reaction not too different from what was the Sarduyan Furious Neo-baroque affective matrix, and not too different either from what happened in Cuba in those first ten years of the Revolution.

It is as though the shortest route towards autochthony, of a true *being Cuban* (which gradually in *Cobra* extends to being Latin American, and after that to the whole planet), the way to the closest achievable vicinity to a 'true' cubanness (*cubanidad*), Caribbeanness (*caribeñidad*), or even a *latinoamericanidad*, the same celebration of an identity that in *De donde son los cantantes* ends up being articulated under the reserve of an interrogation, in *Cobra* can only be attained by traversing the farthest orbit possible, the straight line of an infinite circle that only finds its enclosure in the *sunyata* (nothingness) of a being. All in the simulacra of language effects. It is as if the revolutionary way, the truly insurreccional way, of attaining the international universality of class struggle against Capital, could only be attained through the pinning down of the hard kernel of singularity that *Cobra* embodies in its endless transformations and fugues. It is, precisely in the irrational and enjoying drive to absorb this supplemental

singularity, the indeterminate singularity of *an-other* that can only be apprehended in *perpetual becoming*, always too soon or too late, not only the unconscious of the Boom, but also the unsurmountable abyss of animality that grounds the ethical affirmation of universal (bourgeois) values of the Communist State. And it was this symbolic void, this ubiquitous, inapprehensible abyss, in short the death drive at the heart of every language machinery, that was the uncanny cipher of a projective mechanism, a conjuring up of the ghosts of the sovereign State onto a disgusting, monstrous, capitalist other, the shameful enemy *within* the gates. It is ultimately this autoimmune effect of the communist state that Sarduy transfers to the cultural realm with *Cobra*. In its *refusal* to play by the rules of the cultural game that was to the very core a transnational business of exchange of utopian fantasies, *Cobra* effectuates the aesthetic *in-version* of the autotelic fantasy of the revolutionary *foci*- which remained paradigmatic for Latin American Marxist guerrillas throughout the Cold War and beyond-, the formless, ineffable perfectibility of the revolutionary national subject turned ‘inside out,’ into the empty form of a cultural object devoid of any meaning and content, where all the accumulated knowledge becomes the very skin and evidence of this inelible ‘stain’.

It is when *Cobra* becomes identical with itself that it becomes *Cobra*, that is to say, a dead, useless artifact (“What is this thing?”), totally devoid of any meaning, absolutely lacking of any knowledge-value. Sarduy’s *Cobra* is, therefore, very much like Borges’ deadly coin (the *Zahir*), or like the *Aleph*, just like these two daemonic objects are akin to Fernando Vallejo’s *Virgen de los Sicarios*, or like Márquez’s *Delgadinha*. Only that, contrary to Borges’ tale, which takes place within what I called the ‘cultural scene’ as a domestic metaphor for the nation (or even Pauls’ novel, where the double stream is perceptible only when Sylvia’s dismembered body



is read as the flipside of the narrator's mother); contrary to Vallejo's novel, where the universal void of the *munus* structures a deadly romance at the point of statist conflation with the nation; or even unlike Márquez's novel, where *Delgadinha's* stillness unleashes its protean power beyond any symbolic demarcation, in *Cobra* the cultural scene explodes beyond the functional confines of the State and the Nation, since it is not a question anymore of a real or imaginary re-enactment of the ; It becomes impossible to nurture Cobra's furious vortex within any national placenta, or submit it to the regime of statist incisions. It cannot be anymore that sacred realm of the national voice or the state's law because, in *Cobra*, the daemonic aspect of a cultural object re-turns to the telluric origins of modernity's embrace of its dark, nomadic calling with knowledge's function of demarcating the planetary routes of future territorializations. By surrendering her body into the vertiginous flow of knowledge that circulates- and until further notice there is none other-, therefore by becoming the sort of planetary, infinite, multiple, *flâneur* that perhaps Borges would have liked to be but could have only imagined, Cobra re-cuperates for the Cuban State, the debt of Modernity's claims of universality to its colonial legacy.

This is the point where the protean engine that withstands the infinitesimal *hardening* that verifies Cobra's synchronous coming to itself, confronts the reader with the. This *queer*, disgusting, capitalist *other* that seems to proliferate uncontrollably within the communist nation, subverts the categorical imperative of the communist state's 'programmatic' unfolding, revealing it ultimately as a question of *taste*. Only then, on the condition that we readers become, like Borges, the abject witnesses of the lettered man's self-parody, and so the excremental excedent of a queer, cultureless, sub-proletarian other. Cobra's blindness is Capital's doublebind function.

In *Cobra*, it is not the nation, or the state that become utterly a dead object, but knowledge itself (cultural capital).

The next chapter will be devoted to a reading of this dead 'diamond'. The question of the indeterminable *munus* of the community resurfaces, but this time it is irreducibly obscure, ever retreating. Furthermore, it structures the relation among its characters as the 'dark precursor,' the impossible cannibalization of which it is the sole purpose of the 'imagined community' that actualizes itself as a provincial *knavery* [canallada], even if its form displays the international overtones of a noble cause.

## Chapter 6

### Virgilio Piñera's *La carne de René*: Of a Book that Lies and a Book that Does Not Lie

"How are we to break the wall of the individual,  
while at the same time saving the singular gift  
that the individual carries?"

- Roberto Esposito.

The instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be  
applicable to artistic production,  
the total function of art is reversed.  
Instead of being based on ritual,  
it begins to be based on another practice-  
politics.

- Walter Benjamin

La ciudad es grande, cierto,  
y rica, y brillante, y bella,  
y yo soy un hombre muerto,  
y mi sarcófago es ella.

- José Martí, *Versos Libres*.

In his 1955 essay *Cuba and Literature*, two years after the publication of his most well-known novel *René's Flesh*, Virgilio Piñera seems to conceive of his preoccupation about Cuban literature in terms that are indissolubly linked to concerns of literary autonomy, authenticity, legitimacy and authority; concerns that, according to Julio Ramos, were to become, since the nineteenth century's burgeoning of Latin American nationalisms, germane to the Latin American lettered class, and to which one could consequently give the name of constitutive symptoms and desires.<sup>309</sup> The importance of this essay rests heavily in that it bespeaks, in more than one instance, these concerns as configuring the political undertones of his fictional enterprise, much

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<sup>309</sup> Throughout the chapters of his *Divergent Modernities*, Julio Ramos' argumentation is punctuated by a constant referencing and interpretation regarding the nineteenth-century authors' (ultimately futile) insistence in giving a self-consistent configuration to the relationship among these four signifiers. Furthermore, their preoccupation therein was a telling sign of a crisis of their traditional role as statesmen within the project of new nationalist formations in the continent. To a large degree, the power and appeal of Ramos' argument hinges upon his comparative cartography of an operation of displacement of such concerns *from politics towards aesthetics*, and therefore on a demarcation of the points of contiguity that such operation of transferral presupposed. Cultural agency, in its most mundane form of *materialization* of the national project, became a metonymy for the *letrados'* (lack of) political agency, when viewed from the geopolitical perspective of transnational capital.

of which, in turn, is a direct expression of his notoriously ‘constricted’ style, and whose real dimension has been overlooked by much of the current critical acumen surrounding this novel. His fiction involves, not only a personal account of a ‘stifling’ experience as an isolated lettered man in a geographically insulated space (i.e., Chichester, *Virgilio Piñera and the Formulation of a National Literature*, 2002), or a mere game of languages and desires (Austin, *Unending Desire*, 2005), or alternatively an ethical or political impeachment, strictly about a homosexuality relegated to political invisibility (Jérez-Farrán, 1989), in the guise of a mock *Bildungsroman* (Arrufat, *La carne de Virgilio*, 1990), but constantly re-inscribes those experiences within the broader context of issues about the supposed legitimating authority of metropolitan literary and intellectual movements, the significance of literary practices irradiating from that metropolitan center, for the constitution of a project of an authentic national literature, and the current ideological international fencing within which this took place- the Cold War, or roughly Soviet communism vs. American neo-liberalism -, all of this considered from the specific context of what he emphatically qualifies as *his* country. If, as many readers have noted, Piñera’s writing is so difficult to pin down to a single, non-exclusionary reading, it is because, in his narrative, political preoccupations appear not only inextricably linked to those choices, but also inescapably relevant to the ‘petty’ politics, intrigues, and struggles for power that always condition the literary production within the not so poetic realities of a marketable publishing venture. Very much in tune with Severo Sarduy, he voices an implicit, yet unequivocal rising of a self-critical relation to Cuban literary production to the level of an ethical and political imperative.<sup>310</sup> Put differently, one can see a moment of *repolitization* of culture, or rather, how politics emerges from *within* these anxieties of legitimation, authorization, autochthony and

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<sup>310</sup> See Ana García Chichester for an account of this aspect in Piñera’s struggles against the *Origenistas*. Chichester, Ana García. “Virgilio Piñera and the Formulation of a National Literature”, 231-25.

authenticity, as they determined the petty politics of the cultural game.

In spite of Piñera's reputation as a cynical nay-sayer, as the inveterate denier of anything that was positively produced in his days as authentically or autochthonously Cuban, or rather *precisely because of that*, in *Cuba and Literature* the author strongly urges attention and acknowledgment to the importance of this set of intersections, when urging an answer to the question as to the precise relation between a personal literary enterprise and its institutional reception in his country:

We are not going to say anything so dumb as this: Cuban literature is infinitely inferior to French literature. [. . .] That would be laughable. We could not even juxtapose the two things via negation. [. . .] here we are only considering what is called Cuban literature, or, to be more exact and in accord with the ugly title, the relation which might exist between my country and literature.<sup>311</sup>

For him, literary anxieties and obsessions of authorization coming from within a context of colonial subalternity were necessarily tied to considerations of national cultural autonomy, which in turn impinged on issues about legitimacy and authenticity, in short something that affected his literary person, as a Latin American man of letters.<sup>312</sup> Put simply, for him the question of the existence of a national literature, being a question as personal as much it was institutional, was of utmost importance; and the aporiae, intrigues, farcical situations and

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<sup>311</sup> Piñera, Virgilio. "Cuba y la literatura", 91

<sup>312</sup> Later on, Piñera puts at the same level the cultural domain and other institutional activities that characterize a nation. The question of existence as an autonomous nation could not be thought outside the cultural. For him, between the cultural and the political there was only a formal difference: "Why, if we have an army, a navy, a police force, public assistance, hospitals, firehouses, etc., why shouldn't we also have a literature? And if the army is armed, if the firemen put out fires, we, too, with our literature, write. . . . You will see that by the end of this year, our literary production will have increased: so many volumes of poetry, so many stories, so many plays . . . Who doubts, *who dares to question our existence*, who feels anxiety, what heart fails and what hand can no longer hold the pen [. . .]?" (90-91) (An anxious reference to European modernity and a situation of colonial mimicry. All the indexes of modernization prompt the question: Do we exist? In relation to whom? Do we exist as belonging to the European project of modernization? Do we *belong* to modernity?)

equivoques that necessarily explode and are put into circulation in the critical pondering of this relation is possibly what happens in *René's Flesh*, a thinking that implies its reader as partaker of the same cultural game- a game that leaves him/her with the not so flattering ethical-political choice of choosing between being a beautiful soul or being a knave.

Together with all the lingering problems the signifier *nation* removes, this possibility recurs to haunt his writing as both a disavowed and ineluctable specter. The question about literary national authenticity reflects a constant critiquing on his part of a 'belonging to,' of a being 'included into' that is purely based on an uncritical wanting [*querer*], since young writers " [ . . . ] only have to write something, and you will immediately be included [ . . . ] they will not accept any other truth than that of inclusiveness." (90) He goes on to reflect on that relation (between Cuba and literature), about which he asserts that there is 'currently none,' therefore implying that this authentic and legitimate literary space bears the characters of inaccessibility to Cuban culture, a space from which Cuban culture seems to be, by definition, excluded. He does this by resorting to an example drawn from the English 'millenary tradition, by its geniuses, and imperial grandeur'. The fame and prestige of this exemplary author, is due to this 'respectable,' and 'impressive' literature. He presupposes a fixed, fatal, yet contradictory logic between the two: this writer, emblemized here by the crime novelist Nicholas Blake (?), owes all his (otherwise indisputable) 'grandeur' to the 'shelter' offered by the 'blinding light' of English literature.<sup>313</sup> This logic he later translates to the Cuban case, with the only exception that, in terms

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<sup>313</sup> Piñera, *Cuba and literature*, "[ . . . ] Currently, none. It seems to me that a graphic example would suffice to demonstrate the lack of relation. Let us take any writer of crime novels. Nicholas Blake? I have read a crime novel from this author, about whom it is said on the front pages that he is a grandiose writer; that his little book, which is entitled *The Head of the Traveler*, is a great novel, and more praises. And do you know why such an inflation of Mr. Blake's reputation and his crime novel is possible? Simply because it is sheltered by the blinding light of English literature; by its millenary tradition, by its geniuses, by its imperial grandeur. That is, since English literature is so respectable, so alive and real that even if a thousand inexactitudes were said about Mr. Blake and his crime novel, no one would be surprised or make a fuss. It is so real and so respectable that Mr. Blake has had no trouble being

of respectability and grandeur, this tradition seems to keep an inverse relationship with its English counterpart. He denies the existence of such tradition, and he delegitimizes and disauthorizes it, because that tradition denies his existence (arguably as an autonomous and authentic writer).<sup>314</sup> At play in such assertions is an express will of artistic authenticity and autonomy, and a not so fully recognized will for legitimation and authorization- in Piñera these two desires seem to stand in a relation of irreconcilable, yet inextricable antinomy.

Notwithstanding the obvious derision, it is interesting to note the ambivalent and conflictive relation between the man of letters as aspirer to a status of prestige and power within that tradition, and the tradition that confers such status. To belong or to be excluded from an epistemic body, while at the same time willing a sort of self-ontologization of that body, in other words, to simultaneously want a body, as an object to be had, and will its embodiment, as an essence to-come, seem to be two recurring axiomatic matrices in Piñera, his particular way of compromising his literary affects and obsessions. It shows that issues of desire, embodiments of consumptive cultural activities, the corporeal instancing of such culture, or the abstract pretext for enacting an experimental poetics of self-referentiality, performed from a pre-textual, authorial outside, were for Piñera probably more than a purely theoretical preoccupation, but rather he saw all of them as impinging on the very texture of the Cuban literary phenomenon, its inner political workings, and its connection with themes that transcended its formal domain. As a

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accepted in any collection of crime novels in any part of the world. That is, Mr. Blake belongs to real and true English literature, all of which is impressive, carrying along with its greatness someone of the likes of Mr. Blake and his little crime book.” (92)

<sup>314</sup> Note the paranoiac character of the assertion: “I deny that such a Cuban literature exists, since day by day I suffer this terrible civil death of the writer who does not have a true literature to back him up. I deny that it exists because *everything conspires* to demonstrate to me that I am very far from being a writer. I deny that it exists because it is incapable of demonstrating to me whether I am a sad madman or a magnificent writer. I deny that it exists because it does not energize me or give me protection in my vocation; I deny that it exists because I do not see anywhere this golden network that writers form who preceded us in their solid glory, the voices of universal recognition, the true literary life with its paradises and infernos.” Piñera, 89. [My emphasis]

writer, he could not conceive of himself otherwise than as precariously navigating in the odd interstices of this conundrum.

This suspicion and resentment against a blind desire for inclusion seems to come inflected with a corresponding anxiety about certain inconsistencies regarding the double position of the lettered man as an agent and recipient of culture. He relates this critique to the legitimacy of an autonomous literary ‘genius,’ an individual upon whom the authority of creating an authentic Cuban literature would befall; a genius whom he otherwise describes as still “lacking a *passport*” to “travel through the land of culture” (91). He declares that there should be a cultural hero (himself) who would finally help Cuban literature earn that passport. Furthermore, he spatializes the terms in which this problem is to be understood and solved, since the use of travel vocabulary does in my view more than convey a metaphor: it is as if this land of Cuban culture, or rather its corporeal existence in the body of the lettered man transporting it, lay elsewhere, or were even a native product, for export overseas, in an outside of itself, arguably an imaginary metropolitan outside bearing some resemblance to the ‘imperial grandeur’ of European culture, as the essay seems to suggest.<sup>315</sup> While being in other instances explicitly dismissive about this universal haven of European literary traditions, he also implicitly posits it as superior and as deservedly enabling the inclusion and visibility of literary geniuses whose geniality, like his, would otherwise have been ignored and forgotten. He voices a break with the tradition to which he nonetheless wants to belong, as the tradition that he will have initiated, in a literary elsewhere. He bemoans the ‘ominous’ inevitability of his ‘fate’ of not belonging to Cuban Literature, from which he nonetheless desperately wants to escape. While apparently

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<sup>315</sup> For a more extensive commentary of how the dichotomy between spatialization and temporalization is played out in the constitution and understanding of the Cuban literary canon, as well as its place in the Western Canon, see Pancrazio, James. “La temporalidad del canon: la narrativa y la poesía en Cuba”, 104-121.



encasing this genius within the Western myth of the ‘self-made’ man, at the same time he condemns that genius to his fateful historical-material conditions. Piñera posits the power of a true literary genius to keep his writerly autonomy, to break away, to clean the slate, and start a new tradition in Cuban letters, the veritable one, while at the same time he recognizes the power structures that fatally condition, and in his case radically impede, the entry of such talent into that tradition.<sup>316</sup> For Piñera, literary genius seems to be somehow independent of the conditions within which he writes, while at the same time this genius is impotent to institute himself as such without the help of that tradition, which he, for that reason, vigorously disowns. In short, the ruse that determined much of Piñera’s fiction: he wanted to belong to an autonomous Literary Cuban tradition outside of itself, one which mirrors his own autonomy, as the literary talent that institutes it, to therein affirm his existence as a man of letters, *by simultaneously recurring to a refusal of that dislocated tradition, and preemptively denying his power to extricate himself from it*. He declares an impossibility to belong, which is also his impossibility not to belong. He should have to disappear into anonymity, to perish as a sacrificial victim, so to speak, if he wants to figure as such in that tradition; thus positing an escape and a disappearance as the only way to inclusion, *a fugue that is already part of a process of insertion . . .* One is almost tempted to conclude that this line of escape was also destined to appear, in the end, as a mock one, inauthentic, as equivocal and farcical as the one he describes.

In his first interventions in *Poeta*, he already hints at that possibility, when he suggests

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<sup>316</sup> Incidentally, Chichester reports that “in Piñera’s opinion, *Cuba was progressing at a snail’s pace in the direction of producing a literary genius that would authenticate its literature before the world.*” (235) Moreover, “Piñera’s comments appear to pertain to the absence of a historical corpus of literature definable as Cuban, more than to volume or even to the quality of production. Coming in the middle of the 1950s, however, his statement could no longer have been directed at the literary enterprises of the 1930s and 1940s, but rather concerned the condition of literature in Cuba in the period dominated by *Orígenes.*” (234)

that the movement that *Poeta* represents, also “awaits the discovery of its fake part . . .”<sup>317</sup> While critiquing the circumscription and constriction of Cuban letters to the problems and themes that occupied figures that gathered around the *Orígenes* group in the Post-Machado regime, he equally rejected any superiority of anything coming from Europe, and arguably he saw himself as *embodying* this double negation.<sup>318</sup> As an illustration, in *La isla en peso*, the poetic voice seems to deride the European who was the only one reading Cartesian meditations in the middle of an Afro-Cuban dance, probably also an allusion to the imposition of an anthropological, ethnographic- read European- vision imposed on an event that conglomerates elements making up for the concept of *cubanidad* as they were understood by the *Origenistas* - nightly exoticism, the predominance of the ludic and daemonic over the rational, myth over history, sound and rhythm over meaning, baroque expenditure and exhaustion over classicist economy, form over content. Certainly, there seems to be an equal amount of derision about the exoticism the poem describes, as if everything that was being done by his contemporaries to tackle problems about what *cubanidad* really meant (mainly nation, negritude, and identity) came already shrouded within and over-determined by the cartographic will of a body of knowledge of European import: in the poem, he describes one and the other as being in mutual, self-negating complicity. Chichester suggests in her essay that this ethnographic/anthropological body of knowledge was the conceptual tool figures like Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera used to dissect Cuban reality, *like the skin of a wild animal*.<sup>319</sup> And, conceivably, whatever configuration these topics acquired in the literature of the time within publishing enterprises like *Orígenes*, was already sifted

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<sup>317</sup> Piñera, Virgilio. “Terribilia meditans”.

<sup>318</sup> More explicitly: “He will not be able to be a genius, but it will be forbidden to demonstrate this. He *lacks a passport* and for this reason no one will hear him in his pathetic task of traveling through the lands of culture. But still more: his head will elaborate ideas, theories, grandiose visions, theses that the world of high culture will never know.” (*Cuba and Literature*, 91) Piñera seems, on the one hand, to be acutely aware of his disadvantageous condition as a subaltern in relation to the metropolitan center, while at the same time affirming the inevitability of this subalternity.

<sup>319</sup> Chichester, 244-247.

through this ethnographic decanting.<sup>320</sup> Further ahead in the poem, Piñera describes the European as “the inevitable passing guest who leaves his illustrious shit.”<sup>321</sup> Piñera, in other words, consistently describes *cubanity* as the corporeal, feminine, wild, yet passive receptacle of a cultural knowledge coming from an excrescent Europe, as inevitable as it is ephemeral, as a bestial body upon which a *strange feast of epistemic disciplining, pinning down and branding* takes place.<sup>322</sup> A carnival, a *choteo*, unfolds, that has acquired a sanctifying status (thus, in this island, “sanctity deflates in laughter”)<sup>323</sup>, a solemn guffaw that already bears the imprint of a market enterprise, a savage ritual whose procedures and formulas have been strictly imposed from an excremental outside.

Piñera further develops a discussion about Cuban culture in terms of a ‘deficit,’ as if it was being starved of itself. Yet, in another essay (*Borrón y cuenta nueva*) he qualifies this culture in terms of a need for a clean slate, therefore implying a sort of concurrent surplus and profusion, a ‘too much,’ as if Cuban literature under the influence of the *Orígenes* group suffered from a lack that paradoxically needed to be ‘cleaned,’ in order rightfully to have a place in World literature. There was, literally, *too much of Nothing*, a Nothing to which he nevertheless adjudicates some sort of corporeity:

“ To the extent that I listened, I was more than convinced that the pen refused to deliver something ingenious because either nothing was happening to us or because we did not know that nothing was happening to us. Then I thought that the sense of nothingness through excess is less deleterious than the sense of nothingness through defect. To arrive

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<sup>320</sup> See Rojas, Rafael. “Contra el *homo cubensis*: Transculturación y nacionalismo en la obra de Fernando Ortiz”

<sup>321</sup> Piñera, Virgilio. *La isla en peso*.

<sup>322</sup> More precisely, “Lezama and the Orígenes group were not interested in introducing the testimony of a present as a sign of identity that could have been and never was; their preoccupation was finding potential forms to fill the existing void, overcoming that which is with the incarnation of that which can be. Underwriting this imperative lay the desire to occupy the emptied body of the Republic, and to generate meaning within its interior.” (158)

<sup>323</sup> *La isla en peso*.

at Nothing through culture, tradition, abundance, the blow of the passions, the contradiction of being, etc., brings on a vigorous, vital posture, since the great spot left by the ink of Everything is indelible. But this Nothing arisen from Nothingness, as bodily as the nothing-ly that warms the people, like the no-things, the no-sound, the no-story . . . takes us quickly to the morphology of the cow on the plain, of the tree on the road, or the lizard on the wall. . . .”<sup>324</sup>

This anxiety about a Cuban literary culture that was too poor of itself because it was plethoric of European over-determinations, that was at the same time outside of itself, because its authenticity always lay elsewhere, was correlative to the author’s anxiety and ambivalence about his place in that culture: to the lack of a passport to enter into the land of such culture, there was a concomitant dislocation of the space where that non-existent culture was supposed to be. To the lack of existence of Cuban literature Piñera opposed his non-existence as a man of letters. Against his banishment from the *Origenistas’* and *Minoristas’* realm he posited the realm’s dislocation.

Piñera also propounds a *performative* understanding of this *choteo*. For him, Cuban literature, even if it did exist, was no more than what a group of people said and wrote about what Cuban literature should be.<sup>325</sup> The literary scene during his time was little more than just that, a grotesque scene in which its actors more or less consciously assumed their role for themselves, in what he describes in more or less farcical terms. What is endangered, he decries,

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<sup>324</sup> Piñera, Virgilio. “Borrón y Cuenta Nueva”. “It is necessary to keep in sight that in its time, *Orígenes* constituted a task in the face of the inertia of *Espuela de plata*; that Lezama, director of *Espuela de plata*, made an agreement with Lezama, co-director of *Orígenes*, to finish once and for all an anomalous situation. How can we aspire to less than that Ciclón, not throwing the lessons of history into a torn sack, might do the same with *Orígenes*, wiping it out with one stroke and reinvigorating thus the promising tree of our literature.” (5)

<sup>325</sup> Interestingly, Jorge Mañach defines Cuban *choteo* in just about the same performative terms. For him, *choteo* is primarily a question of “derisive habit” (habit as stupidity in action) [13], an unconscious, ‘instinctive’ reaction, *in the name of the independence of the individual with regard to an instance of authority*; something that he situates at the lower level, within the hierarchical articulation that he seems to be concerned with, of the capacity of mockery that humans share with other animals, because “the parrot and the monkey, among others, seem capable of mockery; but with all probability it is a simple mimicry devoid of genuine intention.” [6] For him, true *choteo* belongs to this lower, more childish forms of this faculty; it is primarily due to a lack of intention, and attention, which puts it at the same level with a reflexive corporeality of the gesture: the grin, the interjection, facialities, or even slapstick. [6] Further, quoting William James: “We don’t cry because we are sad, we are sad because we cry.” [8]

in this incestuous, lascivious scene, is the public thing [“No, I only ask these questions in the name of the public thing!"]. Not surprisingly, for him, everything relating to these problems, as well as the way they were tackled by his contemporaries, had something ‘fake’ and ‘pastiche-like’ in it, since it was predicated on a claustrophobic enactment or staging of an (at least partly) borrowed authority, in the name of what otherwise was taken to be original and authentic:

Such and such a book is the same as such and such, and so on for the tens of similar works produced in the course of years. There is a formula: this formula is repeated *ad eternum* and is aggravating in that it is not the result of an ingenious crucible.” [ . . . ] (94) [ . . . ] “ That is to say, its *Pastiche et Melanges* will not be followed by an *À la recherche du temps perdu* but rather another *Pastiche et Melanges*; this *Pastiche et Melanges* will not be followed by another *Pastiche et Melanges* but by something like a *Pastiches et Pastiches* or *Melanges et Melanges*.” (95) “I remember the case of X, one of those writers who, when he passed by you, gave the same effect as a tremendous gust of air in your face, to such an extent that citations emanated from his every pore. Before his work, you asked yourself, why does X write? They shall warn us not to ask why X writes, what X writes about, what for and with what. . . . No, *I only formulate the question from the point of view of the public thing. For whom does X write?* Well, he writes for a group of friends that, in just reciprocity, write for X. Moreover, it would not be fatally sterile if, like, for example, in the case of Kafka, he wrote something that was not written for his friends but which he read to his friends. Now, in the case of X, this “something” has been conceived of, if not explicitly, tacitly, so that it can work in *a medium prepared for effect*. That is, the work of X, no matter what its undeniable formal virtues might be—elegance, fluidity, diamantine phrasing—is not connected to any kind of reality; at no point do we sense that the ornamentation in his writing functions as anything more than *mere decoration*. (98) (My emphasis)

What lay behind what he describes as little less than a decadent charade, was an undue glorification of the individual, and a concomitant degradation of the textual object:

Thus, it could be said: the last and most ingenious mystery of X has just appeared. He

offers us nothing less than his new style: he greets us by taking a step back, a step forward, and then he opens his mouth, poetically. As for the rest, it is so simple that his last book is the ultimate in simplicity and boredom. (96)

Furthermore, this fakeness was described by Piñera, early on in the same essay, as the truth contained in an other “textbook [that] does not lie”, a text that “has its truth, which smells and fells.” (90). Cuban literature is posited as a *textbook*, a *corpus*, in short, a branded body that, even if it tells the truth, needs to be disinfected, cleansed, arguably of its own lack, which is nonetheless posited as an excess. It is alternatively either two different books, a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ one, so to speak, and one single book that lies as much as it tells the truth, that tells the truth in its very lies, or that lies when telling the truth, the inner undoubling of which mirrors and unravels that of the truth/lie opposition itself.<sup>326</sup> This textbook is prescriptive and formulaic, “a mere list”, the vehicle of a pre-existing established knowledge: it was an empty template, a ‘self-proliferating manual’ that dictated in advance the way the problems orbiting around *cubanidad* were supposed to be tackled, in order to gain legitimacy and authority in the stifling circle that professed and officiated the cause (of cubanness).<sup>327</sup> Cuban literature, *cubanidad* as a project, as a cause, existed, he says, but only as a fossil, a manual that “is swollen and filled to the brim”, one whose “stitches threaten to burst open.” It was a schoolbook that, in its falsity, told smelling and felling truths. These problems were handled on the basis of a supposed Cuban

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<sup>326</sup> The equivocality in the passage is suggestive, since Piñera sometimes seems to be referring to a book that lies, and a book that does not lie, as if they were two different books, while in other times he seems to be referring to an uncanny book that partook of a duplicitous quality: “[. . .] in accordance with this textbook and the one that, on the other hand, does not lie at all, we have had writers since the seventeenth century. There have been literary movements, generations, publications, and so on. If you follow the textbook you will see that we had such and such a poet in the eighteenth century, or this and the other novelist; that in the nineteenth century Cubans invaded the field of the philosophical; and that in the twentieth century, poets proliferated. There have been many novelists and storytellers, and much theater has been written. And in effect, the textbook does not lie; it has its truth, a truth which smells and fells: such and such a poet really existed; he left these works and he died on this day of that year . . . This textbook has no reason to get mixed up in this matter.” (89-90) The question remains whether the textbook that does not lie, is the same one as the textbook that “has no reason to get mixed up in this matter.”

