

A POETICS OF TRANSLITERATURE

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With the premise and affirmation that literature is a form of thought, this dissertation explores and implicitly defines the logic of what I define as “transliterature,” a reading practice that thinks and goes across geographies, genres, identities and aesthetic categories. Transliteration critically thinks its own place within the literary tradition while negating three core modern narrative categories: character, plot, and time. To explore how these categories can be traced in a different way, the dissertation is organized along three main lines that I call “Nobody,” “Never” and “Nothing.” Through the late “autobiographical” works of Mario Levrero in the first chapter and different texts and drawings by Eduardo Lalo in the second chapter, the section “Nobody,” argues that as an alternative to the imaginary and psychological discourses of identity these authors propose a subject constructed through writing as a material and bodily process. In “Nothing,” *Museo de la novela de la eterna* by Macedonio Fernández is central to exploring how the novel becomes the empty object around which different representational discourses are constructed. The work of Macedonio launches a poetics of narration that finds its most creative act not in the novel and its central plotting but in the proliferation of multiple versions, sutures, and accidents of the story. In relationship to how a traditional understanding of time and literary genealogies can be given a different logic, the fourth and fifth chapters of “Never,” study the parallel projects of José Emilio Pacheco in his only novel, *Morirás lejos*, and several texts by Salvador Elizondo. In their vocabulary heritage can be read as a “net full of holes,” using conjectures, happenings and the erasure of the traces of origin as an alternative way of narrating timeless instances.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

E. Christina Soto van der Plas (Mexico City, 1989). She obtained her Licenciatura en Literatura Latinoamericana by Universidad Iberoamericana, Ciudad de México in 2011. She has been part of several research and editorial projects and has published book chapters and essays on Mexican, Caribbean and Southern Cone literature in volumes such as *Tierras de nadie: el norte en la literatura mexicana contemporánea* (Tierra Adentro, 2012) and others. Recently, she edited the volume *Imágenes y Realismos en América Latina* (Almenara, 2014) and published an essay on psychoanalysis and aesthetics in the volume *Sex and Nothing. From Ljubljana to Elsewhere* (Karnac, 2016). She translated into Spanish *The Odd One In: On Comedy and Why Psychoanalysis?* by Alenka Zupančič.

For those who have seen and lived in colors

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My advice to someone beginning any kind of energy-draining project requiring a commitment, such as a PhD, is that no matter what, it is necessary to maintain at all costs the desire and passion for what you are doing. All of the above mentioned people reminded me of this in their own ways.

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## PREFACE

Afuera, el camino se levanta y cae, ondulado, se extiende y se ramifica hacia una infinidad de caminos que se encontrarán, una vez más, al principio. To erase the starting point. To forget. To see nothing but circles and nothingness and to sense one's own outlines and shape. El viaje ha comenzado.

—The Circle

Finally, I have arrived at the beginning. The beginning of a project that is nothing if not the realization of faith in the writing-act and of remaining faithful to my desire, intuitions, conjectures, and conversations. It has been an exercise of shaping my stubbornness and experience in infinite ways that have always led me back to the beginning, forcing me to begin again. Every theory I have is, in fact, a theory of the beginning, a theory of recommencements. Some might call this obsessive, an obsession with seeing nothing but beginnings whether in my own outline and shape or in other spaces, in the language of others. Perhaps this is the reason why I am obsessed with literature, because in some scarce places I recognize my beginnings—which are nothing if not my own desire, of course. Literature is a form of thinking beginnings and a form of beginning to think. And all I desire is to find a form, a shape, a circle. So to begin, I had to begin by writing myself, and this is my wager, my form of beginning to think. To arrive at the beginning, at last. My beginning.

This project is better described as years of words and years made out of words. I erase and forget my starting point only to begin. It seems, now, that the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence. The illusion of development, progression and evolution are all

means of disowning the past, whereas here there are recommencements, a river in which we are the same and others. Or, perhaps, we are made out of rivers but are also in movement. This project is a river flowing into the sea, which can only be the beginning of yet another tide—a different swaying tide. For these rivers I offer, in what follows, three beginnings for both my view of literature and of how I conceive of my project: transliterature as the thought of *nadie*, *nada*, and *nunca*.

In the end, the journey always begins.