<sup>327</sup> “But manuals constantly proliferate, since as the years go by one repeats the other and, in addition, adds its ration of conventional truth.” (90)

essence that none of his interlocutors questioned too deeply, and which was posited by figures like Fernando Ortiz as belonging to an already lost golden age.<sup>328</sup> Nevertheless, a conception of origin as retroactively performing its own posited essence, was critiqued by Piñera as hegemonizing the literary space for an automatism that eventually did nothing more than perpetuate itself, for it had arguably forgotten the radical contingency upon which a truthful performance is predicated.) Piñera wanted to point out that the moment a literary or artistic process had identified itself too much with its own axiomatic predications, was the moment that it had become already *hardened*, dead letter, the moment it had betrayed itself. Simply stated, for Piñera, *Orígenes* as an original project was dead (therefore, it is a body that ‘smells and fells’) from the moment it started to repeat its selfsameness, because it fell into the naiveté of becoming one with the image it created of itself. It nonetheless, told the truth, a false one. Therefore, his bitter remark that “they did not take into account that a literary generation ends up doing the same as last night’s reactionaries” and that “the monarchy of *the formula* pursued its sad reign, only with new clothes. . . .” (97).

If we start with a tentative definition, by positing that a situation becomes farcical, inauthentic, whenever its actors’ activities are invested on a set of axioms which have exhausted their transcending momentum and lost their truth value, thus turning a creative process into a

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<sup>328</sup> Certainly, Lezama and his group did not ignore- everything indicates the contrary- the performative character of their poetic project, and he himself did not champion a naïve recuperative gesture towards the origins- identitarian, racial or national- of Cuban literature. As Roberto González Echevarría has shown in his *Celestina’s Brood*, Lezama’s project had more to do with a sort of Nietzschean recuperation of the sense of the word *origin* itself. Lezama’s project was, in short, the filling up of the actual, empty space of the Cuban, with *images* from the past. Memory in Lezama was collective and poetic, a collective, mythical narrative to the service of the future. More precisely, “José Lezama Lima elaborates the process by which history enters the collective consciousness, examining how history is a shared memory, and that memory is creative. As a result, history becomes a consensual narrative or fiction, composed of *la imagen* and the poetic myth.” (Rowlandson, 71) “Lezama and the Orígenes group were not interested in introducing the testimony of a present as a sign of identity that could have been and never was; their preoccupation was finding potential forms to fill the existing void, overcoming that which is with the incarnation of that which can be. Underwriting this imperative lay the desire to occupy the emptied body of the Republic, and to generate meaning within its interior.” (Rafael Rojas, 158)

self-consumptive machine that blindly follows a mechanism of its own, in spite of its bodies, then Piñera's recalcitrant rejection of the *Orígenes* group, and to a great extent his fiction considered as a whole, could be understood as the key of a clinical diagnosis of this point of radical evacuation, - the group was performing its own repetition as original, and they were thus condemning Cuban culture as an encyclopedic over-accumulation of the Same, a repetitive richness of a reified 'originality' that betrayed a radical poverty. Again, this Sameness, personified here by the name Arthur, displays its risible and grotesque performativity:

Many times I have wondered why we do not all call ourselves by the same name, for example, Arthur. Arthur arrived from M. and meets Arthur, tells him about how Arthur was involved with Arthur but now Arthur has buried Arthur, which is not a barrier to Arthur's throwing a party at which tens of Arthurs will converge. This "Arthurity" imperils our literature. [ . . . ] (*Cuba and Literature*, 93-94)

The literary space in *Rene's Flesh* can consequently be understood as unfolding from the insight of the teleological imbroglio in which both the *Orígenes* group, and in all probability Piñera himself, were inextricably involved: if a discursive outside is always posited, performatively, negatively and therefore precariously, as an outside *from* a constraining inside, and always in itself presupposes an inside into which it nonetheless risks to be engulfed, then any literary movement is eventually 'doomed' to constitute inadvertently its own engulfing inside, distancing, outwardly projecting as a threat what it nonetheless introjects in the name of a salutary promise.<sup>329</sup> To the extent that this novel can be conceived of as a symptom of this situation and the literary solutions proposed in his time to the recurring problems aforementioned, on how they were being posited and thereafter performed as excremental

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<sup>329</sup> For a relevant discussion of the parallel between this logic and the conditions of production under late capitalism, see Fredric Jameson's *Culture and Finance Capital*, where the author ties up this logic to the logic of finance capitalism.



‘outsides,’ embodying a reified repetition of their performative horizon, it is possible to detect a line of interpretational continuity between these concerns, the political dimension they presupposed, and the corporeal as a point of tension between questions about form and content, and how these inflected the literary space the dilemmas of which haunted the writer. Moreover, the affinity of such cultural concerns with the problem of founding the universality of a community on the irreducible nothingness of the *munus*, the *no one’s rose* that René embodies, becomes evident, once the relation is made clear between the social knavery that is laid bare in the novel, and the way this knavery *mirrors* the dynamics of transnational cultural exchange of which Cuban officialdom was keen to participate. In this sense, what the novel depicts, as does its photographic negative, is the moral flipside of the existing atmosphere of cultural policing the revolutionary *ethos* in communist Cuba. From this perspective, what the novel depicts is, therefore, the process of evacuation, the turning into an empty ritual, of this revolutionary *ethos*.

The novel tells the story of René, a young man who resists the systematic siege that the people professing the *Cause of the Flesh*- once the *Cause of the Chocolate*- have instituted against him. The story is told by means of a knavery organized around a transcending yet transient, dislocated, excremental instance, a solemn farce, sometimes described in the code of an international political intrigue, sometimes ciphered as a religious ritual, a paranoiac tale in which all characters gleefully perform their roles as if they followed a pre-established protocol. As in any farce, there is a constant play of mutual simulations and deceptions, but always done with the utmost appearance of seriousness and solemnity. This protocol proliferates, like a cancer, for it is the protocol of the Cause, which the characters must follow unquestioningly, just as much as it is the many protocols of reading that eat their way out of the reader’s bewildered

modernity. The knavery in the story is conducted in the name of an affirmation comprising a coercive status, for everyone belonging to the Cause- and who is not, since the Cause is universal, even if its struggles are today restricted to the city where the story unfolds?-must submit to this imperative of flesh consumption, which is *unconditionally to want their inclusion in it*, an inclusion that, for René, is otherwise restated, throughout the whole of the novel, as fatally impossible to elude. In doing so, the narration removes and puts into interplay issues of institutional authority, cultural legitimacy, subjective autonomy and authorial authenticity that resurface in different guises throughout the text to offer a constellation of meaning that, through the series of semantic avenues concentrating around the signifier *carne* [indistinctly ‘flesh’ and ‘meat’], organizes a space of intelligibility that mediates between readings already proposed for this text- a coming-of-age story of homoerotic self-acceptance, an allegory of fetishistic commodification of one’s body in a capitalistic society, a mere stylistic experiment that follows after European expressionist and existentialist vanguards, a mock *Bildungsroman*, or a rather bizarre sort of Foucauldian/Lacanian/post-structuralist allegory (the wandering play of the signifier, etc.). . . - readings that otherwise, as most have noted, frustrate each other.

The Cause seems to stand as the doubling sign upon which the ambiguity that inheres to the word ‘flesh’ in Spanish plays out: ‘carne’ indistinctly denotes both ‘flesh’ and ‘meat’. While flesh signifies what is epidermal, on the surface, ‘meat’ connotes that which lies beneath the flesh. But, while *carne* (as meat) is something devoid of any metaphysical reference, *carne* (as flesh) is ripe with such allusions. The author seems to deploy the word in this irreducible ambiguity: the actions around the signifier ‘carne’ evoke ostentatiously religious and political resonances that one can read throughout the text: there are a political party, conspiracies, murder

attempts, betrayals; the Cause is equally a priesthood, exercised with a fervor that impregnates the characters' motivations. For both, it is an absolute outside that arranges every relation among bodies in the stories. Nonetheless, the metaphysical kernel, 'the meat,' of the Cause is essentially indeterminable, it lacks depth as much as it lacks surface. It cannot be 'fleshed out,' penetrated, inasmuch as its 'meat' equally resists and entices consumption.<sup>330</sup>

The Cause is indifferently described as the cause of a political movement, or of a religion, but what is important to note is that it is invariably posited as an absolute transcending instance that structures and encloses the circulation of the characters and the roles they are assigned. Constant allusions are rife in a ruthless game being played out around simulations, intrigues, conspiracies, deceptions, jests, duplicities, in short a farce whose only reason is the consumptive enjoyment all the participants derive from being the accessories in a perverse sort of tag game: flesh that exists only in mutual collisions, lacerations and persecutions. This transcendent character necessarily seems to posit its own asphyxiating interiority, for, as the characters tirelessly repeat, *there is nothing outside the Cause*. The absurdity of this solipsistic situation entraps them into a circuit that bears all the signs of an automatism. During René's enquiries as to the nature, origin and purpose of the Cause, explanation after explanation follows as to its true designs, each of which is told in the tone of an authoritative, unquestionable truth. But, after each of those explanations, each of them also failed gestures toward an outside from the Cause, René, and the reader, is left with the inescapable conviction that the positing of any predicative determination accounting for the contents of the Cause, arguably the Flesh (or Chocolate), becomes confused with the subject, with the Flesh (or Chocolate) itself. The Cause of the Flesh is its own content: "The predicate of the subject 'man' is his flesh"; "All is flesh and

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<sup>330</sup> Elizabeth Austin explores exhaustively this aspect of Piñera's novel in "Unending Desire for Piñera's *La carne de René*", 50-64

nothing but flesh.” [“El predicado del sujeto ‘hombre’ es su ‘carne’; “Todo es carne y nada más que carne.”] (107)

Not even René can extricate himself from this solipsistic automatism: in the fifth chapter, titled *Pro-Carne*, on their way to the boarding school where René is to learn everything pertaining to the Cause, René’s equivocal mixture of terror and fascination, when presented by his father with an album representation of a monotonous infinite proliferation of his own self, is the realization that his *existence*, as a valuable member of the Cause, as much as the Cause’s existence itself, depends on a *training* based on *repetition*.<sup>331</sup> That he recognizes himself, in the album representations of his many selves, as essentially similar to himself, thanks to a ‘crude cosmetic operation,’ a retouching here and there, so to speak, is very telling. It is probably, more than just a comment of how the Cause’s noble values have been reified to the point of becoming a mere proliferation of samenesses- the Arthurity that imperils as much as it reaffirms the cause-, an index of how the future leader’s horror becomes inflected with this recognition- in the end, René’s doubles, representational and real, also point to the fact that he belongs also to the same Arthurity. Said otherwise, one should not take for granted the authenticity of René’s dismay seeing himself in those pictures- seeing himself, in his uniqueness, being repeated ad infinitum, in religious, sacrificial representations or, later, in doubles supplanting him- since it bespeaks its own fakeness. This uncanny, fascinating sameness owes to this horror that there is something not quite befitting him, something not quite the same as himself, in those images. For sameness to be uncanny there must be an irreducible difference subtending and destabilizing it, however virtual. While narcissistically identifying himself with his own sameness, he affirms himself essentially

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<sup>331</sup> “ The mouth filled with a word and he experimented the anguished sensation that he was suffocating. That word was: repetition. [ . . . ] By repetition they wanted to convince him, and by repetition they wanted to get him used to the Cause.” Piñera, 51.

as different from the others, but this difference, in the pictures of himself, is literally a deformed and deforming intimate outside of himself. It is as if the only way for him to be able to reaffirm, throughout the whole of the novel, this uniqueness, is for it to be put at peril, once and again, by these proliferations.

In regard to this automatism, it is also important to note that no psychological insight is offered for the motivations of the characters, only that they follow through with the strict mandates of the Cause: to persecute and be persecuted, to persecute the persecutors, in the same way the characters are being persecuted. The characters' psychology, including René's, cannot be 'fleshed out,' arguably because there is no 'meat' in them. They are only pastiche-like elements of this pendular movement in which the roles of persecuted and persecutors alternate, even though they are compelled to act 'as if' they were obeying their desires, 'as if' they really wanted what in reality they are quite sick of. To any question by René as to the contents of the Cause- to Dalia, Ramón, the Powlavski/Nieburg couple, the Cause's functionaries, Cochón, Mármolo, Bola de Carne ('Meatball,' probably an allusion to the big Lezama himself?)- the answers are invariably the same: that is not the right question to ask, it is a naïve question. At most, they embody the intensity of their own mode of reverence for the Cause, their uncanniness hinges on their fake dermality, as if they only intensely affected their motivations, or lack thereof. The Cause needs, for its subsistence, a series of representational metastases of monotonous repetitions, just as the individual characters professing the Cause needed for their sense of existence the intensive circularity of incessant relays of persecutions, collisions, and escapades.

Early on, in the first chapter, we learn that the circulation of flesh in the market takes place by virtue of a morbid enjoyment. A bizarre consumptive logic is instituted in relation to this flesh, and it is obeyed as an imperative that performs a monotonous automatism that is, using Deleuze's nomenclature, *molar*.<sup>332</sup> The opening paragraph introduces a scene in the butchery, where the "human tide" [*la marea humana*] avidly and joyfully makes a long line, waiting for its turn to get its ration of meat. The market bears the name *La Equitativa*- alluding to some sort of democratic, yet strangely tyrannical distribution of meat. (Interestingly, Virgilio has also described the "conventional truth" of the textbook that is Cuban literature, as 'being administered by rations.'<sup>333</sup>) At this unsightly spectacle of the distribution and consumption, René sickens. Mrs. Dalia Pérez dismays in watching René fainting, flesh so "exposed promised enjoyments to whatever flesh having the joy of *possessing* it in the path of its life."<sup>334</sup> The presence of Ramón, René's father, in the meat market, is due to his "remarkable liking for meat, a preference so passionate that constitutes *a priesthood*, a dynasty, something that is transmitted from father to son [ . . . ]"<sup>335</sup> References to this sanctifying enjoyment occur throughout the whole text. Almost at the end of the story, Mrs. Pérez again admonishes René to put his flesh to enjoyment- "If I were you, little darling, I would make that flesh enjoy" ["Yo que usted, tesorito, pondría esa carne a gozar"]-<sup>336</sup> suggesting that the irreducibility of the double topography between sense and nonsense, between the flesh and the proper name that alleges its possession, finds a point of

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<sup>332</sup> A term the precise meaning of which Deleuze does not clarify, but which one may assume to have a metaphorical value: *molarity*, in chemistry, is the mechanism that describes the laws of concentration in a liquid- particles move from a more to a less concentrated medium; in the end there is a quantitative stasis due to their dynamic random collisions, a balance that does not alter the chemical properties of the whole. A molecular mechanism, by contrast, is one in which there is a qualitative transformation in the result; a different 'machine' results from the coupling and decoupling of other 'machines'.

<sup>333</sup> "Manuals constantly proliferate, since, as the years go by, one repeats the other and, in addition, *adds its ration of conventional truth*." Piñera, *Cuba and Literature*, 90.

<sup>334</sup> Piñera, 11.

<sup>335</sup> Piñera, 10.

<sup>336</sup> Piñera, 225.

contact in the automatism of an unconditional wanting and a resulting consumptive enjoyment, which is where any interpretational intelligibility mediating this impasse is at all possible. René's flesh, we are told, only has sense in its being confronted, in its collisions against other flesh.<sup>337</sup> This priesthood of a hypostasized knowledge is later on alluded to again, regarding Cochón's 'Theology of the Flesh'. Interestingly, James Pancrazio has established a suggestive connection between this consumptive logic, the *canonization* of Cuban writers, particularly under the *Origenistas'* influence, and the wrestling between the axes of temporality (narrative) and spatiality (poetry) within which this process takes place, something that the novel also seems to contain.<sup>338</sup> The canonization of René depends in this ritualized enjoyment, which seems to entail an acknowledgement of the spatializing privilege of the Cause's discourse- as it turns out, this "sanctity", in the end, will also "deflate in laughter."

At the end of the novel, René is told by one of the Cause's high functionaries at the *Headquarters of the Accosted Flesh* what his father had already told him:

At the moment, the Cause is in flight. At the moment, your role is that of retreat. Of course, always inflicting damage on the enemy. From your father's reports, we know that he explained to you in exhaustive detail the vicissitudes of the Cause and its present state. So there is no need for further explanations. But I certainly must make it clear to you that for us the order of the day is flight. We are the great pursued waiting to become the great pursuers. When that take place, we will hand over to those presently hunting us the complete norms and precepts of the pursued. They in turn will place in our hands the

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<sup>337</sup> Piñera, 208. "Don't fool yourself. There is only the collision between one meat and the other." ["No se haga de ilusiones. Sólo hay el choque de una carne con otra carne."]

<sup>338</sup> For example: "Como muy bien señala Rojas, el discurso poético de la isla consta de dos vertientes. El primero se centra en lo autóctono, lo propio, lo sincero y lo telúrico. Sus representantes son Manuel de Zenqueira, Juan Francisco Manzano, José Martí, Regino Boti, Emilio Ballagas y Cintio Vitier. El segundo enfatiza la ingravidez, el nihilismo, la artificialidad y la rareza. Y estas características suelen aparecer en la poesía de Manuel Justo de Rubalcava, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido), Julián del Casal, José Manuel Poveda, Eugenio Florit y Virgilio Piñera." (110)

entire archives of the hunter, and the battle for the flesh will continue without cease, forever and ever. The battle for the flesh is eternal. (233)<sup>339</sup>

The Cause, again, is explained as owing its existence to these incessant oscillations.

In the third chapter, we learn from Ramón that the origin of the Cause of the Flesh, of the interminable relay of persecutors and pursued ones, is due to a dispute over a ‘chunk of chocolate,’ described in terms reminiscent of a mythical origin, an origin whose temporality is stilled in an indeterminable once-upon-a-time: everything began *in illo tempore*, ‘many years ago,’ when the leader who now persecutes René’s father, after a bloody battle, finally vanquished the fierce chief who prohibited in his estates the consumption of chocolate.<sup>340</sup> The story of the cause is told in the manner of a genealogy that reminisces the logic of filiations and ruptures characteristic of the life of a national literary tradition, but also comes close to the capitalistic fairy tale of savage original accumulation, the interminable succession of relays that are the product of legacies and transitions within one generation and the symbolic assassinations and cleaning of slates declared and performed by succeeding ones. René’s father leaves no doubt that, even if they have been confined to this city at this moment, the Cause is international:

The Cause is world revolution. As long as it remains unrealized, we must serve it with arms. There is a chief. This chief, who betrayed the Cause, controls our country. He pursues us because we pursued him. His pursuit takes place *in* and *out* of that country. Your grandfather, who had the privilege of serving the chief who crushed the old chief,

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<sup>339</sup> Piñera, *René’s Flesh*. [“Por el momento, el papel de la Causa es la retirada. Por supuesto, siempre infligiendo daño al enemigo. Por los informes de su padre sabemos que explicó a usted exhaustivamente los vaivenes de la Causa y su posición actual. De modo que no es necesario entrar en mayores detalles. Eso sí, debo aclarar que somos los grandes perseguidos, a la espera de tornarnos en los grandes perseguidores. Cuando esto se produzca, entregaremos a nuestros actuales perseguidores el conjunto de normas y preceptos del perseguido; a su vez, ellos pondrán en nuestras manos los archivos del perseguidor, y la batalla por la carne proseguirá sin descanso por los siglos de los siglos.”] Unless otherwise stated, this will be the English edition referred to in all subsequent quotations.

<sup>340</sup> Piñera, 31.



spent the last ten years of his life pursuing his chief who, in turn, was pursuing him. (23-24)

While Ramón is that father who is also capable of taking his knavery to the extreme of a foolery- René sooner or later realizes that Ramón's "capacity for feigning could reach the dimensions of a foolery [*una payasada*]"<sup>341</sup>- René's more distant predecessors were the reputedly more genuine champions of the democratic consumption of Chocolate. The relation between the Cause of the Flesh and the Cause of the Chocolate, though it is far from clear, seems to replicate the Hegelian Master vs. Slave logic, for the Cause of the Chocolate seems split from inside, and the Cause of the Flesh seems to contain within itself its distant remnants, barely recognizable, and almost forgotten: there is not any other mention of the Cause of the Chocolate until the very last chapters. The reasons for the transformation of the Cause of the Chocolate to the Cause of the Flesh are given in an impassible transition that, again, is disturbingly derisive, if the reader, like René, attempts to look at it from a foolish outside of the economy of meaning of the deceiving, yet truthful textbook that is the novel: René is simply told that this transition took place thanks to a bitter dispute within the cause between René's grandfather and its leader- who wanted to prohibit the democratic consumption of chocolate. Thanks to the 'swings of international politics, [ . . . ] almost every government is [the current Chief's] partisan. (30). In order for the Cause of the Chocolate to be won, finally, another cause, that of the Flesh, has to go on, indefinitely. Maybe the point is precisely that an immanent automatism- a coming and going, a swinging, an oscillation that obeys blindly, performatively, some pleasure principle- is instituted in accordance to the mandates of an absolute, excremental, consumptive transcendence. In any case, Ramón lets his naïve son know that the ones who are persecuted for

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<sup>341</sup> Piñera, 158.

their democratic defense of the Cause of the Chocolate do not actually drink it, in fact, *they are sick of it*.<sup>342</sup> If, as Francisco Fernández de Alba has suggested, chocolate can be taken as the emblem of a cultural object of colonial, exploitative transactions, devoid of anything particularly nutritious or in any way essential for the health of a body, functioning as a mobilizing agent of struggles for emancipation, flesh, or its analog, body, may stand on the other hand as a catalyst for a sacrificial calculation that inheres the first: within the christening rules of the game called modernity, there is a constant trafficking of human bodies on which the cause of a cultural object- chocolate- depends. The Slave embodies (an authentic culture) and wants (what it lacks in terms of legitimation); conversely, the Master possesses (an autonomous, legitimating knowledge, arguably of that culture) and wills (the cultural Otherness that he otherwise disowns). They continue performing the defense of Universal Cause in which no one believes, whose objects are sickening to them- a sort of Hegelian bad infinite, in which the less they believe, the more ferociously they act ‘as if’ they still did.

*To Have or to Be a Body,*

Soon, René learns from his father that his ineluctable purpose in life is to be, in its due time, the leader of the Cause, after his father dies. Ramón takes René to The School of Pain; again, a school that was just “business, a by the book business”, and whose owners were in charge for the “good functioning of the establishment.”<sup>343</sup> There he meets Mármolo and Cochón, the ones in charge of the education and initiation of the pupils into the service of pain. *The School of the Suffering Flesh* is depicted as a respectable institution that has *very precise guidelines and protocols*. According to Mármolo, the head of the school, discipline in it is paramount, yet it simultaneously reveals its automatic character. In the chapter dedicated to the

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<sup>342</sup> Piñera, 33.

<sup>343</sup> Piñera, 89.

description of René's education- the one bearing the same title as the novel- this re-petitive monotony is conveyed in the form of a vinyl disk being repeatedly played for René's ears, paradoxically over the sacrosanct mandate of wanting [*querer*]:

Why do you not want? Do you not want because you want not to want? Do you want wanting, or do you want not wanting? How do you want? (Noise.) Do you want the noise to stop? No, you are unable to want: you've said it yourself: you don't want. Say along with us: I want, you want, he wants, we want, you want, they want. Now say them without the pronouns: want, want, wants, want, want, want. Repeat. René, repeat faster. [ . . . ] No René, don't think, don't ever think: only want, want, want. (85-86)

But what if he wants to think? What if René posits his thought as the expression of his willing? If, as Freud had noted, every compulsion to repetition is inherently religious/obsessive, insofar as it is a representational re-petition of an authorizing, transcendental instance that consumptively reintroduces the immanence of its transcending presuppositions, then it is not easy to ascribe to this law of wanting any truly Nietzschean index. It is so, to be sure, but only falsely, performatively, a Nietzsche turned into a Modernized Christ, an institutionalized Nietzsche.

These, the 'school days,' are a period during which he is submitted to the harsh disciplining and education in the hands of the preceptors. There, René becomes a 'case,' according to the professorate of the school. His flesh is *promising*, inasmuch as he resists receiving the "sacred bread of teaching." He is reminded that he is already *in* the Cause, its elected torch carrier, *on the condition that he does not belong to it, that he rejects it tirelessly, as he in effect does*. This unconditional rejection is predicated on a 'wanting to' whose unreservedness haunts and undermines the first:

Pulled bodily from his room and carried to class, he flatly refused to carry out the indicated exercise and even had the audacity to harangue his classmates. Brought before Marblo, he was given a dressing down. Marblo told him that his mistake was all the more serious since the Archimede's lever of this school was precisely the very word René was refusing to put into action. He added that everything, absolutely everything, depended and rested on the word "want"; that not to want did not exist in the school's vocabulary. (87)

As it turns out, René's adamant reluctance against the inculcation of those precepts is what makes him utterly strange, queer, baroque, in the eyes of Cochón. This is what scares Cochón- he decries René's "abnormality" and "eccentricity", probably yet another baroque *choteo* to the neo-baroque straightjacket his contemporaries seemed keen to perform: "Decidedly, René was abnormal, or better said, an eccentric. That was it, he was out of the center. He was bent on going against the grain of the suffering Flesh." (89) Paradoxical, for it is in reality René's resistance against this nihilist exercise of affirmation, not his acquiescence, which makes him baroque, and the body of this text which is *René's Flesh* is decidedly anti-baroque, if by that we understand the formulas for exuberance in cancerous circulation during the heyday of Lezama's sphere of influence, yet baroque, queer, strange, abnormal, in its illegal anti-baroque, against the stifling normality that a metastasized, prescriptive baroque à la Lezama probably imposed in the school of the Cause.

The antagonism between René and Cochón is as farcical and derisive as it is performative- since his authority and legitimacy, his sanctity, depend on convincing René that he submits to his version of a 'christened modernity'. It exposes Cochón as another 'frosted clown.' Again, this is a struggle configured around questions of authority and authenticity, or

otherwise of questions about the truthfulness or falsity of the Cause, but one that is unleashed on the basis of the efficacy of a repetitive exercise:

Repetitoin is efficacious, works miracles, but it has no effect on a madman. Crazy people are found in an insane asylum and not in a school for absolutely normal children. [ . . . ] – [to René] Swine whined. “Don’t you see they are going to make a monkey out of me if I fail with you? You can’t allow that to happen. Does my body mean so little to you? It’s certain death if I fail. NO, you wouldn’t let . . . No? You don’t want; I can see you don’t want . . . [ . . . ] No, don’t separate my face from yours. I’ll cry for all eternity on your face. If you’re so cruel to your teacher, it must be bewailed with tears. Look: I’m a dog that’s licking you. There’s nothing else for me to do. You’ve defeated me. My tongue is yours. I will lick you for all eternity. (97)

If ever there was a moment in the book in which “sanctity deflates in laughter” it is this one. René, the future leader of the Cause, rejects it with as much vehemence as that with which his educators accost him (maybe just as much as Piñera paranoically conceived of his contemporaries’ rejection as a ‘conspiracy’ concocted against him). For René’s is an “iron will” that “incited to indiscipline,”<sup>344</sup> someone who is implicitly destined to a higher purpose outside of the school, someone who may even overhaul the textbooks and manuals by which the School of the Suffering Flesh is run. But this iron will is predicated on a ‘not wanting to’. Within the school, he has to be this destabilizing element, in order for him to be the leader of the higher, distant, international, universal Cause of the Chocolate, even if everyone is sick of it. This is, precisely, the destiny that he has willfully, autonomously, to assume, by not wanting it. As Mármolo says, that is the *Gordian knot* that maintains Rene’s charm, his glow and aura as the (authentic) chosen one: Rene’s “[ . . . ] is a flesh that allows itself to think about itself, contrary to

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<sup>344</sup> Piñera, 89. Here is one of the few times where the narrator uses the word “voluntad” [will] in clear distinction to “querer” [to want].

the others that you find in the school. Here lies the Gordian knot. If someone cut this knot, the charm would be broken.” (120)

There are several instances in the school chapters that capture this paradoxical relation between the institutional, compulsive affirmation of a wanting to belong to the Cause of the Flesh, and the nay-saying that is nonetheless René’s “iron will,” a willing in the name of an autonomy and authenticity that René predicates, ontologically, as a becoming, as being ‘himself’ outside of the Cause. René is the most legitimate member of the Cause, but this depends of his constant subversion, derision, disauthorization and illegitimation of the Cause’s doctrinaires- his *choteo* is only a correlate of this other *choteo*, and the question of whose version is the truthful one remains open. Which one is the true *choteo* remains an undecided question, but what remains very clear is that both *choteos* depend on each other for their claims; ultimately, perhaps the question about the truth and falsity of the two *choteos* is poorly formulated.<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> It is interesting to note that Jorge Mañach, in his *Indagación del choteo* [*Enquiry on Choteo*], described two types of such behavior in Cuba, a deleterious, yet truthful one, and an innocuous, false one. The mixture of terms here is very significant: there is an obnoxious *choteo*, which for Mañach is nonetheless *the true one*, in the reductionist Eurocentric appropriation of the authority with which he talks about it; the healthy one is actually a false *choteo*, in that it is purely exterior, owing merely to vices or faults of attentions, namely unintentional: “[ . . . ] hay un choteo ligero, sano, casi puramente exterior, que obedece principalmente a *vicios o faltas de atención* derivadas de la misma psicología criolla, y otro choteo, más incisivo y escéptico, perversión acaso del anterior y originado en una verdadera quiebra del sentido de autoridad que antes analizábamos.” It should be noted that he also articulates the questioning around the true *choteo* in terms of authority, authenticity, autonomy and legitimacy. It is beside the scope of this essay, but an exhaustive study seems to be lacking on the question of the role of *choteo* as a genuinely literary topic, as a literary affect or at least an interstitial discourse in its own right, deserving of critical attention, during this period, not only in Cuba, but also in Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, since Mañach reduces the significance of the phenomenon to the merely popular, the folkloric, the anecdotal, or at best, as an ethnographic or anthropological curiosity. Mañach slights the analytic import of the semantic richness of the word- to talk too much, to betray, to deride in a particularly disrespectful way- opposing them in a rather non-dialectical manner. Writers such as Severo Sarduy, Cabrera Infante, Reynaldo Arenas, Virgilio Piñera, to mention perhaps the most prominent, more or less contribute to the same literary formalization of what originated as a ‘colloquial,’ largely ‘rural’ phenomenon, what Mañach alternatively characterizes as a ‘laughter without route’ or a ‘laughter without object’. The fact that all of these writers, all great *choteadores*, consummate masters of the truly *literary choteo*, were in their youth *guajiros perdidos*, province dwellers who move to the city in the look for better prospects, adds weight to this idea. Mañach, Jorge. “Indagación del Choteo”.

As Cochón and Mármolo constantly repeat, in order to succeed in the school and become a respectable member of the Cause, one only ought *to want/to will* [hay que *querer*]. With the semantic ambiguity flesh/meat that activates the series of situational equivoques in the story, regarding the Cause's precise status, and the power relations that become fixed in a specific set of mock legitimations and authorizations, there seems to overlap yet another point of ambivalence, namely the one surrounding the binary to will/to want: in a similar fashion with which the author manages the signifier *carne*, to explode the ever oscillating distinction between immanence and transcendence, he chooses to resort indistinctly to the rather ambiguous Spanish *querer* (which can equally mean *to desire, to want, to volition* or *to will* ) therewith compounding the organization of meanings when related with the first pair, since it is ultimately impossible to determine how much disinterested, authentic will there is in the characters' wanting to belong to the Cause, or how much wanting there is in their will of embodiment or, put simply, how much the characters' performances of authority-wanting betrays a lack of authentic will, and how much of René's seemingly autonomous, embodying will puts in reserve a disavowed, interested toward seeking legitimacy.

To belong, to be included in this otherwise international, dislocated Cause, René only had to will it, by not wanting it, the text seems to suggest. They, following Cochón's convictions, endorsed and praised by Mármolo, were to become, like many others, "modernized Christs, with a face of happiness; softened, beaten, pulverized, compressed, but modern, always modern."<sup>346</sup> This insistent allusion to a grinding modernization at any cost is as interesting as it is puzzling, since René's only relation with the norms and precepts of the Cause is exclusively predicated on how intensely he flees from them, when he is manifestly destined to be its leader. He is not

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<sup>346</sup> Piñera, 95.

modern, to the extent that he refuses to have his will pulverized by the grinding machinery of modernization but, by refusing it, he is actually complying with the manifest destiny as the carrier of this Christly, modernizing cause. The core of the problem seems therefore to lie in René's refusal to be a *modernized Christ*; he dares to declare himself in "allegiance to the ancient way."<sup>347</sup> He also refuses to give away *his most precious possession*: "his body was his sacred property and nobody had the right to desecrate it." This rebuttal re-positions the ambiguity between wanting and willing in direct, univocal alignment with a dialectics of having and being, arguably between *having a body* and *being a body*.<sup>348</sup> To *have* a body means to entertain an attitude of separation between the body and the knowledge of the body; whereas to *be* a body entails an acknowledgement of the inseparability between the two.

As Austin has noted, René's is a paranoid refusal to 'play the game'. How can this refusal be understood from the standpoint of the game that was, also, the ideological game- between Capitalism and Communism- that was being played internationally? Literary creation within the constraints of the *Origenistas* was depicted by Piñera as an already empty cultural game. Such was the game that he at once refused and wanted to play, a deceptively joyful affirmation of Nothing, an 'Arthurity' played around the semantic vacuum that the word 'modernity' might have had for him. But the economy of the text, this empty game, this 'Arthurity,' was also the game that defined the lines of a knavery. The novel concludes with René's tacit, if equally reluctant submission to the Cause. But this submission is all the more perplexing for the reader,

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<sup>347</sup> Piñera, 95.

<sup>348</sup> Hegelian resonances here are impossible to ignore, since they impinge on the Nietzschean paradox of affirmation that weaves into Piñera's narrative: throughout the whole of *The Phenomenology of Mind*, a distinction is marked between two words that, in Spanish, could indistinctively denote *querer* (*to want/to will*): *Begierde/Lust*, to want, seems to allude to a purely instinctual mechanism, a pleasure principle in the service of (self-) consumption that is nihilistic in nature, as much as it is narcissistic; by comparison, *Willen*, inscribes drive in the ontological domain, where the subject recognizes itself in its predicates, and therefore as implicated in the principled objectifications of his reality, connoting the will of becoming (embodying) a desire, an intensity where wanting, the nihilistic, death-bent drive, turns back upon itself.



since it is done, like many intellectuals at both sides of this ideological battle did in their moment, without the least conviction, out of a quest for sheer survival. Moreover, this acquiescence is in the end ideologically indeterminate, for it signifies a point of entrance into the very space of co-transparency with regards to *death drive* that obtains between Capitalism and state Communisms. From this standpoint, the problem seems to be not whether René's escapades are genuine, but rather how they are, together with his fascination, ideologically charged through and through, whether his denials incarnate an (by definition unconscious) institutional acknowledgement and instrumentation of an 'ideological interpellation.'<sup>349</sup> Both René's refusal and fascination are indistinctly instrumentalized in the name of his ideological subjectivation. The last lines of the story perplex the reader for its mock-triumphalist tone in what is otherwise a rather anticlimactic and disappointing defeat- and it provokes, again, considerations as to its paradoxical nature. After being weighed, one of the old men who minister the Cause of the Chocolate, comments approvingly about René's body: "Your flesh is going well. It has gained two pounds and a half." ["Su carne marcha. Ha aumentado dos libras y media." (226)] This sounds more like the obscenely optimistic declaration of a team of entrepreneurs with regard to a joint financial venture- *All goes well!* If culture is just a by-the-book business, in whose international dimension a sacrificial game is instituted around the putting into circulation of bodies and languages, then René's escapades and entrapments are always already part of the same game where eroticism and nationalism become each other's symptom, whose blind knotting is this strangely unfathomable 'body'.

At first sight, Piñera seems an odd candidate for a scientific poetics of the Marxian kind. More concerned with a schizoid narrative understanding of the functioning of the international

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<sup>349</sup> Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. (Notes toward an investigation)," 127-86.

mechanisms of cultural mercantilism within a capitalist paradigm, rather than with the obsessive enactment of these dispositives in their ideological subsumption, and perhaps more invested in the narrative “design of the structural laws of the whole” than in the “particulars of reality”, Piñera could nonetheless be positioned along the same *hiperic*, totalizing will that, in his time, José Martí opposed to the decadent, particularistic trend that hegemonized Latin American realities in his time. In this sense all particularistic interpretations for this novel miss the mark. In it, one can verify the same spirit, in his concern for the ‘bestial forces’ of modernization, the same fascinated terror for the ‘animal energy’ that mobilized, then and there, a human wave of bodies at the service of a savage Capitalism.<sup>350</sup> One can see also how this ‘animal energy’ is put at work within State Communisms, at the service of a production of the New Man. It strikes me as an interesting connection that this novel’s relation with pain enacts in very similar terms what, in the context of the incipient modernization in the Americas, Ángel Rama described as “ the relation [between] the animalism of the images and the power of human voluntarism thrown into an incessant, relentless, *offensive-defensive* activity,”<sup>351</sup> since this painful animality “ is the recognition of a relation of production, an exchange in a market of offer and demand, an analysis of the singularity of the productive machine that is the man-poet.”<sup>352</sup> It is perhaps the idea of the poet-martyr (poet-witness) such as Rama articulates it around his reading of José Martí, that Piñera also sets forth in a fleshing-out that cannot but open up an interstitial narrative code that

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<sup>350</sup> Rama, Angel. “José Martí en el eje de la modernización poética: Whitman, Lautréamont, Rimbaud,” 96-135. “A la obra de los poetas “hipéricos” competía el diseño de las estructuras, merced a un trazado global y sintético que las situaba en la máxima jerarquía simbólica de la cultura. De hecho, lo que tales obras representaban no eran los particulares de la realidad, sino las leyes de funcionamiento del conjunto. Registrando el uso de palabras extranjeras por Whitman, anota: “ensemble, sobre todo, le seduce, porque él ve el ciclo de la vida de los pueblos y de los mundos” 21. Pueblos y mundos, espíritu y materia, hombre y naturaleza: gracias al paralelismo entre la psiquis humana y el orden de la naturaleza al cual ella pertenece, esa visión global del universo era también el registro de la dinámica psíquica.” (109-110)

<sup>351</sup> Rama, 111. [ “la relación del animalismo de las imágenes y la potencia del voluntarismo humano arrojado a una actividad incesante, sin tregua, ofensiva-defensiva. ” ]

<sup>352</sup> Rama, 118. [ “es el reconocimiento de una relación de producción, un canje en un mercado de oferta y demanda, un análisis de la singularidad de la máquina productiva que es el hombre-poeta de acuerdo con las pautas de una determinada sociedad y época.” ]

exacts an equally interstitial reading, a code that is always a part of the process of decoding, if it is to measure up to the totalizing will of a subject refusing to be fleshed-out so easily by an all too egalitarian butchery.

Indeed, for as long as cultural representations of Cubanness or Latin Americanness replicate the workings of this savage machinery, following the logic of a sort of cultural *latifundismo*, a single-crop financial venture for international export, as long as culture is seen as a homogeneous, hegemonized body that gets fat of its own self, in order later to be consumed by a metropolitan Other, in a quasi-religious ritual bearing the features of a grotesque dance of a slave offering his cultural flesh in solemn sacrifice to the epistemic oblations of a hungry master, then all “will go well.” The Christening cause of a will-grinding modernization will go on indefinitely, the expiatory “act of faith” [*auto de fe*], the nihilist *Arthurity* around its defense and propagation perpetuated, in the name of an all too democratic traffic of that exquisite cultural good, that collection item called Latin American literature, even if its proponents and defenders, “condemned to mere gesticulation”<sup>353</sup>, are actually sick of it. Concurrently, and to some extent against the grain of Antonio Cándido’s understanding of a “superregional consciousness”,<sup>354</sup> in which the Latin American subaltern will supposedly have “shed its skin”, for as long as the paradoxical workings of cultural subalternity are not narrated in their problematic constitutiveness, from the “lost paradise” of any beautiful soul, fool enough to dare to ‘transcend’ this ‘inferno,’ only the morsels of an album of his always already branded, fleshed-out anatomy will remain, perhaps only for others to consume joyfully.

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<sup>353</sup> Piñera, *Cuba and Literature*, 100. “We wanted to enter into the grand tradition of grand letters, but how would we be recognized? With horror we noticed that to the extent that the days passed and the rugged crest of the forties reared over our heads, our language turned into stuttering and our life pure gesticulation. Between those who are satisfied with the formula and the rebels against the same, there was this common stutter: the satisfied one stuttered more and better to the extent that he repeated said formula, while the rebel, desperate by virtue of the nothingness before which he had to compete, retired to the back of his room and burst into tears.”

<sup>354</sup> Cándido, Antonio. “Literature and Underdevelopment”, 119-41.

In speaking of Sigmund Freud as an artist for the future, Piñera touches on the question of dreams, of their truth and its representations, and how these representations are ineluctably destined to become, also, another dream.<sup>355</sup> He tacitly touches on the question of knowledge's exchange-value: as if he meant to imply that statist Communisms depended, after all, on Capitalism's relentless forms and codes of knowledge-production and circulation, to posit itself as its interpreter. After all, Communism, as a stable continent of theoretical practice the more or less explicit ethical thrust of which obeyed the teleology of its *ulterior* political instrumentalization, depends as well on the very illusion of meaning effected by the logic of exchange and, necessarily, the creation of surplus-knowledge. This brings us head on to the corporeal dimension of the question regarding the distinction between truth and lie that the novel constantly unravels, when it is examined from the viewpoint of the communist state's ideological apparatuses' uncontrollable process of extirpating to the very last remnants, as if it was a cancerous mass necessarily irreducible to any use-value for the revolutionary cause, the capitalist core lurking *within* the communist subject, where the veritably *cannibalizing* drive of knowledge production was turned relentlessly against any formal index betraying the signs of hedonist expenditure (that is, consumption that is not, in any way conceivable within the dictates of the Communist Party regarding economic and cultural activity, productive for the cause of the Revolution). In the paranoia that instills the novel's storyline with a sense of being a college textbook (or following the template of a *Bildungsroman*, as Arrufat and others conceived of it)<sup>356</sup> that is promising some otherwise ever retreating truth and threatening to be already a lie, this novel can be seen as enacting many of Piñera's anxieties and ambiguities, in relation to the

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<sup>355</sup> Piñera, Virgilio. "Freud and Freud".

<sup>356</sup> Arrufat, Antón. "La carne de Virgilio." For a more comprehensive catalogue of critical readings under the same interpretive vein, see endnote. 1, of Austin's *Unending Desire for Piñera's La Carne de René*, p. 60-61.

legitimacy of his place in the much derided, non-existent place of Cuban letters to which he belonged by not belonging. But these anxieties of a cultural affair, the petty politics and innuendoes that it narrates acquire their full allegorical import only when they are put in parallax tension with the transposition from the political deadlocks regarding these same concerns, the historical repetition of which the novel enacts.

His infamy as a recalcitrant ‘nay-sayer’ is significant on this account.<sup>357</sup> When reading this novel, one should keep in mind that it was at any rate an ambivalent and paradoxical nay-saying, structured around the author’s particularly contradictory understanding of this situation, a ferocious ‘nay’ that was probably done in the name of a Nietzschean transcending affirmation to come. The poetic voice’s despair about suffering from the “damned circumstance of being surrounded from all sides by water”,<sup>358</sup> an ocean also described as a *cancer* in *La isla en peso*, may be interesting on this account. By displaying a set of parallelisms between a space that is fake, constricted and ‘pastiche-like,’ while it tells a felling, cancerous truth, this novel calls for some pondering about both the ideological ambivalence surrounding the truth/lie binary that a critical understanding of this space through the lens of its performative character commands, and the constitutive inconsistencies of a man of letters who could not conform to the current ideological rules of the cultural game, but who could not *not* conform to them either, as much as he wanted to belong and extricate himself from that game. If, as one of the Cause’s functionaries in the novel has said, this lettered man “fled Scylla, only to fall into the hands of Caribdis”,<sup>359</sup> maybe it was because, “in a battle so uncommonly huge between the lie and the truth, there was *not a* demarcation line: they were both instruments that, depending on the case, served the

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<sup>357</sup> See Cintio Vitier’s *Lo cubano en la poesía*.

<sup>358</sup> Piñera, *La isla en peso*.

<sup>359</sup> Piñera, *La carne de René*, 88.

strategy of the Cause.”<sup>360</sup> Unlike any other writer of his generation, Piñera’s novel forces the reader to tackle the double ethical impossibility of constituting a reality without planting the seeds of meaning for a dream that will haunt the future with its forgotten remnants, and of becoming a subject of the unconscious, without subverting and even undoing the hierarchical order of these registers. If this is true, then one feels compelled to think that, like the rigorous, methodic, scientific, yet no less fabulous interpreter that he envisioned in Freud, this novel announces a new kind of contractual relation between the writer and its reader, where “the statue [the reader] has sculpted [of the text; of the author?] is more disquieting, strange, and mysterious than the model [ . . . ] that it will inevitably lead us to other dreams, to other disquietudes, to other mysteries.”<sup>361</sup> Perhaps, in the pursuit of a cause that, in its asphyxiating immanence, has lost all meaning, the utopian preserving of the trace of this demarcation line is ultimately what is put at stake in the novel, in what the author describes, quite explicitly, as a pleasure principle, the beyond of which seems to be unattainable but which, for that very reason, ends up being posited as an essential piece for the heralding of the promise for some narrative meaning, making all the more urgent a quest for its recuperation, if only on the condition that it is a beyond always to come, a dream in whose consecution the reader dares to get his hands dirty.

If the coming forms of the Baroque will be without the forms of the State, the Nation and Capital, the coming community can only be rizomatic, de-centered, and nomadic. The one that deserves to be called truly Communist, that is to say, where the distinctions between form and content, proper and improper, inside and outside are no longer going to be dealt with in the violent bio-political self-immunizations. In other words, the coming community will only have to

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<sup>360</sup> Piñera, Virgilio. *La carne de René*, 213.

<sup>361</sup> Piñera, “Freud and Freud.”, 117-118.

be a *baroque community*. These words are not going to be tied to any meaning that designates the genealogy of a community- it will be a community without legitimacy or authority. A family of outcasts, of orphans, and nomads, it will also have to be a community without autochthony or autonomy, without culture.

#### Part IV: The Paradox of Enjoyment

The point of *la traversée du fantasme* is not to get rid of *jouissance* (in the mode of the old Leftist Puritanism): The distance toward fantasy means, rather, that I, as it were, “unhook” *jouissance* from its *phantasmatic* frame and acknowledge it as that which is properly undecidable, as the indivisible remainder that is neither inherently reactionary, the support of historical inertia, nor the liberating force that enable us to undermine the constraint of the existing order.

Slavoj Zizek, “I hear you with my eyes,” in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Zizek, Slavoj. “I hear you with my eyes”, in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*,



*What is left of the Latin American Left*

How can a paradox of enjoyment be articulated as a political problem for the Lettered City in Latin America? For emancipatory politics in Latin America has largely been tied, from its colonial origins, to the problem of *casting a gaze* that was also an act of *lending a voice* to that oppressed other, a voice, whose effects of meaning are supposed to be mediated by the authoritative interpretation carried out by the Lettered City. Its only means of legitimacy have to emanate from the semblance of truth that offers this mediated gaze.<sup>363</sup> Articulated within the constraint of these terms, the question of subjective representation as such presents itself as a deadlock: The *silent voice* of the victimized Other, as a voice that comes as the mute witnessing of its own suppression, necessitates the imaged form of its previous silencing, by way of a particular *gaze* cast on the Other by an authority emanating from the one who possesses the word, the knowledge- this is the calamitous tradition of religious humanism started by Bartolomé de las Casas and which lingers even today in different forms. This terrified gaze (of misery, of dispossession, etc.) *will have been* construed as *voice*, one which could only be given positive effectiveness through a translation that is also, inevitably, a betrayal.

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<sup>363</sup> The instances where the Latin American intellectual's projects of political emancipation reveal themselves as an act of *donation of voice and visibility* are many. In other words, it invokes the fundamental question of inter-subjective representation, that is, of knowing, or pretending to know, 'what the other wants' (What Lacan has in mind when he invokes the phrase *Che vuoi?*- "What do you want?"), a gesture that always underscores something in the order of miss-recognition and imposture. See, for example, Jáuregui's acute analysis of Bartolomé de las Casas' dispute in the Spanish Courts, through José Martí's paternalist and condescending language regarding the 'mute' Indians, to Che Guevara's Christ-like, avant-gardist rhetoric of "descent" and of "leading the oppressed masses on the revolutionary path". (Jáuregui, *Cannibalia*)

At its simplest, the question this chapter sets out to answer can therefore be posed as follows: Is it possible to postulate the existence of an enjoyment *of* the Left that is simultaneously *outside* the automated dialectics of consumptive enjoyment, and beyond any subjective configuration that proposes its objects as fundamentally unnamable outside this immanence of cultural consumption? Can things be given a name, that is, can a situation be *affirmed* as a situation the possibility of which lies outside the cartography delineated by the traffic of bodies and languages that the cultural space imposes?

The fundamental point is that this colonial gaze cast upon the colonized other, can only be considered, in due justice, as being totally grafted to the excess that generates this anamorphic dynamism. This anamorphism is that gaze which also depends on the dialectical correlate of a donated voice coming, as a terrifying gift that returns from the colonized Other, in the abject form of a monstrous obscenity, an insult, an offense, a blasphemy. This will be the object of analysis in this last chapter. Whenever there is re-presentation there is violence,<sup>364</sup> and the religiosity that these terms connote should not surprise anyone: religion comes into play whenever there is ‘something’ in the Other that needs to be designated as ‘sacred,’ in order for this Other to *exist* effectively for the subject as a phantasmal effect of language, an undecidable ‘something’ which any epistemological concoction of this ‘Other,’ as such, necessitates.

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<sup>364</sup> Political authority, needless to say, was also one of the issues at hand in Early Modern thinkers’ attempt at disengaging politics from theology. The modern concept of *authority* was the late inheritor of the primitive Roman Catholic obfuscation of the Roman *auctoritas* with Greek philosophy, which lacked a political tradition in the properly Roman sense. As Hanna Arendt remarks, Greek philosophy lacked a concept for *philosophical tradition* or (even less) of *philosophical authority*, at least in the agricultural sense in which the Romans understood those terms (that is, in intimate connection with the land and land toiling and cultivation, but also to lines of blood filiation). It was the Roman unwarranted application of the concept of *tradition* (associated to the cult of the dead ancestry)- which was originally used in exclusive reference to political authority-, in relation to philosophical endeavor that originated the confusion between philosophical tradition and political authority that has endured until today. See Arendt, Hanna. “What is Authority”.

As the case of the Brazilian woman illustrates, what seems to have sustained the leftist intellectuals' determination and strength while facing their torturers, was a sense of moral superiority, a certain way of *seeing things* that implies- in the form of a subversive *return of the enjoying gaze to the one who cast it*, and a particular truth of a given configuration of things this act of seeing renders in return visible- the overturning of the humanist/bourgeois hierarchy of signs, orienting their investments around the signifier *dignity*.<sup>365</sup> A retracement of this signifier, which, Agamben reminds us, is etymologically retraceable to the ancient Roman military origins of *rank* (and therefore of a superior form of *autoritas*), and should involve such a kind of new rehearsal of a politically militant subjectivity. What is the Latin American intellectual capable of articulating in terms of a gaze of this sort of subverting that means a dialectical re-positioning with regards to *jouissance*? What, in short, can the Latin American intellectual *see* and *say*, today, that is fundamentally *transversal* to the enjoying principle of the homicidal supremacism that seems to lurk beneath any anamorphic re-presentation of the oppressed Other, that is, as alternately angelic *and* monstrous?

What the intellectual of the Left should learn to see today, if the word "Left" is to reassert whatever remains of its truth-value, is something that has to do with what could be termed a *double spectacle*, where the contingent, singular content is present with all sorts of signs that act as a screen that comes to inundate with a labyrinth of mirrors the invariant form of an *old battle*. What are the features of this gaze? It certainly has the features of a circus, a carnival, which is

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<sup>365</sup> Consider, for example, the reason constantly invoked by victims of torture as to how they endured so much pain without giving out their friends: "Simply because *we knew* we were in a *superior moral* position," as if there was a sense of superiority, a trans-temporal sense of *dignitas*, that transcended any moment of impotence and humiliation-equalizing all terms at the level of class, gender, and sex, yet differentiating them at the level of justice, truth, love, etc.

paradoxically performed with the solemnity and sacredness of a religious service. What renders the position of the intellectual so unbearably painful and, in a way shameful today, is that there is something in the order of impotence in this experience: in order to be master of the situation, in order to have *autoritas*, it has to be the impotent one, the *delegitimized* one. In order not to be taken for a fool, he has to enact, for the Other, as the truth of a message returned in its inverted form, the situation of foolery into which this knowing forces him. How does this translate into a literary act?

## Variations on Culturalist Nationalisms in Puerto Rico, or “That Orgy of Brutal Appetites, Under the Veil of a Loutish Superstition ”

Repetition in history does not signify the recurrence of the same events, for repetition is possible only in terms of *form* (structure), and not *event* (content). As Freud wrote, the compulsion to repeat marks the return of the repressed that can never be remembered; instead of being remembered, it is repeated in the present.”  
Kojin Karatani, *History and Repetition*.<sup>366</sup>

### I. *Traversing the Phantasms of Culture*

How can we come to a historical understanding of the Lacanian formalizations of gaze and voice which would serve the task of addressing the message ciphered in the terrifying demand coming from an Other, whose monstrosity and abjection is, after all, the disavowed hard kernel of anything that pertains to whatever remains of the ‘aura’ of a cultural artifact?<sup>367</sup> How would this understanding in turn inflect our readings of contemporary counter-canonical cultural production in the Caribbean, by reminding us about the formal supplement that returns in their novel singularity? The pages that follow represent an attempt to enquire into the possible meaning today of the superposition of the two discourses that have historically determined the activity of the Latin American lettered class, at a moment in the history of Puerto Rican literature, where the ideological pitfalls inherent to the re-incidence of these forms in counter-canonical literary practices is likely to remain unquestioned.<sup>368</sup> More concretely, the

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<sup>367</sup> For a clarification of the concepts of gaze and voice, such as these terms are being used here, see Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.

<sup>368</sup> These two hegemonic discourses are, respectively, the early modern, legal/ethnographic construal of the American Other alternatively as monstrous and devouring, and the eventual subsumption of this colonial dialectics

argumentation that I pursue in these pages runs along two parallel lines of inquiry: by putting into dialogue the way the excremental objects of gaze and voice play out in tandem with the Marxist notion of class struggle, in the emblematic work of two already canonized figures of Puerto Rican literature, Luis Rafael Sánchez's novel *Macho Camacho's Beat*, and Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá's urban chronicle *Cortijo's Wake*, I first seek to place in the foreground the anamorphisms operating in the historical production of the ethnographic tropes of the savage cannibal, or more generally the colonized Other, as these tropes recur in the narrative practices of both authors.<sup>369</sup> As a second theme, I attempt to articulate the overlay of this anamorphism onto the splitting that informed the representation of the nineteenth century *letrado*, when the cartographic gestures of the journalistic chronicle and the aimless meanderings of the street stroller became the two contending terms in a dialectics of representation that was the result of attempts to respond to the enigma posed by the importation of European industrial Capitalism into the American continents (Ramos, *Divergent Modernities*).<sup>370</sup> By considering how the

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of monstrosity into the modernist attempts at addressing the enigma posed by the lingering colonial contradictions involved in the importation of European industrial capitalism into the American landscape. For a more detailed account of the historical succession of these master discourses and their over-determining relation to literary production see González-Echevarría, Roberto. *Myth and Archive*. It is significant that González argumentation throughout the book runs along the question about the nature of contemporaneous forms of hegemonic discourse over-determining literary production in the region.

<sup>369</sup> The concept of anamorphism here I draw as well from Lacan's formulations in his Seminar 11. Here I also thread closely upon Carlos Jáuregui's observations regarding the rhetorical construction of the American cannibal as partaking of the uncanny hybridity that pertains specifically to the *aporiae* of race, sex and gender. For example, with regards to gender: "The American activation of the classical and medieval European imaginary is equally significant in the [American] cannibal and the continent's feminization. The cannibalism associated by the first *conquistadores* to the Caribbean bellicosity, and later to code of honor, vengeance, and male warlike activity, [ . . . ] was nonetheless first and foremost represented with feminine figures. To represent the American Other, there was frequent recourse to the teratological imagination of sexual roles."<sup>369</sup> [My translation and emphasis] (Jáuregui, *Canibalia*, 115)

<sup>370</sup> I specifically refer to the connection between the anamorphisms of the gaze at the colonized Other, and the fetishistic disavowal that presuppose it, as it has been suggested by Homi Bhabha: "[For] fetishism is always a 'play' or vacillation between the archaic affirmation of wholeness/similarity. [ . . . ] Within discourse, the fetish represents the simultaneous play between metaphor as substitution (masking absence and difference) and metonymy (which contiguously registers perceived lack). [ . . . ] For the scene of fetishism is also the scene of the reactivation and repetition of primal fantasy- the subject's desire for a pure origin that is always threatened by its division, for the

psychoanalytic categories of gaze and voice operate at this intersection, that is, as the symptomatic indices of these formal remainders, I read in these two texts the phantasmagoric insistence of primal scenes of ambiguous fascination and repulsion, in order to thread a political argument around the way both writers positioned their narration at two opposing sides of this space of ambiguity, and how, when read in *parallax* tension with one another, their work can be read as staging a conversation with respect to two radically different subjective relations with respect to the perverse imperatives of culture consumption within late Capitalism in the region: to attend to the terrifying gaze of the Other and engage in the traversal of the phantasm; or to become trapped in the fetishistic proliferation of difference.<sup>371</sup>

There are, at the interior of the modernist cultural foundations of Puerto Rican *beaux arts*, two well-known paintings that emblemize what will constitute, for many years to come, the wealth of the popular iconology pertaining to the collective imaginary of Puerto Rican culture. As such, they also offer a good entrypoint to answer these questions.

The first of these is Francisco Oller's *El Velorio* [*The Wake, 1893*]- more popularly known as *Baquiné*. The second is Ramón Frade's *El pan nuestro de cada día* [*Our Daily Bread*,

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subject must be gendered to be *engendered*, to be spoken. [ . . . ] It is only on that basis that we can construct its 'knowledge-value,' which will enable us to see the place of fantasy in the exercise of colonial power." Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 74-77.]

<sup>371</sup> To the extent that my inquiry entertains the question about the possibility of a historical traversing of the lingering phantasms of a given cultural policy, it is important to mention how this traversal entails a different subjective relation with respect to *jouissance*. Slavoj Žižek is quite explicit about the political implications of this kind of subjective repositioning, when he asserts that "the point of *la traversée du fantasme* is not to get rid of *jouissance* (in the mode of the old Leftist Puritanism): The distance toward fantasy means, rather, that I, as it were, 'unhook' *jouissance* from its *phantasmatic* frame and acknowledge it as that which is properly undecidable, as the indivisible remainder that is neither inherently reactionary, the support of historical inertia, nor the liberating force that enable us to undermine the constraint of the existing order." Žižek, Slavoj. "I hear you with my eyes", in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*.

1905.] As it turns out, both works became identified with the defining hybrid characters of ‘a great family,’ under the panoptic surveillance, that is, of a paternal figure whose traits were covertly those of a white, Catholic, male master.<sup>372</sup> Oller’s *Baquiné* represents the wake of a peasant child in the countryside. By displaying dimensions considered perhaps too epic and monumental for the provincial taste of the island’s intellectual elite of his time, the painting casts a gaze where wonder and terror mesh to present a domestic interior riddled with figures representative of the main social castes of Puerto Rican society of the time. Depicting a scene simmering with chaotic movement, this enclosed space obtains at the irreducible obfuscation between the public and the private that supplements their difference. The final effect, as Rubén Ríos-Ávila has keenly noted, is that of “a painting that is excessively auricular [ . . . ] a painting in which noise exceeds the image.” (Ríos-Ávila, 2002, p. 48). Moreover, the painting’s *punctum* inevitably falls on an impaled roasted pork, quickening reverberating echoes of a ritualized primal murder.<sup>373</sup> In fact, *El Baquiné* is a historical palimpsest: recurring to the codes of *costumbrista* impressionism, Oller’s painting rehearses the discursive artillery of equivocal tropes from early colonial-ethnographic depictions of a cannibalistic feast, where the European construction of the New World inhabitant was the effect of an anamorphic gaze around which the usual aporiae at the heart of the narratives of Modernity began to take hold- preeminently the ones contained in the civilization/barbarism and noble Savage/terrifying cannibal binaries (Jáuregui, 2010, *Canibalia*). Oller himself, in the inscription accompanying an improbable

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<sup>372</sup> For a more comprehensive critique of the ideologeme of “la gran familia puertorriqueña” in Puerto Rican politics and culture, see Gelpí, Juan. *Literatura y paternalismo en Puerto Rico*.

<sup>373</sup> Here I borrow from Roland Barthes the notion of the *punctum*, the wounded irrevocability of the blind spot that cannot be reduced to the symbol (as he opposes it to the *studium*, the symbolic web that imparts meaning to the photograph), in his *Camera Lucida*.



exposition at the *Salon de Paris* in 1895, qualified the scene as “an orgy of brutal appetites, under the veil of a loutish superstition.”<sup>374</sup>

The second painting, Frade’s *El pan nuestro de cada día*, represents the dignified picture of a *jíbaro*- a white, albeit disturbingly sun-roasted peasant- holding a bunch of green plantains, surrounded by ethereal, Eden-like hills that are reminiscent of a place outside of time and history. This painting effectively articulates the desire of a Puerto Rican national identity, recurring to an equivocal invocation of a popular base, while the historical inscription upon which this telluric ideology is predicated remains questionable and, needless to say, thoroughly Eurocentric in terms of the class ideology it advances. While it celebrates hard work, honesty, frugality, in short a sense of stoic and fatalistic Catholicism that we are supposed to recognize as the ontological ground for the real deal Puerto Rican, these marks of identification are more interesting for what they elide: the African communities of cane-cutters, artisanal fishermen and tobacco rollers, who had concentrated in the island’s coastal fringes during the preceding three hundred years, and which comprised, by a significant margin, the majority of the inhabitants of the island up until the year of 1898.<sup>375</sup> In effect, what the painting covers up is a brutal process of systematic racial whitening, of which the dark skin of a *jíbaro* attired in plain white clothes remains, nonetheless, as an indelible reminder.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> Ríos-Ávila, *Raza Cómica*.

<sup>375</sup> According to demographers Mara Loveman and Jerónimo Ortiz, even if, according to standard demographic accounts, the population of Puerto Rico was at least sixty-two percent white by the turn of the twentieth century, this apparent increase in whiteness in the following twenty years was primarily due to changes in the social definition of whiteness. For a thorough demographic assessment of the gradual and systematic “whitening” of Puerto Rico during the early twentieth century, see Loveman, Mara & Jerónimo Ortiz. *How Puerto Rico Became White: An Analysis of Racial Statistics in the 1910 and 1920 Censuses*.

<sup>376</sup> For a more thorough analysis of the role of this two hegemonic classes during this period, and of its importance for a proper understanding of the political developments in Puerto Rico during the first half of the twentieth century, see José Luis González, *El país de cuatro pisos*, 22-42.

The period that roughly covers the years of national independence wars and finishes its first cycle in 1898, with the last dying gasps of the Spanish Empire and the concurrent rise of the United States as the new geopolitical power, is also important to note in this account. In his *Divergent Modernities*, Julio Ramos invites us to envision the perplexed gaze of the *urban chronicler* and the hypnotized meanderings of the *flâneur* as two formal instances that, in spite of the differing subjective modalities they reflected, gave expression to the same symptom. Even when radically opposed in the relations they entertained with the overwhelming perceptual influx of commodities, money and people inside the recently industrialized North and Latin American cities, this opposition signed to a harrowing tension taking place within the same historical subject. Ramos' seemingly indistinct treatment of the role of the modernist *flâneur*- or city stroller- and that of the urban chronicler, in the narration of life within the newly emerging modern cities, makes it difficult to articulate an argument grounded on a sound critical discernment between these two terms. Nevertheless, as Ramos has otherwise noted, the relationship between the modernist chronicler and the city stroller is predicated on the way they embody two opposing attitudes towards the consumerist logic that was beginning to take hold in the modernizing city.<sup>377</sup> The author goes great lengths to show that these two forms represented states of consciousness where interiority and exteriority, the domestic life of the bourgeoisies and the outer spaces of crowded streets and world fairs coexisted in a permanent state of precarious interchangeability.<sup>378</sup> Similarly, in a world where aestheticist interiority was always besieged by the threat of an 'impure' outside, the positing of which it nonetheless necessitated for its constitution, the Latin American literary subject became the sign of the deadlocked circularity

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<sup>377</sup> Ramos, 112-143.

<sup>378</sup> Ramos, 129-130.

implicit in that aporia.<sup>379</sup> If the chronicler often embodied the will to imprint a transcendental domain of subjective intelligibility, an outside from which to impart meaning to the “ever-refined and complex market of cultural goods” that characterized the new urban space, he nonetheless contributed to the concomitant “materialization of a rhetoric of consumption and publicity.”<sup>380</sup> Crucial to Ramos’ argument is the idea that the modern literary subject found its *raison d’être* in the symptomatic knot of these mutually opposing, yet mutually constituting forms. The chronicler’s “critique of private interiority” harbored a desire and hope for another kind of storytelling that accounted for the restitution of a subjective sense of unity. Yet, the intelligibility of this outside came at the price of a reinsertion back into the immanence of the symbolic expediency to which the city threatened to relegate him. In his mesmerized strolling, “the chronicler transforms the city into a salon, into an intimate space, precisely by means of this consumerist gaze that turns an urban and mercantile activity into an object of aesthetic and even erotic pleasure. [ . . . ] consumption- and the discourses of mass culture that sustain it- will begin to mediate between the two polarized fields of urban experience.”<sup>381</sup> The *flâneur* represented the moment where that fascination towards the new turned into the horror of a senseless, mechanized repetition, the daunting moment where the Latin American intellectual became one (identified himself) with any whatever signifier in the unrelenting circulation of symbolic goods, the moment where all the mysterious and whimsical forces of the market appeared to him in the full force of their enigmatic monstrosity. In other words, this oscillation between the flâneur and the urban chronicler became the symptom of Latin American Modernism, a symptom that betrays a looped un-deadness at the heart of a dialectics of the inside and the outside subtending, at the same time, the dialectics of a devouring fascination and the horror of being engulfed. The first

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<sup>379</sup> Ramos, 106-107.

<sup>380</sup> Ramos, 113.

<sup>381</sup> Ramos, 129.

worked its way out from its agonic sub-tension with the latter. Moreover, what this ambiguous oscillation between the *flâneur* and the *urban chronicler* ultimately reveals is the same perverse enjoyment that connects it to the colonial anamorphisms at play in the gaze of the early ethnographers' construction of the colonial subaltern.

During the subsequent transformations that the *lettered city* underwent, this historical displacement from the earlier *relaciones de Indias*, to the later urban chronicler underscores a dialectical sublation that nonetheless leaves a remainder that spells coloniality.<sup>382</sup> Moreover, such coloniality frames up political antagonisms the battles of which will unfold around cultural signifiers. In order to arrive at a level of analysis closer to the point of articulation that concerns us here- namely, the one that would make visible the paradox inherent in an alternation of the gaze and the voice underscoring a consumptive ideologization of enjoyment, it is important to consider the phantasmagoric space that mediates between the two poles that constitute the dueling terms of this displacement. Any current discussion about cultural consumption in the Caribbean necessarily entails the invocation of these two distinct yet inextricably related moments in the history of Modernity in the region. Furthermore, produced closely by, although on opposite sides of a moment that has come to signify what some consider the demise of the lettered man, the two aforementioned paintings narrate these two moments' dialectical overlay of a terrifying imminence of things already past, and the wondrous remembrance of things to come. The nationalist mythemes contained in these two foundational works of late XIX<sup>th</sup> century pictorial tradition in Puerto Rico, interweave to constitute an ideological unit, the mythical emblem of a logic of culturalist nationalisms that still totalizes the cultural field in the island

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<sup>382</sup> For a detailed historical account of this transformation, see Rama, Ángel. *La ciudad letrada*. Hanover: Norte, 2002.

today. That is to say, it is a way of doing politics that, in its institutional expressions, confers the proper measure to the truth involved in Carlos Pabón's caustic remark, to the effect that "in Puerto Rico, the nation sells very well".<sup>383</sup>

## Chapter 7

### *Luis Rafael Sánchez's Macho Camacho's Beat: The Guaracha Song As the Shofar of the Caribbean Neo-liberal.*

El yo quisiera ser cósmico. Al sujeto no le queda más remedio que ser cómico.  
Rubén Ríos Ávila, *La Raza Cómica: Del Sujeto en Puerto Rico*.<sup>384</sup>

How could a subverting gaze be cast on Oller's gaze, as it is contained in the Salon de Paris inscription accompanying *The Wake*? In other words, how can that "orgy of bestial appetites, under the veil of a loutish superstition" be re-signified, so as to be given the surplus of truth it deserves? Luis Rafael Sánchez's novel *Macho Camacho's Beat*, conceivably the most celebrated and most widely reviewed novel of the Puerto Rican *post-treintistas* generation, can be read as an attempt at localizing what is irreducibly sacred- that is to say, *obscene*- in culture, and therefore offers a possible answer to this question.<sup>385</sup> These practices can be traced back to what many consider the foundational text of Puerto Rican culturalist nationalism: Antonio S.

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<sup>383</sup> Pabón, Carlos. *Nación postmortem: ensayos sobre los tiempos de insoportable ambigüedad*. San Juan: Callejón, 2003.

<sup>384</sup> Ríos-Ávila, Rubén. *La raza cómica: del sujeto en Puerto Rico*. San Juan: Callejón, 2002. "The Self would like to be cosmic. The subject cannot but be comic." (My translation.) This is in direct reference to José Vasconcelo's *The Cosmic Race*.

<sup>385</sup> See the *Introduction* and *Preface* to the 2006 *Cátedra* edition of the novel, by Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, for a canonical, albeit by no means exhaustive, critical bibliography of this work, and more generally on its author.

Pedreira's *Insularismo*, the space where Puerto Ricans could perform the differential assertion of their collective imaginary, a populist nationalism which can also contain and, in a way, 'make up' for and 'make-do' (*bregar*) with the erasure of class, racial, sexual and gender antagonisms that preceded- and succeeded- the publication of the novel.<sup>386</sup> The textual reference, with which the novel establishes a not so obvious diatribe, should nonetheless be obvious for anyone familiar with the debates at hand: Antonio S. Pedreira's *Insularismo*.<sup>387</sup> Although this is not the moment to linger on what this lineage represents in terms of the culturalist ideology it endorses, Pedreira's canonical text, and his public life at large, is important to mention in this context- at least as a symptomatic signpost in the historical trajectory of the paradox of affirmation I am trying to make visible here- among many reasons, because of Pedreira's *cultural-conservationist* attitude regarding intellectual activity in the island after the U.S. invasion in 1898, up until the publication of Sánchez's novel. Born in the same year of the invasion, Pedreira can be considered the inheritor of the castration anxieties that this colonial transaction aroused amongst the (almost exclusively male and white) intellectual elite in the island. This is arguably because, for him, these two events- his birth and the historical meaning of the military invasion- were at the origin of the same enigma. His assertions frequently refer to the *wealth*, the *hidden treasure*, of the Puerto Rican *Archive* that *will have been rediscovered* by him. In effect, Pedreira's work seems to be largely animated by a *projective anxiety*, in relation to what he regards as a *lack*, an *insufficiency* that he finds expressed, *as coming from the Other*, in terms of its opposite: we have

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<sup>386</sup> For a seminal commentary of Luis Rafael Sánchez's work, as well as of other writers of his generation, see Gelpí, Juan. *Literatura y Paternalismo en Puerto Rico*. Río Piedras: Universidad de Puerto Rico U.P., 2005; see also his "La cuentística anti-patriarcal de Luis Rafael Sánchez," 113-120. The textual reference, with which the novel establishes a not so obvious diatribe, should nonetheless be obvious for anyone familiar with the debates at hand: Antonio S. Pedreira's *Insularismo*.

<sup>387</sup> For a more complete analysis of Pedreira's culturalist legacy, see Juan Gelpí's work. For a commentary of the conservative, ultra-nationalistic legacy of Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos, see José Luis González' *El País de cuatro pisos*, and Arcadio Díaz Quiñones' "La pasión según Albizu", in *El Arte de Bregar*, 88-95.

been “enthusiastic followers of a rhetorical patriotism”, and therefore “we need to end our servile idolatry that tends to define our personality, relying on achieved perfections that have been no more than aspirations”, used as we are to “highlighting our virtues, as if we had actually fulfilled their measure [ . . .]” (Pedreira, 37-38). It is significant that, in the same pages, he invokes Enrique Rodó’s words in *Ariel*, as a compass to orient this enterprise of finding *a truly affirmative core behind the deceptively celebratory affirmation of our identity*: Rodó, Pedreira reminds us, used to say that “there are pessimisms that have the signification of a paradoxical optimism.” (38) The fundamental preoccupation behind his activity can therefore be conceived of as that of preservation and expansion of that (negatively affirmative) Archive, which is paradoxically to be found in the “extra-radius of official history”, and this in the name of a need for *transitioning* from the pre-1898 towards the post-1898: he was there to direct, broach and facilitate the specific *transit* of this *transition*. Frequently considered to be one of the earlier archetypes of the modern Puerto Rican scholar, through an arduous work of archival research, Pedreira’s gesture largely consisted in asking the questions “*How are we?*” and “*What are we?*” (Pedreira, 37), and he sought the corresponding answers by engaging in a process of “gathering the hidden fragments of the Puerto Rican soul in a superior, intelligible, clearer unity” (Quiñones, *El arte de bregar*, 97). His intellectual voyage can be characterized as initiatic and deeply teleological, since his efforts were aimed at re-covering, re-vealing, and dis-closing *what was already there*, as a “*terra incognita*, a round trip in time and space, in which Puerto Rican culture and history emerged from their constitutive occultation.” (Quiñones, 98) Stated otherwise, in spite of the colonial humiliation, there was, in his own words, something inherently ‘young,’ ‘pure,’ ‘eternal,’ ‘sacred,’ ‘fixed,’ in short a “divine treasure” (Pedreira, 185) that, while ‘emerging’ from the ocean of geo-political twists of fate, nonetheless remained totally external,

and immune, from the unpredictable, mundane vicissitudes of such geo-political games. This *substitutive* hard-kernel was, to be sure, Puerto Rican culture, subsequently translated into the more essentialist *puertorriqueñidad* [*puertorricanness*], and subsequently into the more policing *puertorriqueñismo* [*puertorricanism*]. Furthermore, while this *puertorriqueñismo* was positively constituted as a *harmonious whole*, its existence was, on the one hand, only feasible through the obsessive performance of its reaction formations, which translated rhetorically into repeated attacks against its minority, its marginal Others, that is, posited only as an entity constantly threatened by the increasing emergence in the cultural arena of the black, mulatto, feminine and (at least from the 60's onwards, if we leave aside the unique and exemplary case of Luisa Capetillo) queer intellectual voices (a threatening presence, it needs to be stressed, that came as a somewhat *marginal* and *incidental* effect of the North American invasion against which Pedreira was, at least metonymically, addressing his attacks). Furthermore, *this threat exacted a militancy that translated, at the cultural level, to an antagonism that could not be realized politically-* to this effect, suffice it to recall Pedreira's constant referring to that (racial, feminine and queer) threat as an 'invasion'. The great silence in this process was, of course, the socialist struggles that were being unleashed by the incipient urban proletariat, struggles that were taking place at the same time that Pedreira was immersed in this cultural/archival rite of passage (roughly between 1920s-1940s), but had definitely been simmering much longer. Summing up: Pedreira's hard-core presentation of *puertorriqueñismo* subtends two simultaneous movements: the retraction of political antagonisms from the political sphere - which was essentially economic, and therefore also class-related, but th racial, gender and sexual coefficients of which were impossible to ignore-, *its de-politization*, and its corresponding insertion into the cultural sphere. From then onwards, this antagonism turned against the emerging popular and minority sectors,



which were, as a matter of fact, the answer, rather than the question, the solution rather than the problem, to the *disturbing riddle* that represented, for him and his generation, the neo-colonial transaction. What was a matter of tacit relinquishing at one level, became the stuff of virulent expurgation on the other- political antagonism turned against itself, having negated its irreducibly political, affirmative, dimension. It was this culturalist spirit that was very soon to be poured over onto an institutional mandate, with the fateful advent to power of Luis Muñoz Marín's *Partido Popular Democrático*. It could be conjectured that the purist expedient of this (essentially *Arielist*) cultural policy survives largely intact today, in disguised forms, in ways of writing that *betray* the memory of the political defeat upon which the triumphalism of their culturalist affirmation is often grounded, be it in the form of *negrismo*, feminist or queer writing.

It is crucial to understand the depth and scope of Pedreira's work, in order to understand what exactly Luis Rafael Sánchez's literary activity was, more or less ambiguously, both dialoguing *with* and breaking *from*: it was more against this (anterior) triumphalist spirit of defeat, rather than the (later) second defeat of the *independentista* militant struggle that took place during the 50's and 60's in P.R.- a struggle that was still largely predicated on the nostalgic resurrection of the national-fundamentalist messianic discourse of 'The Saint,' Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos-, since the political defeat of the later struggle was already 'mounted' on the 'culturalist,' that is, disavowed defeat of the earlier. The prose that has been written from there onwards has, in one way or another, had *Sánchez's* work as an ineludible referent.<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> The international prominence of Luis Rafael Sánchez signed the beginning of a literary production seconding his *africanist, proletarian* and *anti-paternalist* discourse. In the following twenty years a whole generation of writers and intellectuals thrived along Luis Rafael Sánchez: Rosario Ferré, Ana Lydia Vega, Mayra Santos Febres, Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, Manuel Ramos Otero, Pedro Pietri to mention just a very few of them. Their writing developed in varying degrees this *afro-caribbeanist, proletarian, queer* and *feminist* traits as a reaction against Pedreira's classist, racist, anti-feminist chauvinisms, characteristic of the white creole elite (Quiñones, "Pedreira en la frontera", *El Arte de Bregar*, 98) but which more or less still developed within the ideological umbrella of Pedreira's culturalism. Nevertheless, what goes largely unnoticed in this production was Sánchez's entrenched, albeit irreducibly ambiguous, socialist independentism, and its relation with the anti-culturalist and anti-populist form that grounds it.

Yet, the significant wealth of literary criticism that surrounds this novel and, to some extent, the narrative that has been practiced in the island ever since, has not exhausted the power of its political message, insofar that this wealth has capitalized on a failure to capture the radical nerve of its prophetic value regarding the historical scope of what constitutes the central target of its subversions, namely ‘culture,’ in what was known, since the establishment of the power apparatuses that ruled, since the late 1940’s, the political respiration of the island, as *cultura puertorriqueña*.

It is true that Sánchez’s position regarding this cultural policing has been, in the best of cases, deeply ambiguous and ultimately un-decidable, oscillating from sheer hostility at the violence implicit in the impossibility of not talking about (selling) one’s afro-Caribbean blackness, if one happens to be black, to a blatantly celebratory tone with regards to the same institutional demand, for example in his article “¿Por qué Puerto Rico es rico?” [Why is Puerto Rico rich (in the double meaning of the word in Spanish: *rich* and *tasty*)?]. Indeed, his position regarding the consumptive culturalism of *puertorriqueñidad* under colonial *muñocismo* is more akin to the myriad of significations that, in his *El arte de bregar*, Arcadio Díaz Quiñones fleshes out from the manifold usage of the verb *bregar* (to *make-do*) in Puerto Rican day-to-day parlance: “[*bregar*’s etymological] base is the Germanic *brikan*, which meant in English ‘to break,’ and in German ‘*brechen*’. [ . . . ] To break not only means ‘rupture,’ but also ‘fugue,’ ‘evasion,’ as in ‘a break from prison’; and the difficult trance of ‘breaking through’ [ . . . ]” (42-43) “The strategy of *bregar* consists in interrelating that which seemed until then distant or antagonistic. It is a position from which one acts *to deal without violence with very polarized*

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In other words, one can venture the assertion that, even when these writers nurtured the same ideological vein, they still did so at the expense of remaining within the consumptive immanence of Puerto Rican culture. For Sánchez and his generation, Puerto Rican culture, as the ideological and institutional machinery of *muñocista* populism, needed to be re-envisioned as a political problem rather than as a literary answer, insofar as, in its practices, one could still perceive the surviving forms of a previous political occultation.

*conflicts*. (My emphasis) (22) Furthermore, the Puerto Rican double uses of the verb *bregar* emphasized by Quiñones is also worth mentioning, for the many interesting reverberations that it evokes in the context of our discussion: “It deals with a pragmatic dimension that distinguishes the Puerto Rican usage [of the word], and which has positive and negative implications worthy of reflection. [This third usage of *bregar*] touches on the most intimate, the individual existence; and also on the most political, the life in the community. You start with a calculating reason that allows you to play without knowing beforehand how the game is going to end. In other cases it results in a strategic knowledge that provides the resources to mediate, with a view *to softening the antagonisms*, and even to *covering them up*. It is a very practical line of conduct that *makes it possible to survive with a certain dignity*, even at the price of theatrically *simulating that something has been solved*.” (My emphasis) (32) *Bregar*, nonetheless, also partakes of sexual connotations that are exclusively Puerto Rican: “It has a corporeal meaning that confirms the constant consciousness of the subject as a sexed being. [ . . . ] The intensity of the usage of this making-do characterizes Puerto Rican parlance: couples ‘make-do’ [las parejas *bregan*].” (29) What this study seems to elide, or at least leave undeveloped, is the comprehension of this art of ‘making-do’ as a symptomatic axis of modern coloniality, the art of making-do with a ‘divergent modernity’ that does not work, because if it worked, then it would not be necessary to make-do with it at all in the first place. (El arte de bregar con una modernidad divergente que, literalmente, no brega). It is interesting to note that other words from other regions in Latin America display more or less the same semantic spectrum contained within the general meaning of subaltern improvising within a fundamentally messed-up and deadlocked situation- *chambear*, in México; the Argentine *laburo*, etc. It is, strictly speaking, not just a Puerto Rican, or perhaps even a Latin American phenomenon. The last sections in his essay point toward that direction.

For example: “The powerful sectors also ‘make-do,’ of course, but calibrating very well their own interests. One could say about Puerto Rico what Carl E. Schorske sums up in the subtle thesis exposed in his book *Vienna Fin de Siècle*: ‘When political questions became cultural, [cultural questions] became political.’ According to Schorske, it was not doubted that political transformations were necessary so that the cultural ones became efficacious [ . . . ] The colonial State, and the powerful sectors that in Puerto Rico act from the finance system and the media, invoke with great demagogy the ideology of the ‘great Puerto Rican family,’ that is to say, to a cultural nationalism previously de-historicized and de-politicized by recurring to hollowed-out formulae [ . . . ] San Juan is today an incredibly hard city [to live in], and deeply segregated. It is like the sum of the deceptions and indifference of those who cynically despise all the codes for lucrative gain, and of those who feel a ferocious hatred for urban popular culture. The history of *la brega* includes, therefore, the history of its own over-estimation, and of its vulnerability. The colony, *la brega*, and the desire of modernization have parallel lives. Between the three a deep interrelation has been weaving throughout a long period. [ . . . ] the colonial horizon offers an enduring continuity: it is strictly complementary to Puerto Rican modernity.” (75-86) But these comments still leave the question open as to whether “*la brega*”- in the falsely affirmative dimension that the author wants to foreground in the last instance (for example: “it is very hard to recognize the wisdom that *la brega* has accumulated in its long history. Is not the will to life and [the desire for] peace another form of heroism?”)- is also an integral part of the colonial predicament. I wonder if the right thing to do would be, on the contrary, to do away altogether with this collaborationist and survivalist making-do, and instead radically to refuse to make-do anymore with the situation- to refuse to make-do with this making-do- whatever the consequences, since it seems, according to most recent developments in the island, that this art of

making-do does not make-do anymore. Moreover, as can be inferred from his many interventions and interviews throughout twenty years in newspapers and conferences, it also seems evident that, in spite of his obvious suspicions against it, Luis Rafael Sánchez has after all also had to learn how to ‘make-do’ with the inflexible culturalist logic of late *muñocismo*.

Marking the recognition, by way of a celebration that goes against the grain of a loss that it nonetheless affirms, of the definitive defeat of the socialist, workers-based movement in the island, Sánchez’s novel refers more to a state of things that was yet to come, than to things already past. To say that the novel is truly affirmative is therefore at one and the same time, to say what is obvious and to obscure further what is not. For it referred to that past only to the extent that this past pre-figured what remained to persist from it in things to come. The novel’s vociferous celebration of Puerto Rican culture, a celebration ambiguously repeated by the author in later writings and interviews, is predicated on what the text explicitly terms as an ubiquitous, yet for the same reason impossible to pin-down *vendetta*, and as such is only there as the doubled foreboding of things taken to their futural limit- both the belatedness of an imminent threat coming from the future, and the adolescent urgency of a promise coming from the past-, a precipitation into the abyss of a future that preserves the mnemonic forms of a violent past.<sup>389</sup> This *vendetta* is carried out, in the text, by the tropical sun (invoking, by the by, the old tradition of geographical determinism in tandem with the tradition that sees in the sun as the metaphor of truth, the father, etc.), which “prostitutes the blood, stains the skin, storms the senses . . .”<sup>390</sup> The

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<sup>389</sup> A paradoxical relation to loss and mourning that has been already noticed by the preceding literary criticism. See, for example Arcadio Díaz Quiñones’s comparison with Luis Pales Matos’s *Canción Festiva para ser llorada*, in his *Introduction* and accompanying critical bibliography, to the 2010 *Cátedra* edition. (52-54). See, also, Carlos Pabón’s *Macho Camacho’s Beat: the Novel as Dirge*.

<sup>390</sup> Gelpí has already observed regarding the early presence of this word in the novel: “A term alien to the novel’s lexical universe, it can be seen, nonetheless, as the emblem of the novel. It is worth recalling the definition of the

novel narrates a *stilled now* that was yet to happen, and this now is a vendetta *inflicted by the sun*. Today, the *now* that this novel portrays is, unfortunately but perhaps not surprisingly, more contemporary and more pressing, that is, in terms of the insidious re-incidence of the forms of this past in some of the literary instances the contents of which paradoxically come into alignment with the rupture that this novel represented. The past- but also the father, truth- unleashes an *impious vendetta* on the island, and it is, without a doubt, the deed of an ex-orbited son. The contemporary timeliness of this novel can only be understood in relation to the untimely movement of its apparition, and the subversive form of this un-timeliness was what was greatly lost from sight, both in the local condemnation, and subsequent dismissal, of the novel as ‘vulgar’ and ‘obscene’ (that is, inedible), as well as in its metropolitan celebration as a ‘timely’ (culturally edible) product.<sup>391</sup> Interestingly, Juan Gelpí’s invocation- in the context of his critique of Pedreira’s *Insularismo*- of Julio Ramos’ observations about the relationship between a classic and the reader throughout history strike, in this respect, the right chord,<sup>392</sup> invoking, among others, Jacques Derrida’s *Dissemination* and Frank Kermode’s *The Art of Telling*,<sup>393</sup> Gelpí’s

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term [ . . . ] Sánchez’s novel coincides with this definition. It is one of the modes in which *Macho Camacho’s Beat* can be read: as the dramatization of the struggle between two familial triangles.” (Gelpí, “El clásico y la reescritura: *Insularismo* . . . , 61.)

<sup>391</sup> True, the reception the novel has had within the local intellectual circles has been nothing short of enthusiastic, as is testified by the literary reviews published in *El Mundo* and *El Nuevo Día* in the following thirty-five years. Nevertheless, the immediate reception of the novel among the lay readers was, in the best of cases, mixed. See, for example, the following letter to *El Mundo* by Carlos Pagán: “El contenido de *La Guaracha del Macho Camacho* es lo más indecoroso que había leído nunca . . . Es un libro sin razón de ser, forzado, solamente para desafiar una sociedad entera en el más descarnado alarde de vulgaridad, de mal gusto . . . Como puertorriqueño que soy, y muchos que lo han comentado conmigo están de acuerdo, me avergüenza *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*.” Pagán, Carlos, Carta, *El Mundo*, “La voz del lector”, 17 de agosto de 1976, p. 6-A, col. 4.

<sup>392</sup> Gelpí quotes Ramos, to premise his argument that *La Guaracha del Macho Camacho* is another, less-obvious reading of the classic that is Pedreira’s *Insularismo*: “[A classic] is a discursive event that, when institutionalized, in diverse historical junctures, assumes an enormous referential power. A text that in the history of its readings loses its character as discursive event, and is read as a function of the immediate *presence* of the represented world.” (Gelpí, “El Clásico y la reescritura: *Insularismo* en las páginas de *La Guaracha del Macho Camacho*”, 55-56) (My translation, italics in the original.)

<sup>393</sup> For a more complete bibliographical reference, see Footnote 1 in Gelpí’s essay.

fundamental gesture in the alluded essay is, precisely, that there is something of an affiliating remainder in any act of *des*-affiliation, one can reactivate the same question, and ask: if a classic comes into being in a gesture of rupture, what remains, thirty years after its publication, *contemporary* in what should by now be considered *yet another* classic, that is, in a text that has come to add another layer of filiation in the literary tradition of the island with respect to which *Insularismo* is, after all, another instance of disruptive relay, since what is always traded in any tradition is that which *remains problematic*? The question of paternity, of the father, of whether the father remains in the ‘purity’ and ‘immaculate’ ‘transparency’ of the *prócer*, of the crisis of paternity as it is, Gelpí reminds us, is very much present in Pedreira’s *Insularismo*; it also summons Sánchez’s *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*.<sup>394</sup> The question of the father, of the father *as* question, which is also, in ways that are obscured by the writer’s oscillations between a *dialogue* and a *diatribe*, a homage and a parricide, with whatever precedes his own present, the question of political subjectivity- of the lettered man as political subject-, does not disappear and is by no means settled with the unsettling appearance and the subsequent canonical settling of *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*.<sup>395</sup> Gelpí’s essay shows us, perhaps in spite of its letter, that there is no better way to keep the father alive than by killing him (without realizing that he is always

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<sup>394</sup> Read, for example: “The resemblance or duplication that binds [Pedreira’s] critics with the text [*Insularismo*] is not fortuitous: both inscribe themselves within the same paternalistic discourse. Or even better, one would have to underline that Pedreira and his critics co-exist in the epoch of the crisis of the Puerto Rican paternalistic discourse.” (Gelpí, 56)

<sup>395</sup> Juan Gelpí notes that Pedreira’s *Insularismo* “constitutes an exclusionary and hierarchical interpretation of *puertorriqueñista* history and culture. It presents a ‘superior’ [Being] that assumes a protecting attitude towards a series of subordinates, be them slaves, women, or workers. From its emergence until its most recent avatar- the developmentalist populism of the forties, fifties and sixties- this discourse has had a privileged metaphor: the equation of Puerto Rico as a grand family. One is dealing, then, with a conciliatory discourse that is founded on the respect to the authority of a symbolic paternal figure. If *Insularismo*, key text of paternalistic discourse, and its critics are mutually reflected, it is because both reproduce the search of a lost father.” (Gelpí, 58) [My translation.]



already dead).<sup>396</sup> The fact that the father *is not* but a problem has been followed by the realization that the ‘great Puerto Rican family,’ whose abode is Puerto Rican culture, is the contingent site of an unnamable trauma, the precarious knot of disavowed conflicts.<sup>397</sup> But it still remains to be seen whether the institutional formations that gave a solid dwelling place to this great family, namely *cultura puertorriqueña*, has been submitted to the same deconstructive rigor. Everything seems to indicate that this is not the case.

This remains, therefore, a problematic question for those whose affiliating gestures are, in turn, oriented towards one of the ‘lost sons/suns,’ the truest ones, of Pedreira’s brethren, namely Luis Rafael Sánchez’s novel- whether in the form of dialogue or diatribe. The novel is, has become, a classic, understood within pretty much the same configuration of meanings with which Gelpí invests this concept, and therefore it is *deeply problematic*.<sup>398</sup> In a gesture that is by necessity meta-cultural, it is the prophetic moment of this trans-historical *now* that remains yet to

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<sup>396</sup> Lacan, Jacques, Object Relations. What See Freud, Sigmund. *Tótem y Tabú*.

<sup>397</sup> See in this regard Ríos-Ávila, Rubén. *La raza cómica: del sujeto en Puerto Rico*. San Juan: Ediciones Callejón, 2002. In the first chapter, titled “El relato del trauma”, Ríos-Ávila compares the colonial drama associated with the invasion of 1898 to a familial drama, implying that, in order to be properly dismantled, the meta-narrative of the great Puerto Rican family has to be understood as traversed by the phantasms of the invasion, in the mirages of the blind entanglement of the private and the public: “There are many who see in the 98’ invasion the navel of our dream, the space where Puerto Ricans’ conflictive identity is forged, the trance, the trauma through which the avatars of our most unresolved contradictions are processed. [ . . . ] One has to reconsider trauma, by restituting the weight of its charge, its hermeneutical density, and above all, its psychoanalytical objectivity. For that, one has to banish it from its place in History, where it figures as a meta-narrative, as a dispositive to authorize the ‘medics’ or the hermeneuts to be, and return it to narration, to storytelling, through which the subject attempts to besiege the unutterable depth of his/her obsessions. [ . . . ] The 98’ as a historical, but above all symbolic, mythical scene of the trauma . . . [On the contrary,] coloniality is our perverse love story, the master, the empire; it is the Other of our erotic tale. There lies the allegory of the colonized, the one who words and is worded *from* the discourse of the Other. Therefore, one has to insist in the interpellation of colonial subjection as a pathology [ . . . ], but not to contradict or avenge him, [but rather] to listen to the noises of trauma, of the attempt of ill-threaded and disjointed tales to articulate here and there the scraps of truth [ . . . ]” (16-23) [My translation.]

<sup>398</sup> In the essay alluded to above, Gelpí’s comments regarding this *vendetta* decidedly point in the right direction: “In this vendetta there are no literal battles: in their place, produces a dramatization at a distance of an *exchange* between gestures of aggression and gestures of resistance; gestures in which bodies and languages are used as weapons and in which various types of secretions, literal and figurative, abound [ . . . ]” (63) Nevertheless, the author stops short of relating this choreography with the song that organizes it, and the corresponding allegorical meaning in terms of cultural critique one is forced to arrive at. After all, a vendetta where there is no literal battle is hardly a vendetta at all. The (political) form of the vendetta remains, while its contents are entirely ‘cultural’.



be captured in all its urgency, precisely after the novel has been (not always un-problematically) consumed as the emblem of an unambiguous rupture from such past.<sup>399</sup>

How does this space of *jouissance* (about which we cannot decide), opened up by gaze and voice, provide a clue to capturing the persistent *nowness* of this orphaned past in all its avenging violence, in a future the inevitability of which is assumed as something that is already too late? The privileging of the *visual* and the *aural* (over the letter, one should suppose) in contemporary Caribbean literature, and more emphatically with respect to the works of Luis Rafael Sánchez and Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, is an aspect that has already been more or less extensively noted and commented on by literary criticism.<sup>400</sup> It is not so much the purpose of this chapter to add to the wealth of this criticism- which narrows its attention on the baroque triangle implicit in the textualizations of sight and sound, to highlight the fact of the Caribbean writers' seemingly constitutive obsession with these two registers of ambiguous representation. The aim in this chapter is rather to inquire into the symptomatic meaning of this predominance, in order to articulate a political reading of what should be understood as the spectral recurrence of a colonial anamorphic distortion, as it pertains to the psychoanalytical categories of gaze and voice, which betrays an enjoying-consumptive index, such as has been expounded in the

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<sup>399</sup> This narrative of rupture is far from homogeneous, and their proponents replicate in their respective tendencies the ideological landscape that defines the fluid cartography of political partisanship in the island: there is an annexionist rupture, a soberanist rupture, and an independentist one.

<sup>400</sup> See, for example, Sotomayor, Áurea María. "Escribir la mirada", in *Las tribulaciones de Juliá*. Also, see more recently Pérez-Ortiz, Melanie. "Del *voyeur* al mirón: la palabra es la técnica objetificante en los textos de Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá", 511-532. For a more general account of the predominance of the visual in Caribbean literature, see Emery, Mary Lou. *Modernism, the Visual and Caribbean Literature*. For example: "C.L.R James [*back and forth*] gazing between a cricket game and a post-card with Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* reproduced in it] exemplifies for the author "the transatlantic vision [that] characterizes a recurring obsession with seeing in the work of writers from the Caribbean throughout the twentieth century." [ . . . ] The work of Caribbean (predominantly Anglophone) writers "centers, often obsessively, on acts of vision." These "social acts of seeing" [ . . . ] "illuminate the significance of vision to one of the major intellectual shifts of the twentieth century- the refiguring of identities across national, racial, and cultural boundaries." (1)

preceding section. The visual and the aural are, therefore, not going to be treated as mere thematic rehearsals to show that Caribbean literature is ‘inherently’ Neo-Baroque, if only because the Neo-Baroque is ‘inherently’ Caribbean. On the contrary, it would be an attempt at breaking away from that. It is not just another making-do [otra *brega*] of this tautological trap. By considering this effect as the colonial symptom in its most acutely evident consumptive index, the present reading would allow us to bring into light the paradoxical dynamics at work in different narrative positionings with regard to *jouissance*, as what is at stake in this distortion, which reflect, in turn, on subjectivities that assume this enjoyment either in its consumptive or non-consumptive dimension.

The narrative argument of the novel can be schematically summed up: At exactly five o’clock in the afternoon, a woman, called *China Hereje*, impatiently awaits for *the Old Man*, her occasional lover.<sup>401</sup> Simultaneously, somewhere in the city, the honorable senator Vicente Reynosa, referred to as the *Old Man*, is stuck in a traffic jam, on his way to his amatory encounter with *China Hereje*. The narration therefore moves forward by rehearsing a series of fantastic variations underscoring the misrecognition at play in the scene of seduction and that intersects gender, class, and race. The first two chapters of the novel present both characters venting out their frustration by indulging in a tirade that amalgamates several registers of popular parlance. The first chapter opens up with the narrator/Disk Jockey’s incitement to the reader to peep *inside* China Hereje’s apartment:

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<sup>401</sup> In direct reference to Puerto Rican singer Felipe Rodríguez’ famous *bolero* song *China Hereje*.

If you turn around now, a cautious turn, a cautious look, you'll see her sitting and waiting, calmness or the shadow of calmness passing through her. She's got a dreamer's face, a wake me up and touch me face, her legs crossed in a cross. [ . . . ] Under the shower, guaracha and woman in a mating of superb agitation: voice unleashed, body bumping bathroom walls, the shower curtain's guaracha whiplash whaks, soaked in thrills, faithful to all balling. (5-6) <sup>402</sup>

The author invites the reader to become a voluntary, yet oblivious voyeur, only in order for that gaze to become her own gaze: What follows from this primal peeping into a woman lying half naked on the sofa (or masturbating in the shower), where her body and the *guaracha* songs are but one single entity, is an intimation of another sort. It could also be called a kind of 'ex-timation': our voyeuristic gaze into that secret interiority slowly turns- through the constant reference to China Hereje's total lack of love for *The Old Man*<sup>403</sup>- into the observed one's own open-eyed erotic *gazing outside*, out towards the construction site taking place in front of her apartment. In all her medusa-like obscene generosity, *this gazing is frontal and direct*:

Generous is she, and as such, she regales the busy construction of a condominium with her eyes; the eyes, swinging from one to another like bad acrobats, leap over half a dozen steel drums, inspect the scaffolding that an inspector is inspecting, bump against the kiss of the concrete and the noise, flutter about the fleshy pole a mason pisses with as she shouts to them: up, up, shouted after having made a mental evaluation of the mason pissing at five o'clock: peeping mom, bountiful in her gaze. (11)

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<sup>402</sup> Sánchez, Luis Rafael. *Macho Camacho's Beat*. Trans. Gregory Rabassa. New York: Pantheon, 1980. For all English translations of quoted passages from the novel, this will be the edition used henceforth.

<sup>403</sup> China Hereje's vampirizing intentions are incidentally one with Marx's personification of *Capital* as vampire: "she wants to suck up every single penny from the *Old Man*'s pocket." The analogy China Hereje = Culture = Capital is established as one of the main tropes in the story: The true, obscene flipside of Miranda in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* - who has frequently been read as a Deleuzian conceptual character, a stand-in for 'culture'- China Hereje traverses the three registers- sexual, political and cultural- that are present in the story.

This act of gazing is described as “*philanthropic*”- “she gives her eyes to the agitated construction of the building.” In her peeping, she is munificent; this generosity strikes a contrast with the Old Man, and the reader’s “closed-eyed”, “discreet”, “miserly” (read hypocritical) gaze. Her pornographic gaze is ‘open-eyed’ and outward, whereas the reader’s gaze is inward (penetrating China Hereje’s *interiority*), and dependent on blindness, insofar as it is only guided/mediated by the textual evidence of the letter. From merely being vulgar voyeurs, we become involuntary, both fascinated and horrified witnesses of her own enjoying and devouring gazing: she wants *to eat* “that piece of meat with which a worker is pissing.” Moreover, her obscene gaze is there, public, to be seen and heard: she shouts at them, in other words, she wants them, the workers, to see her looking at them, whereas secrecy constitutes the private view which is the Old Man’s, and ours.

The irruption of the *guaracha*’s trumpets in the second half of this passage is significant, to the extent that it comes to disrupt the noise of this phantasmal minuet, with a supplement of noise that points to a terrifying void of sense. It reminds one, in fact, of the Jewish *shofar* and its use in special moments of religious rituals.<sup>404</sup> It is described as an *ex-abrupt*, as a disturbing intrusion of a presence that comes, paradoxically, from the same *guaracha* song that acts as the aural backdrop- the ideological white noise- of the story:

Inevitably the sudden words of the *guaracha*: *the trumpet breaking up the ball*, the trumpets plow the furrows, the trumpets speak of clandestine rites, the trumpets speak of mounted bodies, the trumpet speaks of the hot encounter of one skin with another, the trumpets speak of slow, spasmodic undulations: the trio of trumpeting trumpets. (11)

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<sup>404</sup> A Hebrew word loosely translated in modern languages as ‘trumpet’. Also pertinent in our discussion is his analysis of how the object voice is apparently ‘split’ into the ‘maternal’ daemonic voice, and the ‘fatherly’ voice of irrational prohibition via the *shofar*. See Dolar, Mladen. “The Object voice,” in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*. 7-32.

It is as if the already disembodied voice of this *guaracha* came with a second moment of disembodiment: the moment in which the blank permissiveness prescribed and commanded by a song that, precisely because it is ubiquitous, cannot be heard, and re-turned as the reminder of that very same excess coming to disrupt its own manifestation.<sup>405</sup> The trumpet here *irrupts* into a scene that already lacks nothing in terms of sexual excess, only to ruin it.

This *open-eyed* fantasizing has its correlate in the following chapter, with Vicente Reynosa's fantasies of a mythical orgy. While stuck in the traffic jam, "the surrounding reality is abolished by [his] closed eyes". What follows is the staging of a phantasm that owes everything to any ethnographic scene of colonial times, and which, like any phantasm, is always *for* the enjoyment of the Other.<sup>406</sup> What opens up, for him, is the self-proliferating labyrinth of the Same:

A long time: the reality round about abolished by closed eyes, the reality round about reinvented by closed eyes: Strong winds that blow and carry off big women, great big women like the Amazons of California: dark, Darkness, very dark, vanilla-colored, Black as telephones, Black as coal; big women, great big women, great big women like the Amazons of California adulterated by the furious multiplication of their hairy, cavernous sexes: twenty hairy, cavernous sexes distributed on every body, bursting forth like mushrooms, bursting forth like thistles: indiscriminately; big women, great big women like the Amazons of California who jumble around him, around the hooved satyr, his normal condition of hooved satyr adulterated by the furious multiplication of his hairy,

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<sup>405</sup> Regarding this excessive tyranny of the voice in Sánchez's novel, Juan Duchesne-Winter notes how in the author, one witnesses the accomplishment "of that 'tyranny of the sound-track,' so much feared by some filmmakers à la *Cahier du Cinema*, those who would prefer to keep film uncontaminated from the strangeness of the voice." ("Del prólogo al pórtico", in *Las tribulaciones de Juliá*, 19.)

<sup>406</sup> The most direct, although hardly the only one reference here is the depiction of the New World Amazon, by French colonial ethnographers of the XVIth century, specifically Philippe Galle's engraving "America", in his *Prosopographia* (1581-1600). For a much more detailed commentary of XVI and XVII ethnographic visual depictions of the Savage American Other, in very much the same line as ours, see Carlos Jáuregui's *Canibalia*.

lengthened sex: twenty hairy, lengthened sexes distributed about his body, bursting forth like weeds, bursting forth like lipomas: indiscriminately. (20-21)

The impossibility contained in this double protraction- Vicente Reynosa's blockage in the traffic jam, while he indulges in masturbatory fantasies about proliferating Amazons, and the concomitant waiting of his lover, who indulges in masturbatory fantasies of a democratic inter-racial and inter-class gang bang- also stages the blockage of an enjoying principle that paradoxically makes enjoyment impossible. This impossibility conjugates, in what is supposed to be a secret family matter- namely the extramarital, inter-class affair of a white male with a black or mulatto woman- the unresolved ambiguity at the heart of the symptomatic knot that constitutes Puerto Rican national identity, the immemorial question that affixes the memory of a forgotten Puerto Rican political *Thing* to the *vacilón* regarding a pending matter, always postponed for further vacillation. It is not surprising to see this blockage, in the form of a *recognition*, a moment of choked impotence declared and repeated, as an incantation, by a "proper"<sup>407</sup> construction worker:

Turn after turn, she sits down to wait sitting down, to wait sweaty on the sweaty sofa, vox populi has it that African fires scorch the isle of Puerto Rico, to wait in perspiration: because the light has gone, because the light goes every afternoon, because the afternoon doesn't work, because the air-conditioning does not work, because the country does not work; she'd heard it just like that when she was taking the bus to the fortunate apartment. And it wasn't said by a hippie with pollen-messy hair and the languid look of an acid-pothead Christ. It was said by a proper man: the country does not work, the country does not work, the country does not work: repeated to the point of provocation, repeated like the *zéjel* at the end of a *guaracha*: facing a red light that was black because the traffic signal wasn't working, the proper man indignant, his stomach contracted with

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<sup>407</sup> "Hecho y derecho" (literally, "made and straight"), which is commonly used in popular parlance to refer, usually as a token of admiration, to someone's moral integrity.

indignation, his mandibles rigid: the country does not work, the country does not work, the country does not work. (11)

Everything happens in the novel in the paroxysm of this threefold interruption: “the country does not work”, as a ghostly fulfillment of the conciliatory promise of *mestizaje*; “the country does not work”, as the promise of modernity, the botched coupling of a modernity historically contemporaneous with itself; “the country does not work”, as a project of social justice, the only space for the realization of which is, obscenely, ‘culture’.<sup>408</sup> Most importantly, this non-event of sexual protraction also reads as an interruption of diegetic continuity in the novel: the novel, as a narrative machine, *does not work*; narration has come to a full stop, an impasse the very emblem of which is the traffic jam.

The novel is the fragmented, incomplete and collective space of imaginary transactions, seductions, vacillations and fantasizings, a make-do that takes place in this non-space mediated by the gaze and the voice of the two main characters, but that also reverberates along the mirroring labyrinths of class, racial, gender and sexual differences. Whatever ‘happens’ in the following chapters occurs in this non-event of sexual protraction. which also reads as an interruption of diegetic continuity in the novel: for the novel, as a narrative machine, *does not work*; narration has come to a full stop, an impasse whose emblem is, of course, the traffic jam. The meaning of this experience of interruption transcends the merely intra-textual, to confer to it an allegorical coefficient that touches on political antagonism. (Senator Vicente Reynosa belongs to the white *créole* elite, while *China Hereje* belongs to the working class.) In turn, this

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<sup>408</sup> “[ . . . ] the country does not work, the country does not work, the country does not work: repeated to the point of provocation, repeated like the zéjel at the end of a guaracha: facing a red light that was black because the traffic signal wasn’t working, the proper man indignant, his stomach contracted with indignation, his mandibles rigid: the country does not work. (Sánchez, 11)

antagonism is ‘buried’ within the ‘cultural,’ as a spectral scene of savage consumption, re-marked in the text by recurring references to cultural production as partaking of the same ideological matrix as any other product, as well as by distancing allusions to the reader-text-writer relationship.

What the reader finds in this interstitial suspension of narrative and historical time, knotting the sexual, the political and the cultural, is thus a plethora of phantasmal scenes involving a jumbled series of metonymic displacements that follow a seemingly random logic of coupling and de-coupling. It mixes all sorts of objects of consumption with the characters’ mechanical and absurd gestures, sporadic and fragmented evocations of a collective past, and a disparate mosaic of citations that suspends any distinction between ‘popular’ and ‘high’ culture. The perverse fantasies of traffic-jammed senator Vicente Reynosa connect with Benny’s fetishistic fixation with his *Ferrari*, whom his quasi-mythical father, Papitito Papitote [which roughly translates into something like “Daddy Big Dad”] gave to him on his birthday. Conversely, on the side of China Hereje, the pansexual proletarian woman who awaits for Vicente, the narration connects her to popular characters who bear rather generic names, and whose blood affiliation is far from clear, as it refers more to socio-historical matters and class rather than familial loyalties: Doña Chon, La Madre, El Nene, etc.<sup>409</sup> These characters are somewhat typical within the universe of uncanny *hybridity* that the novel constructs; yet, their function in the novel is arguably to re-emit China Hereje’s predicament in the art of making-do, the contingency of the jamming, the day-to-day improvisation that defines the existential predicaments of her class, but also the untimely ‘making do’ of an inter-class pact for which there are no sanctioned scripts, and consequently is as constitutively botched yet urgent, as the

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<sup>409</sup> Something already noted by Juan Gelpí: “The powerful characters in the novel have proper names, whereas the subaltern have generic ones.”



racial hybridity of the sexual act that allegorizes it: the teratological ghost of this interracial, inter-class pact is embodied by the babbling monstrosity of *El Nene*.<sup>410</sup>

Therefore, while the reader finds it impossible to graft this multitude of social registers onto a narrative center, the chapters are nonetheless organized following this alternating principle of (non-) relation, a split that works at least at these three simultaneous levels in the novel. At the 'private' level, two characters belonging to two antagonistic classes, are engaged in an interrupted extramarital affair. At the political level, it re-creates the antagonism between the working class and the political elite, with the chapters alternating between different gazing narrative voices affixed to characters that belong to one or the other side of this social divide. There are two socio-historical blocks staging a duel, the terms of which are consumptive, since it is, at the end the day, a battle *over who enjoys (consumes) more*, and consequently what defines the invisible cultural battleground the invisibility of which the novel renders visible. At the level of culture, then, this split recreates, more crucially, the reader's misreading of the novel as a cultural product from which 'emanates' some kind of a 'sacred' cultural message- *another kind of puertorriqueñidad*. The (inherently invisible and ideological, since thoroughly hegemonic) medium of obfuscation of these opposites- the inedible, unsymbolizable *hybrid stain* whose specter literally 'haunts' with diverse phantasms the characters' reality- is also inescapably "cultural". This hybridity- racial, to be sure, but also sexual, class related, and

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<sup>410</sup> It is impossible to stress enough the significance of the fact that the novel ends with the bloody death of this character, run over by Benny's (Vicente's son) *Ferrari*, on his way to consummate the sexual encounter with another classless, and nameless woman. Benny's words replicate, again, the words of the class that disavows its responsibility for the historical under-development and bestialization metaphorized by this character: "It was not my fault." (Sánchez, 311) For a more extensive commentary on the allegorical role this minor character has in the novel, see Juan Gelpí's essay "El Clásico y la reescritura: *Insularismo*". *El Nene* as a teratological concept-character that is, since its beginnings in, an literary archetype of Puerto Rican literature, also recurs in Rodríguez Juliá's work, most notably in his eighteenth century chronicle-novels *Campeche y los diablejos de la melancolía* and *La noche oscura del Niño Avilés*, on occasion of José Campeche's depiction of the legendary "Juan Pantaleón, hijo legítimo de Luis de Avilés y de Martina de Luna Alvarado Avilés", the real-life case of a child born completely devoid (I can't make a bubble comment in a footnote, but there does seem to be something missing here!) of arms and with disproportionately short legs.

gendered- is a cultural stain *within* culture; it is the outer inside that constitutes and threatens *cultura puertorriqueña*. The ‘cultural’ totalizes the entire domain of the characters’ and the readers’ experience . . . except that there is still something ‘left out’- an uncanny excess of hybridity that is fantasized, does not happen in the real, and is the core of the enjoying misunderstanding that plays out at these three levels: being as it is a question of (self-) donation for Vicente Reynosa (his relation to China Hereje is predicated on an edenic-hedonistic fantasy that follows a long tradition of colonial discourse), and a question of sheer monetary transaction for China Hereje (she only wants his money, for her services rendered).

The importance of this *disruptive asynchrony* between two regimes of relating to *jouissance* (China Hereje’s and Vicente Reynosa’s) cannot be overstated, if one recalls, on the one hand, the *real, authentic* political verve that runs along the more than four-hundred years’ history of Afro-Caribbean music- from the colonial period of the sugarcane plantations, through the emergence of *salsa* from within the Puerto Rican migratory ghettos of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States’ east coast.<sup>411</sup> On the other hand, the ways in which this musical form was re-inserted into the international circulation of cultural markets, in a process that was co-incidental with the systematic neutralization and de-politization of the newly emerging, working-class based, socialist and communist urban movements that evolved from the 1930s and 1940s, and continued to exist until the late 1970s, constitute a process that culminated with the emergence of the populist and culturalist *Partido Popular Democrático*, spearheaded by Luis Muñoz Marín. The traffic jam in the novel functions, therefore, as an allegory of the failure of the project of

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<sup>411</sup> For an exhaustive history of *salsa* music, see Rondón, César Miguel. *El Libro de la Salsa: Crónica de la música del Caribe urbano*.

modernization à la Muñoz Marín.<sup>412</sup> Furthermore, this process coincided with the stillborn entrance of Puerto Rico into the train of industrialized modernization, known generically as *muñocismo*. What characterized *muñocismo* was, in effect, the total divorce of *emancipatory politics* from its irreducibly antagonistic character: the main ideologeme of *muñocismo* was, in effect, that Puerto Rican identity, difference, singularity, alterity, in other words ‘culture,’ did not have *anything* to do with revolutionary politics, since culture was the only way of doing politics: *culture was politics*. It is also important to mention that this ideological a priori was appropriated by Muñoz Marín from A.S. Pedreira, by then one of the most audible cultural voices of Puerto Rican culture.<sup>413</sup> By one single stroke, culture became the only place where politics, conceived of as an imaginary outside from a deadlocked situation, could be performed,<sup>414</sup> and the place where

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<sup>412</sup> Luis Muñoz Marín, founder of the Partido Popular Democrático, and first democratically elected governor of the island, was also, by common accord, the figure behind the process of (a largely subsidized) industrial modernization in the island during the second half of the twentieth century. It is worth noticing, also, that the populist movement initiated by him, generically known as *muñocismo*, is similar in some of its fundamental characteristics to Argentina’s *peronismo*: particularly regarding its ideologically undecidable character: what started as a rural-become-urban-based movement with a strong socialist backbone, upon hegemonizing the entire political field, gradually started acquiring unmistakable proto-fascist undertones- suppression of its political adversaries in mafia-like assassinations, mass mobilizations recurring to a demagogy that relied largely on repetitions of the evacuated symbols of *puertorriqueñidad*, *la gran familia puertorriqueña*, etc. In a way, *muñocismo*, like *peronismo*, is the very name for this ideological un-decidability and political withdrawal. For a more in depth commentary on this, see the two preceding sections.

<sup>413</sup> For Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, Antonio S. Pedreira incarnated the spirit of “transition” and “negotiation”, as an answer to the questions that the colonial relay of 1898 posed to intellectuals of the period. To that effect, Quiñones mentions how Pedreira asserts “with satisfaction”, after reading the English translation of José Padín’s discourses on Puerto Rican literature, that “one can be an American citizen, without ceasing to be a good Puerto Rican.” That declaration became, a little later, “the voice of Muñoz Marín- with the triumph of the Popular Democratic Party- in official policy, and the programmatic definition of Puerto Rican culture.” Quiñones, “Pedreira en la frontera”, in *El arte de bregar*, 101. (My translation.)

<sup>414</sup> And everyone knows what are the privileged signifiers of this performance: from Antonio S. Pedreira’s ‘transition’- from the Hispanic pre-1898 to the North-American post-1898 colonial situation- to Luis Muñoz Marín’s ‘negotiation,’ and, ultimately, to *puertorriqueñidad*, or the cordialist ideologeme of *culturalist mestizaje*. As happened everywhere else in Latin America, *mestizaje* was envisioned as the end of class antagonism and racial violence- the emblem of this racial [and ultimately *racist*] fantasy is, of course, José Vasconcelos’ *The Cosmic Race*- as if the existence of racial mixing was a sign that racism was inexistent in the island [presumably because perceptible racial differences ceased to be], when the case is that the ruling economic elite is *predominantly* and *increasingly* mulatto- a process that started pretty much with the beginning of the Spanish colonial enterprise- and that a *very nuanced kind* of racism within degrees of ‘blackness’ has, not only existed, but also very much legally sanctioned since colonial times. One should only visit the birth certificates at the Catholic parishes pre-dating the U.S. invasion, to be able to see how the Catholic Church divided society according to different degrees of ‘black

politics, considered as an arduous process of *working through* the spectral remainders returning from the ruins of the antagonistic substance of society, was definitely buried.<sup>415</sup> There is a scene in the novel- otherwise widely commented on for other reasons- that captures very well this moment, where a budding, feeble voice of dissent is *literally* drawn by the populist cacophony:

The passengers signed up in two opposing parties: one a minority of timid people in agreement and the other a vociferous majority who proceeded to intone with a verve reserved for national anthems Macho Camacho's irrepressible guaracha *Life is a Phenomenal Thing*, the deeper tones provided by the driver: wiry and skinny, a wild guarachomaniac; the bus afire with the shrieks and roars of the majority party, the bus afire with torches of happiness held high by the passengers of the vociferous majority party: happy because with the neat swipe of a guaracha they had crushed the attempt at dissidence. (12)

The first thing to note here, is that the two parties alluded to in this battle are most probably not, as one might feel tempted to think, the PNP and the PPD.<sup>416</sup> Nor is it the battle between the voices of *independentismo* (PIP, Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño) and the new colonial occupying forces, or between the PIP and the PNP. More importantly, if it is true that the novel *explicitly* marks a moment of radical rupture from the populist-culturalist tradition initiated by A.S. Pedreira and adopted by muñocist officialdom, one cannot ignore what is the real target of Sánchez's critique.<sup>417</sup> The battle seems to take place, rather, between the incipient

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presence' in 'white' blood. The advent of the Napoleonic Civil Code later in the 1800's in Spain and its colonies only 'secularized' those divisions (in such categories as 'hijo natural,' 'hijo natural ilegítimo,' 'hijo natural ilegítimo,' etc.). The point is, of course, that this kind of nuanced subdivision can literally be carried out *ad infinitum*. As they say in Puerto Rico: "Hay negros, y hay *negros*." ["There are blacks, and there are *blacks*."] Rather than being an objective fact, race is, in the words of Rubén Ríos-Ávila, "ideology's skin, its most powerful visibility." (*La Raza Cómica*, 157.)

<sup>416</sup> I allude to the pro-annexionist *Partido Nuevo Progresista* (*New Progressive Party*), and the pro-commonwealth *Partido Popular Democrático* (*Democratic Popular Party*), respectively.

<sup>417</sup> See Gelpí, Juan. "La cuentística anti-patriarcal de Luis Rafael Sánchez," 113-120.

socialist and communist voices emerging from the urban *proletariat* that was just budding out from the increasingly industrialized economy in the island in the 1920s and 1930s, which the dogmatic rigidity of the *Partido Comunista* and *Partido Socialista* of the 1920s and 1930s did not know how to represent and agglutinate into a single voice, and the culturalist populism that not only opposed it, but literally surged *from within* the ruins of these movements.<sup>418</sup> Said otherwise, what was silenced was not the voice of a (ultimately classist and racist) pre-existing, already vanquished elite *independentismo*, or the voice of the future *annexionists*. The interment this scene evokes seems to cover a much wider historical arch, both in terms of time and in terms of depth: we are dealing with the voice of the working-class, which saw its socialist aspirations buried by their absorption into the populist ideology of the newborn *Partido Popular Democrático*.<sup>419</sup> This ambiguous place of impossible consummation of a sexual encounter therefore coincides with the paralysis inherent to the project of the Puerto Rican version of modernity's coming into its own presence in the island. This modernity negotiated, as if it were a matter of a salsa *jamming session*, the internal contradictions of an invisible metropolitan instance in the island, the political forms of which were in principle democratic, but whose absentist industrial-military forms prevented, as Ángel Quintero Rivera has so clearly demonstrated, the incorporation of those republican democratic principles into the institutional modes of participation of the new redundant proletarian working forces it had created, and forced

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<sup>418</sup> For a succinct historiographical account of this process of proletarian urbanization of the peasantry in Puerto Rico during the first twenty years of the North American colonial rule in the Island, see Quintero-Rivera, Angel. "La dominación imperialista del Estado en Puerto Rico y la política obrera", 1119-1139. Also, see Quintero, "Socialist and Cigar-maker: Artisans' Proletarianization in the Making of the Puerto Rican Working Class", in *Social Classes in Latin America, Part II: Class Formation and Struggle*, pp. 19-38.

<sup>419</sup> See Quintero-Rivera, Angel. "La desintegración de la política de clases (II): de la política obrera al populismo", in *La Clase Obrera y el proceso político en Puerto Rico*, 3-48. See also Villaronga, Gabriel. "Constructing *Muñocismo*: Colonial Politics and the Rise of the PPD, 1934-1940".

to organize.<sup>420</sup> This era signified the advent of a populist politics at the expense of the socialist workers' politics from which it emerged.<sup>421</sup> The result of this process of *depolitization* of the working class by Muñoz Rivera's systematic appropriations of the signifiers that once belonged to the socialist party,<sup>422</sup> was precisely, Puerto Rican culture, as being *totally divorced from political antagonism*.<sup>423</sup> The point is that, from then onwards, *anything* that related to this antagonism would be *solely a cultural matter*. That brings us to the third level: this impossibility is also the constitutive lack of relation between the reader and the writer.

#### V. *Looking Awry at Culture: Guffaw, Ritual and the Fascist Structure of Culturalist Populisms*

What does it mean, for the purposes of a critique of culture consumption, that the aural emblem of this scene of enjoyment is, literally, the musical *hit* song *Macho Camacho's Beat*? The names with which the narrator successively characterizes this scene are many.<sup>424</sup> As it is specified by a warning that precedes and inaugurates the story, the motto driving the narration's thronged rhythm is effectively *Macho Camacho's Beat*, the senseless formula of which goes: "Life is a phenomenal thing, frontwards, or backwards, however you swing." The song becomes a religious commandment that sanctifies, sanctions and organizes the rigid choreography of the

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<sup>420</sup> Quintero-Rivera, "La desintegración . . .", see preceding footnote.

<sup>421</sup> For a succinct account of this process of repression and de-politization of the laborer's class and the advent of *populism*, see Quintero-Rivera, Angel. "La desintegración de la política de clases", in *La clase obrera y el proceso político en Puerto Rico*.

<sup>422</sup> Most notably, the phrase "*Pan, Tierra y Libertad*", which was an appropriation from the Partido Socialista de Puerto Rico, which in turn borrowed it from the "Bread, Land and Peace" slogan from the Bolchevik's group led by Lenin in 1917's Russia. (Villaronga, *Constructing Muñocismo*)

<sup>423</sup> On a side note, Quiñones comments on the fact that in Puerto Rico, contrary to elsewhere in Latin America, a 'warrior culture' never took hold. To which I would agree, on the condition that one understand this 'warrior culture' as having more to do with discipline rather than with violence, given the rampant violence that plagues the island.

<sup>424</sup> Among others: *Vacilón, chereo, guachafita, relajo, bembé, choteo, jodedera, la bayoya, el gufeo, la guasa, la guasimilla*, etc. Sánchez, *La Guaracha*, 110, 122, 126 . . .

characters' consumptive acts, like puppets of an invisible master. The author successively describes this song as an addictive drug fashioned to the 'guaracho-maniac' taste of the islanders- it is a "sedative"; a virus that "invades", "infiltrates" and "corrodes" the whole island (169); it is a perfume that "varnishes and odors" China Hereje's apartment; a religious commandment, a "national dogma of salvation" (122), thanks to which one "stumbles against the Bible"; it comes with a mysterious, yet unstoppable force of a "sweeping slogan", brought by an "anonymous, collective, domesticated throat" (165). This *guaracha* will also be assigned its proper ideological place within this cultural game of who eats whom that the novel stages: ". . . national industry, this guffaw." (126) This *guachafita* is a "national industry"- which is a synonym of "culture". It is within the dazzling contemporariness, the stilled *nowness* of the cultural product that is both the song and the novel, that one can have a glimpse of the historical re-emergence of the trans-historical gaze of this enjoyment in all its politically unattributable nature. The continuous emphasis on the *nowness* of this stilled moment is rehearsed throughout the novel, by invoking the auratic sacredness of products of 'high' culture, in this case the constant reference to a line from Federico García Lorca's famous poem *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejía*: "A las cinco de la tarde, a las cinco en punto de la tarde y son las cinco en todos los relojes [ . . .]" (125-126) The reference to the mournful solemnity of this poem<sup>425</sup> gives way to references of the "rancid odor of a dead dog's destroyed entrails", "the steam that simmers in the municipal dumpster, or the gas leakage from Palo Seco's refineries: vapors stinking of The Good Shit [ . . .]" (125-126) The interruption of everything has its counterpart in the near-to-choked rhythm of the story, which points to the evacuated vestiges of a religious ritual:

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<sup>425</sup> Originally, the elegy sung the death of García Lorca's friend, bullfighter and writer Ignacio Sánchez Mejías, who died gored by a bull in 1934.

Macho Camacho's guaracha lacquers a perfumes the apartment: in the corners, in the crannies, in the tripod with Japaneseries, in the painting with a swan in an idyllic lake, in the painting of *The Last Supper*" (65) "[ . . . ] carried by an anonymous throat, anonymous and collective, anonymous, collective and domesticated, a throat that prefers the sedative proposed by the guaracha that has corroded the country, taken over the country: *life is a phenomenal thing*. The tune carried along little by little into a sour whisper, deafening, whisper and wingding and guff as a national dogma of salvation: the country invaded. (20)

The characteristics attributed to this song are quite telling: It becomes a religious commandment that sanctifies, sanctions and organizes the rigid choreography of the characters' consumptive acts, like puppets of an invisible master. Within the diegetic space of the text, the author successively describes this song as an addictive drug fashioned to the 'guarachomaniac' taste of the islanders- it is a "sedative"; a virus that "invades", "infiltrates" and "corrodes" the whole island (169); it is a perfume that "varnishes and odors" China Hereje's apartment; a religious commandment, a "national dogma of salvation" (122), thanks to which one "stumbles against the Bible"; it comes with a mysterious, yet unstoppable force of a "sweeping slogan", brought by an "anonymous, collective, domesticated throat" (165). This *guaracha* will also be assigned its proper ideological place within this cultural game of who eats whom that the novel stages: ". . . industria nacional, la guachafita." ["national industry, this guffaw."] (126) This *guachafita* is a "national industry"- which is another name for "culture"- and one can be sure that it is destined, as is the case in any "national" industry in the Caribbean, to overseas export, rather than for domestic consumption.

Here, the main interpretational stumbling block lies in that the novel is, itself, a space 'opened' up by the deadlocked repetition of a *vacilón* (*guffaw*), one which is intransitive to any



kind of hermeneutical gesture capable of enunciating an ‘outside’ from the clichéd scripts of rhetorical restrictions this modality imposes on the reader. In other words: the argumentative force of the novel, such as it is premised in the narrative dispositive this signifier configures, seems to require, as a question of hermeneutical necessity, the foreclosure of any possibility of an interpretational outside from the cultural immanence prescribed by this enjoyment. Any ‘outside’ from this immanence would have to go through- and not around- the spectral miasma put to work by this interruption. Said otherwise, like senator Vicente Reynosa and China Hereje, we irremediably are trapped, as cultural consumers, in the “stuck-up” immanence of this mortified vacillation that bears the double signs of a protracted sexual rendezvous the mirror image of which is the core of the impossibility of a modernization that failed, as it were, to come to a realization. Ultimately, this deadlocked immanence has, one must add, one unmistakable name: *Puerto Rican Culture*.

One should therefore attempt a minimal formalization of this *vacilón* and its relation to so-called “Puerto Rican culture”. *Vacilón*, together with all its synonyms mentioned above, can be loosely defined as a monumental vacillation, an untimely moment of indecision, a playful ‘going back and forth’. The only purpose is this going back and forth, and the end result- let us call things by what they are- is the supplemental gift of a *kick- el gustazo*, as it were- that this “jerkings” generates, and which in the novel plays out at more than one level. In a sense, this *vacilón* is a rhetorical effect that strives, always with dubious success, to re-present, in the symbolic, the affective essence of the unexpected and the new. If in cultural consumption there occurs a radicalization, in effect, of the idea of the fetish of the New; in other words, if what is consumed within the so-called ‘cultural’ space is, first and foremost, the idea of the new as the fetish of an evanescent form, it is because such space recreates, by obscuring it, the symptom of

inter-subjective communication and the radical split such communication subtends. The author appropriates the rhetorical axioms pertaining to the space of this guffaw, which has its performative fundament in the narration of a jocose anecdote that, given the equivocal signals of superfluity mixed with melodrama within which this gift comes wrapped, exacerbates the seducing effect of immediacy and bedazzlement that always provokes the emergence of a novelty: what the Disk Jockey is going to narrate is banal, the more grandiose and melodramatic are its rhetorical disguises:

Longhairs and other kinfolk of the flock. Do you understand me with understanding? Or does the always smiling, always respectable, always listening audience want another exemplary example of what's music music and what's not music music?" (49) "And ladies and gentlemen, friends, here is the guaracha by the Tarzan of culture, the Superman of culture, the James Bond of culture, here s and we have here Macho Camacho's ecumenical guaracha *Life is a phenomenal thing*. (203)

It is within the dazzling contemporariness, the stilled *nowness* of the cultural product that is both the song *and* the novel, that one can have a glimpse of the historical re-emergence of the trans-historical gaze of this enjoyment in all its politically unattributable nature. The continuous emphasis on the *nowness* of this stilled moment is rehearsed throughout the novel by invoking, and in the process leveling, the auratic sacredness of products of 'high' culture, in this case the constant reference to a line from Federico García Lorca's famous poem *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejía*: "A las cinco de la tarde, a las cinco en punto de la tarde y son las cinco en todos los relojes [ . . .]" (125-126) The reference to the luctuous solemnity of this poem<sup>426</sup> gives way to references to the "rancid odor of a dead dog's destroyed entrails", "the steam that simmers in the

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<sup>426</sup> Originally, the elegy sung the death of García Lorca's friend, bull-fighter and writer Ignacio Sánchez Mejías, who died gored by a bull in 1934.

municipal dumpster, or the gas leakage from Palo Seco's refineries: vapours stinking of The Good Shit [ . . . ]” (125-126) The interruption of everything has its counterpart in the near-to-choked rhythm of the story, which bears the evacuated signs of a religious ritual. The emblematic scene of this is, of course, Benny's stupid infatuation with his *Ferrari*:

What I mean Papi is that my thing is to have my Ferrari feel at home in Puerto Rico, my thing is for my Ferrari to have a fine environment in Puerto Rico, my thing is for my Ferrari not to get any complexes because it doesn't have, because it hasn't got the autostrada that was built for the smooth flow of Ferraris by the immortal Benito Mussolini: heard and celebrated in fascist classrooms. (106) “[ . . . ] my beautiful Ferrari [ . . . ] Benny, carried away by meat-bating fantasies, overcome by a killing deviltry, seeks the copy of *El Mundo* that collaborates in these chores. Benny flies to the washbowl because jerking off with a wet hand is for revolutionaries and other shitheads, Benny gives himself over to an invocatory swoon, his hand attains the automotive speed denied the Ferrari: Ferrari all chrome, Ferrari all wax, Ferrari all nickel, Ferrari all intercepted by Benny's confused kisses, Ferrari pierced, Ferrari penetrated by Benny's desire, the gas tank torn by Benny's desire, by Benny's officiant, Ferrari gorged by Benny's semen. AAAAH, the cry made within and Benny's ascension to a celebration without equal: one of the great comings of the century. The hand exhausted by the mileage covered by pleasure, the exhausted hand gripping the officiant that falls and rises like a drunkard, falls and rises, falls and rises and the convulsion and the throbbing and a sleep that cloaks and beckons him. (151-153)

The ritualized repetition of ready-made phrases with which the Disc-Jockey accompanies his gaze at Vicente Reynosa - “Vicente es decente y su estampa es contundente, [ . . . ]”<sup>427</sup>- which in the sheer musicality provoked by the formulaic codes of rhymed verse, reminds one of

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<sup>427</sup> This motif repeats itself with variations throughout the text. It represents the stuff of revealing analyses on the relation between repetition and difference, and colonial fetishism. For a more in depth study in that direction, see Cruz, Arnaldo. “Repetition and the Language of the Mass Media in Luis Rafael Sánchez's *La Guaracha del Macho Camacho*”, 35-48.; also, Kressner, Ilka. “Emisiones Poderosas: el impacto de la radio en *Pantaleón y las visitadoras* y *La Guaracha del Macho Camacho*”; and Parkinson-Zamora, Louis. “Clichés and De-familiarization in the Fiction of Manuel Puig and Luis Rafael Sánchez”.

a sticky jingle used in TV commercials or a once ‘revolutionary’ Beatle song now constantly played as background music in shopping marts, puts this repetition and its sense-less cacophony in direct parallelism with the imperatives of consumptive automatism that command all of its characters’ actions. The narrator presents Vicente Reynosa’s decency as something that needs to be sold in a market, a commodity. The re-iteration of Vicente’s decency throughout the novel only succeeds in bracketing it: “Vicendesdecente, Vicentesdecente, Vicentesdecente.” [“Vincentisdecent, Vincentisdecent, Vincentisdecent.”]

In this respect, the tone of solemn sanctification and benediction that accompanies this religious dimension has, in a more politically meaningful sense, the effect, not just of disruption, of de-sacralization, and of political condemnation, but even more radically, of effecting another dialectical torsion in the baroque game of mirrors inaugurated by this interplay between the gaze and the voice. Therefore, by implicating and engaging the reader in the enjoyment of his/her reading, the political verve of the text does not exhaust itself in demolishing parody, if this parody does not at the same time constitute a call for the casting of *another* flip-sided scene, in the form of an interruptive critical gaze, this time emanating from the tension between the reader and the book. Because, in the end, is the relation between a reader and a cultural product such as a book, fundamentally not the same as that which Benny entertains with his Ferrari?

### III. *Cultural Shit*

The novel obsessively calls attention to its status as an artifact embedded within that deceiving space of obfuscation between the political and the ‘amorous’. While it inserts the text

into the non-space of enjoyment that the novel stages, the novel constantly enjoins the reader to choose between two *diametrically* opposed regimes of enjoyment-as-reading: either the reader *buys into* this logic of consumption- the novel as a touristic representative of a blissful paradise of unrestricted enjoyment; or ‘*traverses*’ this reading, to reveal the obverse of a mortifying gaze that returns the message of this enjoying voice, in the form of an unpleasant “seeing oneself looking at the abyss of the gaze that this voice returns” or as Nietzsche said, the moment when, “if you [the reader] insist [like Benny with his Ferrari] in staring at the abyss, the abyss [China Hereje] starts staring back at you.” This is, probably, the paradoxical dimension present in China Hereje, who could be thought of as the obscene obverse of Shakespeare’s Miranda, of which Graciela Alcántara and López de Montefrío are good examples.<sup>428</sup> This is the moment where the enjoying and vacillating voice of the Disk Jockey- which is *both* diegetic and extra-diegetic- turns into an unpleasant gaze by the reader, to the reader.<sup>429</sup>

How does this happen? The lewd *China Hereje*, in all her enjoying monstrosity, embodies the dialectical correlate of the horror of being engulfed by the lingering monster of this cultural stain:

When I want to enjoy, I enjoy, and sometimes I enjoy without wanting to, psst: the fun’s going to end with her. Or if it doesn’t end it will cripple her heart and soul: because of Carolina’s Nameday Party, because at Carolina’s Nameday Party I danced with a cath from Barrazas, because a bash in La Muda, because some meat pies at the pigmeat place Here I Stay because we ate some blood sausages at the pigmeat place Here We Are Again, because a veal fricassee at the El Chorrito restaurant, because an Adam and Eve

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<sup>428</sup> In the near to four hundred year long tradition of *calibanist* readings of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in Latin America, Miranda has frequently been read as the metaphorical embodiment of culture, and the female embodiment of the library of Prospero, for whose possession both Caliban and Ariel vied. For a genealogy of this interpretational vein, see Jáuregui’s *Canibalia: Canibalismo, Calibanismo, Antropofagia Cultural y Consumo en Latino America*.

<sup>429</sup> For an interesting albeit somewhat dated analysis of the double function of the narrator in this novel see Roman-Riefköhl, Raúl A. “La guaracha del Macho Camacho: Texto de Ruptura”.

party at the house of a screwer in Ocean Park, because we went through four cases of beer, because we downed three quarts of Don Q, because I dye my hair, because I undye my hair, because I dye my hair again, because the rollers, because the wig, because I'm going to tie it up in bits of paper, because the hang, because the eyelashes, because: it's enough for anybody. (62)

Hispanophiliac Graciela Alcántara, in all her conjurations against the curse of being *cafre*<sup>430</sup> that hovers like an impending shadow over her life and her fantasies of cultural purity, is the other part, the external, yet privatized part of culture, that part of culture, at least, that, if it is to enter the realm of monetary sanctioning, has to pass through the purifying filter of metropolitan tastes:

Monday it was and she was and she rocked soul and sorrows in the Vienna chair, she was rocking her love affair with Chopin when Macho Camacho's guaracha *Life is a Phenomenal Thing* burst into her house with the force of a river at floodtide. Violent, indignant, irritated, she called the servants by name, Chucha, Jacinta, and Josefa, and put Macho Camacho's guaracha *Life is a Phenomenal Thing* into quarantine: a street-corner hymn, a repulsive hymn, a hymn of the mob. Choose: the guaracha or me. (185)

One can therefore oppose *China Hereje's* all too democratic and 'generous' consumptive obscenity, which is, precisely the space of this *cafrería* that torments Graciela Alcántara:

There are things that never become known, the mystery of the world is a world of mystery: a quotable quote. What is well known is that for her everything is plink, it's well known from her own mouth. Listen to her: for me everything is plink. Listen to this

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<sup>430</sup> A word commonly used in the Hispanic Caribbean, and in Puerto Rico in particular, to designate what is vulgar, tasteless, obscene and unrefined. It also has the socioeconomic connotation of being *lumpen*, *déclassé*. A serious study, much in the line of Mañach's study of the African word *choteo*, is lacking about the role this word has as a class marker in the Caribbean, as it operates in literature, painting, and other forms of expression. *Cafre*, probably a corruption of the Semitic *kafir*, which means *infidel*- arguably the worst insult one can accord someone in Muslim countries-, the word, originally used to refer to non-Muslim Africans- was probably imported to Spain earlier on during Muslim colonization of the peninsula, and later on may have been exported by converted Moorish and/or Peninsular settlers during the Spanish Conquest; or may have been imported by slave traders, together with their human merchandise, during the XVII century. The fact that this religious prohibition eventually translated into a cultural prohibition is in itself interesting.

other one: everything slips away from me. Lend an ear to what you hear: I can wiggle through anything. And, right away, she shrugs her shoulders, twists her mouth, snorts through her nose, shuts off her eyes: clichés turned serious by the commonality *I don't give a whore's hard turd for anything*: her Lord's Prayer. Don't look at her now because she's looking now. (14)

While *China Hereje* embodies the dialectical correlate of the horror of being engulfed by the lingering monster of a cultural stain, Vicente Reynosa's wife, Graciela Alcántara, in all her obsessive conjurations against the curse of being *cafre*<sup>431</sup> summons, on the other hand the external, yet privatized part of culture which, if it is to be allowed entrance into the realm of monetary sanctioning, has to be sifted by metropolitan tastes. One should therefore read together *China Hereje's* all too generous consumptive obscenity, which is precisely the space of this *cafrería* that torments Graciela Alcántara's miserly gaze. The narrator invites us, again, to hear China Hereje's bestial indifference:

Listen to her: for me everything is plink. Listen to this other one: everything that is jerks my tits. Lend an ear to what you hear: I can wiggle through anything. And right away, she shrugs her shoulders, twists her mouth, snorts through her nose, shuts off her eyes: clichés turned serious by the commonality *I don't give a whore's hard turd for anything*: her Lord's Prayer. Don't look at her now, because she's looking now. (14)

How, therefore, can we interpret this scandalizing prohibition not to look at China Hereje's gazing, if this prohibition is directed, not against China Hereje's image, nor against what she gazes at, but against her gaze gazing back at us? Graciela's bedazzled gaze upon the *Time* reminds one of Jorge Luis Borges' snobbish Teodelina Villar, the woman who incarnates this self-consumption, whose un-mourned for death is the flipside of the protagonist's cultural-

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<sup>431</sup> A word commonly used in the Hispanic Caribbean, and in Puerto Rico in particular, to designate what is vulgar, tasteless, obscene and unrefined. It also connotes *lumpen*, *déclassé*.

flâuneristic meanderings in *El Zahir*; it also provides a clue to the mystery of the narrator's direct interpellation to the reader in Sánchez novel:

Graciela thumbs through the latest *Time*: people have got to know whether or not their President is a crook. Well: I am not a crook. Graciela skips over the pages of international news in *Time*: Allende or death in cold blood. Graciela skips over the pages of literary criticism in *Time*: Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*. Graciela turns over with horror and disgust some shots of napalmized Vietnam reproduced in *Time*, because she can't tolerate even a minute of anguish: nothing painful, nothing mournful, nothing miserable, nothing sad: I wasn't born for that: it's good not being born to look at children fried to a crisp by flamethrowers and fright, people who are lucky, damn it but it's good. Graciela stops fas-ci-na-ting, en-chan-ting, be-wit-ched, looking at the fascinating, enchanting, bewitching photograph of Liz and Richard's house in Puerto Vallarta published as a graphic supplement of *Time*. (131)

This passage comingles scenes of bourgeois cosmopolitan glamour with the well-known imperial trail of military horrors, where one is tempted to question the ethical status of a reader who is forced to choose between these 'two regimes of madness'. Moreover, it invites pondering on the true obscene 'message' conveyed by this act of 'quickly turning the page' (deviating the gaze) from ugly things, other than what China Hereje says, quite explicitly: that she [Graciela Alcántara] *does not give a whore's shit about anything*. In the relation between China Hereje and Graciela Alcántara we can therefore see very clearly how the horror of which one literally denies the existence, is the prerequisite blindness for a surplus of fascination the horrific excess of which returns in the form of an 'inward scream,' the same scream that the Disk Jockey mentions in relation to Benny's orgasmic spasms on the occasion of his love affair with his *Ferrari*. China Hereje's perverse voice, like a *covenant's shofar*, re-turns the proper dose of truth to Graciela Alcántara's scrupulous gaze. This second moment of the dying father's bellowing is, to borrow



from Michel Chion's remarks, *deaf* (not *mute*).<sup>432</sup> The truth of China Hereje's remarks, to the effect that "she does not give a whore's shit about anything", can only be grasped in all its political force, if one re-conceives it as, literally, the *negative* of Graciela Alcántara's selective gaze. The most horrifying scream is, like the famous award-winning *Napalm Girl* photograph by Nick Ut<sup>433</sup>, the one that we can see but cannot hear.

What, in the end, is the re-subjectifying gaze that inverts our relation with enjoyment as cultural consumers, in a scene that could capture the transcendental structure embedded in its contingent historicity? Perhaps a passage in the novel encapsulates that gaze, since it evokes in the same textual space, the savage obscenity and the harmonious, minimally bearable façade of this "cultura puertorriqueña":

Bartolomé de las Casas, recruiter of black masses from Timbuktu and Fernando Pó, black masses that wiggle asses, that cock it, that open their legs to the white classes from Extremadura and Galicia, white classes that wiggle their asses, that cock it, that open their legs to Taíno lasses from Manatuabón and Otoao, Taino lasses from Manatuabón and Otoao that wiggle their asses, that cock it, that open their legs to black masses from Timbuktu and Fernando Po: fuck about, suck about, and anybody without a Dinga has got a swineherd from Trujillo and a squaw: all milks the milk: the dark skin is from here. (73)

If Puerto Rican national identity has been imaginarily construed around the narrative of an extended family, one has to accept that this family actualizes its self-presence by obsessively performing that imaginary balance of mutual "fuck abouts" [*chingueteos*]<sup>434</sup>, that is, by

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<sup>432</sup> Chion, Michel. *The Voice in Cinema*. The notion of *deaf* (as opposed to *mute*) cinema, is advanced by Chion early in the book, in the section properly entitled *When Cinema Was Deaf*, when he refers to Jean Painlevé's remarks to the effect that "cinema has always been sound cinema, or Jean Mitry, for whom "the early cinema was not mute but quiet."

<sup>433</sup> Ut, Nick. "Napalm Girl".

rehearsing the exchange of signs that are racial, linguistic, religious, and inter-ethnic equality, signs that nonetheless exist only as being perennially imperiled by the threat of *a cultural stain*, re-emerging from a lingering racial, sexed and gendered thing, and allegorized by the transgressive nerve inherent to an extramarital affair.<sup>435</sup> In sum, this scene does not expose some logic of democratic racial summation, but of a subtractive racist and fascist watering down.<sup>436</sup> Since the extemporaneous synchronicity of this torpid vacillation reveals itself as what drives and sustains the historical substance of Modernity as such, the main message in the novel is not that this primal orgy becomes visible *in spite* of the diachronic essence at work in history.<sup>437</sup> It is, rather, that History *qua* substance of the ever-returning New comes to presence, precisely because of the eternal re-emergence of the deadlocked mortification implicit in this timeless and ghostly primal scene.

The gaze and the voice, the effects of which will be retroactively traced to the self-relating gaze of a political subject that will have arisen from the ruins of a political battle, is as

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<sup>434</sup> This orgiastic trans-historical relay reminisces another line of significations that *bregar* [making-do] seems to activate- the famous ‘ten-con-ten’ [‘have-with-have’]: “The *ten con ten* is a convergence immediately followed by a divergence, an indecisive *it is that is not* [*si es que no es*], which makes any definitive response impossible. It is a discord and a duplicity that are implanted as norms of language and in the body the marks of a completely singular social and cultural formation.” (Quiñones, *El arte de bregar*, 36).

<sup>435</sup> And it is this “slightly too dark suntan of here”, precisely, the way the ruling class in Puerto Rico, which nowadays is, it must be said, mostly racially mixed in varying degrees, has had in ‘making-do’ with the disavowal of a *highly nuanced* racism that knows all too well how to discern amongst very subtle racial (and henceforth social, class, historical, ethnic . . .) markers of difference.

<sup>436</sup> The 1946’ *Aguinaldo Gibaro*, and the 1849’s *El Gibaro*, by Manuel Alonso, are considered to be the Ur-texts of this myth, as well as the foundational texts of the Puerto Rican canon. (José Luis González, *El país de cuatro pisos*). And to be revived in the 1930’s by culturalist champions like A.S. Pedreira and his cohort.

<sup>437</sup> Here I echo Renata Salecl’s remarks on the false opposition between the historicist outlook at sex and Freudian claims of universality: “There is no incompatibility between the precise historical context (the great crisis of the relationship between the sexes one hundred years ago, which also gave birth to psychoanalysis) in which ‘There is no sexual relationship’ (Lacan) became a commonplace, and Lacan’s claim that this statement is universally valid: in a proper dialectical analysis, universality and historicization are strictly correlative. Freudian psychoanalysis is, as the standard judgment goes, a product of the late nineteenth century; however, its insights are ‘universally valid’ *not in spite of* the historical context of their discovery but *because of it*.” (Salecl/Zizek, *Gaze and Voice*, 1-3.) See, also, Dolar, Mladen. “Freud and the Political”.

dead serious as the banality of this scene of simulation. The fundamental truth contained in the ambiguity of Graciela Alcántara's (implicit) superego injunction "¡no seas cafre!", has to be interpreted, to be sure, at the cultural register- "don't be tasteless"-, but only in order to reveal another, more disturbingly ambiguous injunction to the reader, translated in the novel as "no la miren ahora, que ahora mira": "do not look at her now, that she's looking . . ."] Again, the second contains the first, even if the first 'came' first, as its generic form. One can only look *awry* at 'culture'. The cultural gaze is the 'cultural' as a whole, and arises precisely in this performative act of seeing without looking, where objective conditions of oppression, social divisions and the violence they entail, are blurred.<sup>438</sup> Considering that the reader receives this invitation/injunction through the textual inscription of the Disk Jockey's voice, henceforth activating the imaginary, what is the meaning of this sentence? The paradox, which traverses this text as a problem that exacts an ethics of writing is that, in order to be serious- that is, in order to subject oneself to the discipline of the serial- something in the order of this disruption has to replicate itself as an ethics of reading and interpretation. This *vacilón*, in the scene of seduction enacted by this vacillation of the gaze and the voice, operates an interruptive crisscrossing

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<sup>438</sup> The most blatant example of this would be, of course, the touristic gaze cast at Indian shantytowns- where a whole industry has been flourishing for some time now, with regular tours scheduled around the slums in bullet-proofed buses; and Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*, where just recently, just after they had been brutally 'pacified' (that is, purged from drug-dealers who nonetheless frequently assumed roles as community leaders), tourists have also started to venture. This obscene gaze consists in this costumbrista 'looking askance,' by virtue of which one sees an 'organic whole' of humans 'embedded' in their milieu, where even sporadic bursts of religious or drug-related violence are understood as part of the 'natural' state of things, part of the 'hidden laws' pertaining to the 'natural balance' and 'homeostasis' within that 'human group,' etc. It is easy to see, incidentally, how an 'ethnographic' discourse tacitly blends with the costumbrista distancing proper to the persistence of a voyeuristic/aesthetic element in *flâneur* writing, to constitute the contemporary touristic discourse. A wealth of literary criticism has evolved around the cultural tourism in the Caribbean (and in Latin America 'at large'). See, to this effect, Rosa, Richard. "Business as Pleasure Culture, Tourism, and Nation in Puerto Rico in the 1930's", 449-488. For a more general account of tourism and the Caribbean, see Strachan, Ian G. *Paradise Plantation: Tourism and Culture in the Anglophone Plantation*. This culturalist-touristic gaze based on an over-identification of a previously hypostized Otherness is transposed into respectable instances of cultural criticism: even the assertions of someone like Benítez Rojo, when he says, for example, that "culture is our (the Caribbean people's) only home" in *La isla que se repite*, can be considered a sign of the typical tendency of Caribbean intellectuals and writers to uncritically and sometimes willingly insert themselves into the international neo-liberal traffic of cultural body-signs.

between the intra-textual and the extra-textual- the alternation of two kinds of subjective positioning in relation to the subjective meaning that the reader in his ambiguous (dis-)identification with the narrator, as the consumer of its cultural 'aura,' will give to his/her act of devouring/enjoying the novel.

In a sense, by the formula of this prohibition, the Disk Jockey is commanding us, as readers, with a certain disgusting, unpleasant, mortifying gaze, from what remains unsaid in the novel. Through the assumption of the mass-media and rhetorical dispositive of the radiophonic device, that 'don't look at her that she's looking,' turns into something more like 'look how they enjoy,' from which such an imperative to look acquires a dimension of satire, only to turn into the less pleasant gaze of shame and horror: that *vacilón*, that *choteo* that the voice of the narrator articulates in a gaze of a secret enjoyment, just to turn it "inside out", into an enjoyment of the gaze- the unsayable truth of a terrifying gaze that enjoys- that finally acquires deeply political connotations: the ethereal groundlessness of that initial injunction ends up by revealing its negative flip-side. That injunction of looking by the voice- "no la mires ahora, que ahora mira"- the Disk Jockey imposes explicitly, yet proposes in negative terms, as a narrative device, the most immediate effect of which, considering that we are dealing with a written text, is to recast the hermeneutical dispositions of the reader along a line similar to that of a vulgar voyeur, only in order to have that gaze, in a second moment, turn upon itself. That is to say, the imperative "[don't] look at how they stupidly enjoy!", turns into "stupidly enjoy yourself, reader, looking at how they enjoy!", only to become something like "look at yourself, oblivious consumer of this cultural product, stupidly enjoying by watching them enjoy, and thinking that you are outside of this cannibalistic cultural feast!"

This is, therefore, a novel in which rhetorical effects explode the ideological matrix- the colonial specters- of neoliberal culturalism, by subverting the distinction between the public and the private, since the inter-class, inter-racial and extra-legal sexual coupling that constantly un-happens in the novel constitutes also the stuff of a lingering political questioning the invisibility of which the text, in turn, makes visible. Its baroque style subsequently collapses the language/body binary, by ‘flattening’ the characters’ subjective relief, turning them into a mere function of signifiers constellating an enjoying cultural machine, and by concurrently ‘embodying’ and imparting ‘subjective’ substance to these signifiers, by virtue of which they become the real ‘actors’ through which the characters’ bodies transit- the most literal example of this transit is, of course, Benny’s relation with his Ferrari. Ultimately, at the space where a spectral re-turn of voice and gaze symptomatize this corporeal dis-closure, it unhinges the auratic of the cultural object and the affective space of its subjective , when it re-emits the status of the text to the performative rituals of cultural enjoyment, where that which ‘others’ in the Other re-emerges as the terror of an obscene spectacle, very much contained in the narrator’s injunction, “no la mires ahora, que ahora mira.” In other words, the novel writes a ‘nothing’ that obsessively repeats itself in the symbolic, since everything un-happens in a Moebius-like interweaving of mutual gazings and voicings. As a cultural product, the novel *symbolizes*, that is, it casts a gaze and a voice upon the form of a literary text, the phantasmal ambiguity that happens at the faultlines of the signifier ‘culture’- the scene delineated by this gaze and voice has the status of a political subject that knows itself as symptom.

The only unifying element is the ethereal, ubiquitous, and invisible force of *Macho Camacho’s Beat*, which the voice of the Disk Jockey revamps, after brief interruptions that mark

the ending and beginning of each chapter. The function of this repetition is to undermine the self-sameness of a national identity and cultural homogeneity that paradoxically it purports to display. The result is that, at the level of *tone* and *rhythm*- that is, of what is *connoted*-, the novel seems to establish a mirror-like correspondence between the song and the text- the song *means* the obverse of the text's *connotations* and vice-versa.<sup>439</sup> But this equalization finds its dialectical counterpart in the totally opposite treatment this song and the text are accorded when the enjoying interplay of gaze and voice reaches its moment of dialectical stasis in the uncanny moment where that obscene gaze, constructed for the reader by the Disc Jockey's voice, returns its gaze to the reader, that is, as a prohibition, or as the ex-abrupt of a trumpet discharge.

This private melodrama, unleashed as a function of a discord with respect to what is *either* in accordance with good taste *or cafre*, hints nonetheless at the constant possibility of its (dis-)closure. After the occultation and displacement of the repressed 'barbaric' element that sustains modernity's civilizational project, the word "culture" subsequently becomes the performative site of that difference. It could be conceived, thus, as the net balance of that mediation, which takes place in the space we have come to call 'cultural,' at the same time that this mediation opens it up as such. However, the fact remains that this balance is always precarious. As lack of meaning, *jouissance*- contained in all the signifiers with which this jerking back and forth is denoted in the novel- is the residual energy of the *socius*<sup>440</sup> that traverses and

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<sup>439</sup> For a more complete analysis of the ambiguity and paradox of the novel's title, see Pabón, Carlos. "La Guaracha del Macho Camacho: The Novel as Dirge", 348-360. This article also touches on the recurrent paradoxical theme of mourning in the novel.

<sup>440</sup> I borrow the term from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as they use it in their work *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Deleuze/Guattari refer to the Roman etymology of the term, arguably to designate the contingency, segmentarity, performativity and imaginary aspects of human groups in their becoming, as opposed to the deceiving 'organicity' and 'wholeness' with which the term 'society' frequently comes loaded. Deleuze, Gilles. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.; and *El Anti-Edipo: Capitalismo y Esquizofrenia*.

infuses the entire cultural field with an intensity that nonetheless ceaselessly calls forth renewed gestures over its political meaning.

## Chapter 8

### Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá's *Cortijo's Wake*: How the *Jibaro* Became a *Boricua Bestial*, or How the Lettered Man Became a Jerk.

“The student feels displaced, not by the fact of feeling himself a brother,  
as they say, of the *proletariat*, but of the *sub-proletariat*.  
The point is to know why students feel, like them, *redundant*.”

- Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*.

“There are pessimisms that have the signification  
of a paradoxical optimism.”  
Enrique Rodó, *Ariel*.

Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá figures as one of the most lucid readers of Puerto Rican contemporary reality, and arguably one of the most prominent Latin American narrators of the dialectical alternation involved in this process of becoming-jerk.<sup>441</sup> Nonetheless, what the readers can read in his texts is the blindness of another baffled reader, who fails to read himself in the blind spots of the Other. Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá's work frequently lays bare the urgency of a question, to which his narrative voices nonetheless fail to find a proper answer: How did the *jibaro*, the sun-roasted, domesticated animal that was once supposed to represent the familial quintessence of *puertorriqueñidad*, become a *boricua bestial*, that terrifying lumpenized monster, typically linked to the blasphemy of identitarian translocation, to the *insult* that represents, for the more Hispanophile members of a Puerto Rican family, this embarrassing breakage of national-linguistic integrity, and to the terror of cultural miscegenation?<sup>442</sup> To answer this question means, in essence, to enquire into the process through which the Puerto Rican

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<sup>441</sup> His work, both his urban chronicles- *Una noche con Iris Chacón*, *Las tribulaciones de Jonás*, and *San Juan: Memoirs of a City*- his baroque, erudite, pseudo-historical chronicles of the XVIII century Puerto Rico- notably, *La noche oscura del Niño Avilés* and *La renuncia del Héroe Baltasar*-, all partake of the same *abject* coefficient, in which the protagonists are depicted in the process of their own degradation and dereliction, of their own becoming-Jerk.

<sup>442</sup> The term ‘boricua bestial’ is a term amply used in street parlance to denote the urban, usually male islander, who belongs to what Marx in his *Eighteenth Brumaire* would have termed the *lumpen proletariat*, the “class of no class”. (Marx, Karl, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.)



lettered man became a jerk. In the paragraphs that follow I will rehearse what appears to be the superposition of the last question onto the first.<sup>443</sup> *Cortijo's Wake*, the urban chronicle that narrates the interment of working-class *plena* singer Rafael Cortijo, occupies a privileged space in this narrative. In it, there seems to exist an ideological blindness that constitutes the nerve of the critical-political gesture that runs throughout the narration. The chronicler vacillates between the wonder and the horror in witnessing what can be conceived of as a spectral re-enactment of Oller's *Baquiné*.

Early in the text, shortly after having made his equivocal entrance into the enclosed space of Luis Lloréns Torres' public project, the ghetto of what is nonetheless the 'impure' and 'anti-aesthetical' outside of the post-modern city, he comes face to face with a heroin addict, who asks him for a dime, in terms that acquire an enigmatic character for the narrator-- "hey, intelligent one, lay a dime on me!".<sup>444</sup> Eventually, this interpellation obtains for the narrator the status of a death sentence: from then onwards he, the belated inheritor of the lettered class, will have the face of a *jerk* ("[ . . . ] tiene cara de mamao"). If an insult could be considered the only moment when there is *actual* communication, that is, when the minimum of phantasmatic support of effective communicative distance is short-circuited, what does it mean to be accorded such an

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<sup>443</sup> In respect to this relation, see Bernabé, Mónica. 'Prologo,' in *Idea Crónica*, 7-25. "Además de su historia como género periodístico, las prácticas del cronista [decimonónico] tienen sus puntos de contacto con la etnografía y otras disciplinas de las llamadas ciencias sociales." María Helena Rodríguez Castro, has elsewhere pointed out the formal similarities between the nineteenth century chronicle and the late twentieth century chronicles of Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá: "En su estudio sobre la inserción de la crónica moderna en el periodismo finisecular, Julio Ramos advierte como la misma auspicia una nueva relación entre lo público y lo privado, una salida airosa del yo del 'reino interior' [ . . . ] Una de las figuraciones recurrentes de la crónica, en general, y las de Rodríguez Juliá, en particular, es la del paseante. Salir del espacio cerrado y sacralizador del gabinete letrado, del recinto del saber en el cual- rodeado de sus autoridades- el ensayo puertorriqueño había postulado sus ficciones nacionales, al espacio abierto e irreverente del desfile callejero. Una salida que implica un inevitable forcejeo con los marcos de la palabra autoritaria que, desde esos interiores, habló y actuó sobre sus exteriores." ("El cronista se pone sus máscaras", 76-78), in *Las tribulaciones de Juliá*.

<sup>444</sup> One of the first to be built, the working-class residential project Luis Lloréns Torres emblemizes the populist ideology of Luis Muñoz Marín (son of poet Luis Muñoz Rivera).

unequivocal sign of visibility and recognition, in a scene the conditions of visibility of which are traversed, precisely, by the rhetorical protocols of an anthropological foundational (mis-)recognition?<sup>445</sup> It is crucial to emphasize, nevertheless, that the narrator's interlocutor never utters those words. The 'jerking' of the urban chronicler in *Cortijo's Wake* takes place in that ambiguous space where the voice attributed to the other is purely an imaginary effect of the Other that is in excess with itself. There is an uncomfortable, uncanny aura that does not go unnoticed by the crowd in this chronicle that is the object of this section:

“But don't think for a minute that I myself won't be subjected to exactly the same kind of stereotyping: A white guy with a chubby face, a handlebar mustache, and glasses is a disturbing presence in Lloréns. *They* too are able to read me; in fact, they already have the *reading* on me: *that dude has the face of a jerk*, . . . Lookie here, man, lay a dime on me . . . . Fuck, as they say in the Mother Country, and to think that all this is [for] so much more than the name of a poet.” (20)

From then onwards, he becomes the embodiment of an undead father. This *voice* is terrifying for him, because he cannot register it in the symbolic texture of his epistemic mappings. This moment leaves the narrator wandering, in a hesitation between letting himself be engulfed by the crowd or struggling at the gates of the whale of his own class prejudices.<sup>446</sup> This hesitation between a desire for legitimacy and authority, and its abject self-parodying, is what is being put to work in Juliá's text, in order to re-create the allegory of that symptom.<sup>447</sup> The hypnotic nature of this riddle will haunt him throughout the narration. The narrator reminds us that they already *have the reading on him*, and there is conceivably nothing more shaming than

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<sup>445</sup> See Ramos, Julio. *Desencuentros*, 112.

<sup>446</sup> Indirect allusion to his other wake-chronicle, *Jonah's Tribulations (Las tribulaciones de Jonás)*, where he registers the funeral and interment of Luis Muñoz Marín. See Rodríguez-Juliá, Edgardo. *Las tribulaciones de Jonás*.

<sup>447</sup> See, in that regard, Duchesne, Juan, Ed. *Las tribulaciones de Juliá*. San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1992. This collection of critical essays explores the writer's recurring motives of the gaze and the voice, as literary dispositives that traverse his work.

*knowing* one is *being read* by someone else, particularly when that reading attests to the exposing of one's own self as an excess remainder, that creature that baffles us because it embodies the refusal, the resistance against that reduction, especially when it comes shrouded in the forms of political right-mindedness. In the wonder, and pleasure, of representing, killing, consuming, engulfing the other in the name of the Other, that Other has killed, consumed, engulfed him. He has become the unwitting object of his own acts of reification- he retreats in terror, the moment he hears the voice of the Other, the second terrifying moment, where the voice tells him what we cannot see in that gaze.

The narration opens with a properly academic definition of where the difference between a wake and a funeral is supposed to lie:

If a funeral marks the end of life, the final separation of the deceased from the mourners, a wake is the realm of conflicting emotions, the space where our unruly inner time can't decide whether to observe death or to deny it, all due to that deceptive state of the deceased who has not yet become a memory. (19) <sup>448</sup>

For the narrator, the abyss that stands between mere academic abstraction and stark social reality is immediately transferred onto another kind of divide: that of his condition of lettered man as being the product of a petit-bourgeois up-bringing, and the largely lumpenized reality he came to measure and register, like an impossible ethnographer coming from a bygone epoch, using an outdated discursive instrument to construct a gaze that is already pre-conditioned by his self-consciousness, as the redundant member of a dying caste. And this transition is like being “woken up from a dream”: “Desperté del sueño de la metafísica cuando el taxi me dejó en la entrada (¿o será la salida?), del Caserío Luis Lloréns Torres.”

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<sup>448</sup> Rodríguez-Juliá, Edgardo. *El entierro de Cortijo/Cortijo's Wake*. Durham: Duke U., 2004. (Bilingual edition.)

Even if he can articulate with perfect intelligibility the predicament of his position, his gaze *still* depends on this mutual excessive visibility that only betrays the ruse of an accompanying invisibility:

But getting out of the taxi I found myself face-to-face with a frightening bit of mythology: *The Providencia Street light- man, I wouldn't stop there even for the cops.* The stories are terrifying: Providencia street in the Lloréns Projects is an area of what the Marxists classify under the category of the *lumpen*; my petit bourgeois mother would call them *hoodlums*. The terms aren't exactly the same but, to the effects of the fear of the other, they have the same taste. Class prejudice can even reduce the threshold of our paranoia: I came by cab for a good reason- where the hell was I supposed to leave the car in Lloréns? Crossing that mythical zone of violence is almost a guarantee that you're going to get *mugged*. *Bro*, that language is like the measure of an unbridgeable gulf between my condition and theirs. *Man*, that stuff about class struggle is serious business, that's for sure. (19-20)

This *bestial* other *exceeds* his gaze. It represents the inedible excess of his academic gaze. But one should understand where this excess comes from. It does not come from the intellectual's loss of authority and autonomy; rather, this excess is paradoxically its guarantor. This gaze is put in italics, in order, perhaps, to institute the unequivocal mark of a *distance* in the text, as if the author's anxieties were ciphered in this gesture.<sup>449</sup> A distance that *constitutes* the sphere of sense around which the outdated chronicler constructs the limits of his authorial

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<sup>449</sup> Regarding to this mark of distinction, Ríos-Ávila makes the following comments: “[ . . . ] the text's *leit motif*: when the *Other* speaks, when it sifts through the lumpenized dialect of the hoodlums and invades the narrator's coherent relation, the letter becomes *italics* [in Spanish this modality is called “bastardilla”- literally ‘little bastards’], marking the passage from the cogitation to the quotation, as a des-figuration of the very letter. And the reason is that a bastard is a deviated from its natural duty; bastard, says the dictionary: ‘who degenerates from its origin or nature’. There are bastard brothers, but also, there are bastard letters, which diverge from the origin, which stick out (di-verted?) because they do not fit altogether in the anterior order sanctioned by correction, approved by the norm and decreed by the Law. And here the voice of the Other talks from that treachery of the Law, from that disturbing zone that insists in the performance of a parlance that belies the illusion of a language as an abstraction, as a guiding universe. The Other speaks always in *bastardillas*, deviating with the timbre of its accent the sure path of its writing.” (*La raza cómica*, 79-80)

presence, as a proper safeguard of an authority that is never questioned, but whose legitimating strategies are always already *in question*.<sup>450</sup> What is interesting about this passage is the way knowledge and belief play out as the two terms in a structure of denial that to a great extent confers power to the diegetic tension of the chronicle. This tension becomes manifest in the narrator's frequent returning to the affective expedient of an ambiguous going back and forth between derision and self-derision. Ultimately, the denial involved in this alternation underscores the recurrence of a narrative involving the intellectual's anxiety-ridden entrenchment as the withholder of the authority-conferring letter.

The inconsistency inherent in the narrator's positioning, comes to full light when the narrator *witnesses* how a group of girls *remind* lawyer-become- salsa star Rubén Blades that he is, after all, *also another jerk*. Here it becomes glaringly evident to the writer-reader that, like Rubén Blades, the bespectacled narrator is *also* an impostor. All this jerking, this going back and forth between a wondrous witnessing of the cultural sublime and a terror of being engulfed by its monstrous supplement, is finally resolved in an outburst of effusive non-sense: "How to reconcile so much madness with so much tenderness?" ["¿cómo conciliar tanto extravío con tanta ternura?"]<sup>451</sup> From this, a series of other pressing questions necessarily follows Is not the non-sense of this phrase somewhat analogous to the Jewish covenant's *shofar* mentioned at the beginning of this section, the psychic function of which is, in effect, to remember, revive the covenant that, in the supplemental dimension of a terrifying prohibition that came from within

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<sup>450</sup> Jorge Duany has already said something similar regarding the work of René Márquez. See *Literatura y Paternalismo*.

<sup>451</sup> Regarding this affective pose, one should mention Juan Duchesne Winter's acute remarks: "God's assassin coincides with his consoler, Zarathustra, when he sees in compassion the affective key of any form of *power over others*. Along the writings of Nietzsche the theme of compassion ciphers those fluxes of active and reactive forces: compassion and shame, self-affirmation and resentment, excess and lack, which structure the ever shifting power relations." Duchesne-Winter, Juan. "Del prólogo al pórtico: criticar un texto llamado Rodríguez Juliá", in *Las tribulaciones de Juliá*, 23. [My translation.]

the Other's obsessional command to enjoy, bound God to the Hebrew tribes? In this particular context, what is the *covenant* of which we must be reminded, if it is not that of a 'cultural' debt owed by its cultural 'prophet'? To whom- to what kind of reader-to-come- is this last bellowing of the always already dead lettered animal addressed? What its message?

Perhaps the most significant difference between Rafael Sánchez- the wondered dancing *flâneur* who jubilantly embodies the cacophony of the popular classes, in order to preserve the inaudible music of its beauty - and Rodríguez Juliá -the belated chronicler who refuses to pay the price for what he does not know of what he knows, instead of "mis-placing (extraviarse) himself in the excess of such tenderness" (Ríos-Ávila, 85)- is this traversing through the specters of modernity that the narrator of *Cortijo's Wake* refuses to embark on. In the process of this denial, he becomes the jerked off dialectical refuse of his own refusal.<sup>452</sup> Perhaps we can see in the non-sense of the narrator's last words the same gesture of terrified 'turning away' of a reader that peeps into what are the veritable outsides of the post-modern cities, but who can only look awry, and quickly turn the page over, like Graciela Alcántara. This last phrase reverberates uncannily, as it resonates in the cultural history of the island as a refusal to that invitation, which is also an invitation to keep looking at the abyss of culture, *especially* when that abyss is, like China Hereje, looking back at us.<sup>453</sup> It is not but in the beyond of the terror of "brutal desires" that lurk in the fault-lines of the "loutish superstition" that, after all, has always defined the Other, that we can arrive at the wonder of *that* other that *refuses* (how can it otherwise be?) to be engulfed by false coins, of a universal singularity the very purpose of which is to *exceed* and ignore the

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<sup>452</sup> *Mama'o* is street slang for the Spanish voice *mamado*, the passive form of which denotes the humiliation attributed to both its sexual and infantilizing connotations. A *mama'o* is not exactly a sucker, but literally someone who has been *sucked off*, *jerked off*, or *-on*, or *both*.

<sup>453</sup> Rephrasing of Nietzsche's remarks: "Anyone who fights with monsters should take care that he does not in the process become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes back at you." Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*.

phantasmal injunction of the Other; of a deaf and blind ‘other’ that sits uncomfortably in opposition to the Other, as an uncanny reminder of what always remains to come from what exceeds our gaze, ever irreducibly and ever affirmatively.

Here, again, the reader can perceive the same feminized, ‘daemonic’ character at play between the *letrado* and its object of aesthetic contemplation, only that, rather than being an aesthetic stand in for an imaginary projection of a nationalist love idyll, within the narration of a violent romance, where the feminine part always bears the brunt of the *letrado*’s homicidal impulse (Márquez, Vallejo); unlike Borges, where it irradiates as a mortifying substance from within an object that is both magical and ordinary; unlike Paul’s body of knowledge called *testimonio*, where the same unfolds from within an ideological duplicity of a discursive form that is, also, treated like a brute, formless *hyle*; and unlike Sarduy and Piñera, where the cultural object becomes itself an embodiment of the undeadness of a subject that is both devoid of biological and symbolic life; in Sánchez and Juliá, this daemonic thing is transferred onto the excremental index of a reified multitude that represents the excess of meaning that had to remain outside the national culturalist fairy tale of the great puertorrican family. This effect, what Walter Benjamin refers to when he speaks of the ‘object’s gazing back’ at its observer, is what terrifies and ultimately turns the narrator into an *undead* figure. More importantly, it signals the moment when in the narrator’s musings (who is so ostentatiously occupying the position of knowledge within the discourse of the university) about the political (and therefore *ethical*) impingements of the cultural phenomenon- *simultaneously* in the ethnographic and aesthetic sense - he came to register and accommodate his academic knowledge, and fail to account for this remainder of otherness that exceeds the Other. In the end, the narrator becomes the excremental embodiment

of this failure to account for the monstrous ‘thing in itself’. This ‘thing in itself,’ which is perceived by the first person narrator in Juliá’s chronicle, or by the reader in Sánchez’s novel, as ultimately horrific and disgusting, is what the multitude in both novels embody.

Let me, therefore, rehearse a comparative summary of my analysis, by virtue of the structural affinity among the different elements of the novel that the conceptual narrative articulated in the previous chapters seems to suggest: As concerns the dialectical pair Vallejo/Márquez, we, the readers, are like Borges in front of a cultural object that is both magical and execrable. In the dialectical pair Borges/Pauls, Alexis emerges as a terrifying thing that threatens to kill us anytime. Similarly, Alexis is Vallejo’s Teodelina Villar and the *Zahir* is Borges’ Alexis. Alain Paul’s *Historia del llanto* is the reader’s *Zahir*. We, the readers, are *Historia del Llanto*’s Alexis or, what is the same, Alain Pauls becomes the readers’ Fernando Vallejo. Borges (the reader) becomes hysterical, and the body of knowledge that goes by the name of *testimonio* is Paul’s Borges. In the dialectical pair Sarduy/Piñera, in just the same way that we, the readers, are *Cobra*’s Montiel, *Cobra* is the cultural Thing of Borges’ magical object, and the reader’s object in *Historia del llanto*. Sarduy’s desire, and the Cuban State’s nightmare, or latent-dream, is Puerto Rico’s national idyll, or manifest content. Similarly, René is the reader’s *wonder*, and we are his *terror*. In the pair Sánchez/Juliá, the uncanny multitude- the ‘nation in-itself’ - becomes a cultural object. In the case of Sánchez, the “master of ceremonies” makes the multitude speak its excess beyond the ideological constraints of the nation. But in the case of Juliá, the place of the “master of ceremonies” falls upon the multitude itself, which, even if it is still a cultural object, occupies the place of the master, and it makes the narrator speak in shame and abjection. The product is the author (the intellectual of the left) as an excremental,



shameful remainder. In Juliá, it is the multitude that posits the narrator as an excremental thing-very much like Montiel's "What is this thing?" In Sánchez's "Disk-Jockey", "Master of Ceremonies", in identifying himself with the multitude that speaks, the result is that the nation speaks- shits- jouissance . . . He is the master of ceremonies, the hidden demiurge who makes all dance to the rhythm of the ideology of culturalist nationalism. [In *La Guaracha*, the "Nation" objectifies itself as excremental discourse.] In Juliá, the multitude makes the narrator speak in shame (The 'I' of the cultural object]- all the ambiguity of the object/subject position, the surplus of shame, falls there. In Juliá, shame returns to its body, so to speak. Luis Rafael Sánchez becomes Cortijo in Juliá's story, and Juliá is perhaps all the Graciela Alcántaras of the future . . . Graciela Alcántara is, therefore, *La guaracha's* Borges, just as she is Luis R. Sánchez's Rodríguez Juliá, and just as the multitude is Rodríguez Juliá's *China Hereje*, as much as deceased Rafael Cortijo is his *Zahir*. In a similar way, China Hereje is the Old Man's Alexis. Finally we, the readers, are Borges, that is- *either* Graciela Alcántara or China Hereje-, in *La Guaracha*. We can either see it as the materialized horror or wonder. Ultimately Rodríguez Juliá the belated chronicler becomes Baltasar's cage, at the same time that the narrator, being turned inside out by the crowd, becomes the Old Man with enormous wings.

## Conclusion

In using some representative work of Gabriel García Márquez and Fernando Vallejo as case examples to consider the paradox inherent to the Latin American lettered intellectuals' efforts at transcending the contradictions inherent to their embeddedness in the coloniality of a modernism they nonetheless endorsed, I have tried to articulate this as delineating a predominantly ideological domain of intelligibility, to the extent that it involved the deadlocks pertaining to the splits that defined political struggles in the region, in relation to the immanence of a structure whose nature was not recognized as such. This paradox could therefore be conceived of as constituting predominantly an imaginary aspect of the same symptom, insofar as it involves the symbolic projection into the sphere of a love affair of the impossibility inherent to the class contradictions involved in the constitution of the modern Latin American nation-state. The ideological terms by which this operation took place were primordially germane to the function of the nation being formed around - since the matrix outside/inside is only effective within the affective logics of a love/hate dialectics, which pertains only to the imaginary function of the Nation. But the movements it subtends fall entirely within the symbolic, since the tragic love story, the failed romance, that came to metaphorize, at the level of culture, this primal affective core, what was impossible to articulate at the political level, the complementary logic of *the cultural gift*, which in turn sustains a relation of dialectical contradiction with the place of the symptom. The oscillation between love- (of the nation, transposed into the feminine character) and hate (of the internal, ethnic, racial or sexual *other*, embodied in the necessary death and protracted mourning of that feminized character)- becomes, through the *mercenary logic of the gift*, theretofore a question of *civilization* and *barbarism*, which the cultural gift came to embody

and entomb in a performance of the fetish-effect of its *aura*. In fact, it can be argued that this ambiguous displacement from politics to love- which we saw at work in Márquez's fiction, but which is a national foundational one for Latin America- is the one through which the contradictions of modernity inherent to the question of what the nation will have been, are transposed to the cultural sphere, where the same antagonism bears another symptomatic coefficient- that of *wonder* and *terror*. The aporia subtending the question of the *inside* vs. *outside* returns now as a question constellated by the matrix *civilization* vs. *barbarism*.

Concurrently, what was envisioned as an ideological problem the aporetic sign of which was the *gift*, through which the Latin American lettered man displaced the denial of a real political loss, through the expediency of a failed love affair, now within this imaginary logic becomes, in the cultural realm, a question of *affect*: the “wonder” of a cultural gift betrays the spectral remainder of its barbaric debt, in the form of its returned dialectical opposite, namely “terror”.

This operation saw its manifestation in the ideological ruse that characterized Latin American foundational fictions, which is the displacement, registered by Doris Sommer, towards a love story that metaphorized- entombed- its constitutive deadlock, and rendered invisible the real of lingering political antagonisms, which ‘reemerged’ as a cultural problem. What is repressed in this displacement from the imaginary towards the symbolic returns in the cultural domain as an aesthetic experience. The possibilities that pertained to the symbolic inscription of an imaginary outside- which is also an imaginary transcendence from a symbolic immanence- entailed the advent of culture as the necessary supplementary effect of this phantasmagoric displacement, as the space where the gift, the (self-)donation that represents, for the subject, the act of love- evidenced in *Memoria de mis putas tristes*-, encapsulates the irreducible mutual impossibility between love and politics. In the dialectics of symbolically engulfing or being engulfed by the

global reach of Capitalism, one could perceive, in the end, that this choice necessarily configures another aporetical sphere within the symbolic, one which overlaps with ideology, but- inasmuch as this ideological trap entailed the opening up of the cultural field- one which nonetheless generates its own mythopoetic dynamics.

This took my inquiry, from being merely a question of elucidating ways to find an ‘outside’ from Capitalism and the consumptive logics it subsumes, to a question of elucidating how this attempt opened up the problem of ‘the cultural,’ as the scene where this ideological matrix revealed how this split saw its symbolic resurgence in the *aporia* present in the binary *civilization/barbarism*. In the second chapter, I tried to rearticulate this problem from the standpoint of what I called the cultural paradox, which was fundamentally a symbolic problem, since it dealt with the ways the production of a cultural object as a ‘gift’ entailed all the contradictions that this gift implied, in terms of the affective ambiguity of the performative instance verifiable in the aesthetic couple subject-object. Concurrently, in shifting from the gift to affect, I wanted to emphasize that symbolic production, as a structurally necessary act of epistemic violence, leaves out a spectral remainder of that violence, which returns in the form of the affective binary *terror/wonder*. As could be seen in the work of Borges, the always already lost cultural aura of an object depended on a performative enactment from which both the lettered man and its cultural object emerged as an ideological pair. At the end of the chapter, the articulation of this cultural paradox put us on the path of understanding why this problem necessarily entailed the corporeal. By elaborating on Benjamin’s ideas on the dialectical relationship between barbarism and civilization, I attempted to show how the barbarism that was retroactively posited as constituting the space of the ‘civilized,’ returned in the anomic form of

the privatized, secret scene of barbarity-in-the-name-of-civilization that marked the entrance of Latin American States into the globalized stage of late Capitalism, during the years of right wing dictatorships.

In the third chapter we saw how the corporeal determined the point of the impossible for Western knowledge regarding Latin American otherness. I began by positing, together with Heidegger, that western modernity was utterly incapable of thinking about this obfuscation. The corporeal resurfaces as a symptom that in the cultural space finds expression, within the singular state of affairs of a revolutionary politics of the Cuban Socialist Revolution, in the exceptional instance of the Neo-Baroque. That there was, in the Cuban Revolution's official discourses of representation of and for the oppressed other, a constitutive blindness to an otherness that simultaneously grounded, yet exceeded and over-spilled the epistemological protocols of that other's visibility- a non-being against which the Revolution unleashed all its institutional terror, and which, in the Cuban case, bore the names of the genderly and sexually queer-, signifies the fact that, as Jáuregui stresses, the discursive wealth upon which these processes of political representation partook of a . An abject and sacred otherness that is, paradoxically, *the same* for everyone. In their effort to predicate the specific particularity of that other, the Cuban Revolution forgot the irreducible, irrepresentable *queerness*- read uncanny- that makes it worthwhile to posit alterity as *the* political problem for revolutionary processes in the first place, and what makes it worth it to talk about alterity at all. The wager in this chapter was that it was, paradoxically, this irreducible *queerness*- beyond and above any symbolic pinning down as *gay, lesbian*, etc., from which Western Academia eventually was deactivated- which was to be considered the ground for any ethical universality. Revolutionary politics- whether in

its institutional or its more 'cultural' forms- as a problem of inter-subjective communication, and therefore, of representation, therefore entails a foundational gap, a point of blindness, in which the message of representation translates into a fundamental mis-representation. It is this blind-spot, this mis-representation, to which the Cuban Revolution remained blind, and a blindness which the furious Neo-Baroque of Severo Sarduy renders visible: this center of symbolic death, to which Cobra comes in the end, where all identitary prescriptions, all the symbolic clothings fall- gender, sexual, that fall off from her body, to reveal the pure nothingness - was the common denominator for the infinite multiplicity upon which the Cuban Communist State pretended, without succeeding, to saturate with a hegemony of sense the site of its representational relation to the oppressed other. It was this empty site of pure contingency, which the Cuban Revolution wanted to fill with the sacred naming of the Leader, the ecstasis of the evental site, and the terror of annihilating that which shamefully exceeds this saturation.

That there is an enjoyment at play in inter-subjective communication; that this enjoyment is equidistant to the symbolic and the bodily, and that whatever happens at the level of a foundational misunderstanding that occupies the site of this enjoyment, is what is at stake in this fourth and last chapter. What comes to fill the site of the interstice of this non-rapport between the observing subject and its represented objects? The ambiguous space of seduction and flirtation defined by the *gaze*, which depends on a semblance of truth, is asymptotic to it, and as such cannot be reduced to the process of observing and giving their proper symbolic place to the signs with which a reality presents itself to the subject; and the *voice*, which cannot be coextensive to the already sanctioned semantics of mere listening. These two pseudo-objects, to use Lacan's terminology, have played, as will be shown, an exceptional role in the constitution

of this space of cannibalistic enjoyment, where a pleasure principle supplements the misunderstandings at work in the communicative situation.

They stand as important nodal points by which to trace the real of this non-rapport between bodies and languages, and the foreclosed *corporeal* that returns in all our acts of knowing the other, to symptomatize this constitutive blindness. If the corporeal, which is an epistemological problem- exposing the knowledge of the other as ‘always already’ being traversed by a devouring and homicidal relation to the mastery of an omnipotent big Other-, composes a relation of antinomy to culture, which, through the foundational displacement of political antagonisms towards the domestic melodrama of a love couple, translated the ideological conundrums entailed by the imaginary question of symbolic immanence into a *civilizational* problem-, then the *real* of this problem, the insistence of which this *corporeal* aspect symptomatized, in turn, as an ontological ‘fold’ in the representation of this other, also stands in a relation of metonymic complementarity, through a logic of the *gaze* and the *voice*, to the ideological pitfalls inherent to the surplus-enjoyment present in the automated alternation of the terms that define the coordinates of each of these aporetic fields- ideological, cultural and corporeal- pose to the *letrado*, as being crisscrossed by this series of dialectical relays, and the consumptive logic it subsumes. The corporeal and the real form a symptomatic pair, which is not altogether dialectical in nature, but one of complementary interdependence, for what they, in their vicinity obfuscate, is the truth that makes the Latin American subject steer its way between two types of relationship towards consumptive enjoyment – the alternation between the bodily and the symbolic begins to manifest itself, as a corporeal symptom, whenever the surplus-enjoyment that the voice and the gaze recreate in the staging of this represented other is

understood ultimately as what sustains the universality of a project of culture critique that aspires to undo the , that is, 'as a question of taste'.



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