In the beginning there was an answer. The answer to the question I will pose is “Yes.” With this intuition, or rather arbitrary assumption, a project begins—an ungrounded choice or leap of faith is necessary to begin. This project is one formed by conjectures constructed at the same time that they are wagered upon because the assertion of an anticipated certainty is both the result and the retroactive grounding of my theories. Only through the impetuous decision to conclude before beginning was I able to make my theoretical structure consistent. To arrive at this conclusion-beginning, of course, my speculative undertaking had to probe the more intricate and wordy version of the three-letter answer. This convoluted process began when the “yes” brought about more questions which, in order to continue, called for additional theories, forcing me, once again, to jump to conclusions and take a stand. As a result of this, one of my assumptions came to be that what matters are not so much the answers but the thought processes, the movements, the logics and the reasons that lead to and begin from anticipated certainties. At this point, then, I want to propose that the speculative nature of all thought follows the same logic, which is one of posing anticipated certainties to launch a method based on conjectures. In the same way and along these lines, I conceive of literature as a conjecture and theoretical movement—a speculation based on an anticipated certainty on which a whole discourse is retroactively grounded. Such is my assertion, the “yes” of my project. My task, here, is to seriously take into account and draw consequences from my conception of literature and that is the reason why my dissertation moves across the unsteady ground of a minefield full of conjectures. In spite of the hazardous conditions, however, my project dares take a step forward and cease being overdetermined and paralyzed by a process that seems to be too risky and unfounded. In this way, my dissertation traces constellations and paths where all that could be seen before were the remnants of flickering stars. If it is true that we only pose those questions

whose answers are the pre-given conditions of the questions themselves, then the outcome is the following initial interrogation to which I have already replied: Is literature a form of thought?

The answer is affirmative, but the first problems arises when trying to establish the ways in which literature can indeed be a form of thought, the kind of theory that it can produce, and exactly how we are to read literature in these terms. A first possible answer is that if literature is a form of thought, then it can be read theoretically or through a theoretical framework. Applying many theoretical approaches to literature allows us to understand its features in new ways, as well as to engage in a broader debate, beyond the disciplinary and even beyond the aesthetic realm. It can be productive, for example, to read a novel as a social critique of the ideological paradigms of a certain historical period, or, further, as a critique of the ideological literary devices or even genres. Or the same novel could be read as response to a literary system of production and transnational market of consumption of certain kind of plots. The text could also be seen through the lens of a feminist or postcolonial theory which would pick up on symptomatic moments of the work that critique, subvert or contribute to certain gender paradigms or cultural hegemonies. Historically, the novel could be situated in the midst of a revolution and so it could be understood, for example, as the re-telling of events through the voice of the victims who lost the war and were silenced or repressed. The discourse could even be thought of as the impossibility to represent and fully convey a repressed symbolic content of some kind or as the symptom of a socio-symbolic structure. Of course, these examples simplify and don't do justice to the complex theoretical frameworks I am alluding to, but what I want to stress is that in all of these *approaches*, literature becomes an example, some sort of raw material for these theories to ascertain their validity by putting literature under the microscope either as an object of study or the subject in an experiment. Literature becomes an excuse for theory, an

example, or a mirror image of our world and history. Or literature functions, as well, as raw linguistic material for feeding a machine that will digest it to produce a wide range of products, readily available to be consumed by preemptive theories and their respective jargons. These theories and jargons merely shape and incorporate the literary discourse into circuits of knowledge and power. It is as if literature needed to be rescued by theory to be up to par in a broader theoretical debate, as if it were a helpless creature without the innovative, complex, and more powerful frameworks that would help translate it and verbalize what it *really* means to say. In these cases, then, literature only belongs to a certain sect of professionals or authorized translators that can reveal what literature is hiding—the unconscious of literature that only a chosen few can understand and explain, thanks to their analytical tools. So, to think of literature theoretically or through theory means to shape it into a corsage and take away its specificity as a discourse in its own right. In short, it implies the dissolution of literature.

An alternative to this last position is to claim that literature is a form of thought because it can reflect upon its own various processes of construction—its themes, devices, and the forms that shape language. In many texts it is possible to find a meditation about the work itself, moments of self-awareness that draw attention to how the literary artifice is built. Other works even contain a critique of literature from within, some sort of *mise en abyme* that denounces the fake and illusory nature of literature. If literature can think and theorize about itself then we can avoid the trap of having a preemptive theory simply to be applied to the “literary object.” In this case, literature does have a voice and is allowed to tell its story as well as defining its being and doing in its own truthful terms. A classic example of this kind of reading would be to say that, in theater for instance, a performance can create a discourse about the staging, characters and arguments of a play while also staging and enacting that very same play. The performance, then,

creates a necessary distance from what is happening on stage for the spectators to realize not only that what they are seeing is an ideological representation, but also that their own reality and identity could, in the same way, be performative as well. And the theory would come from within the representation for us to properly read the theory of performance—or our performance. Or, perhaps, we can think of a detective novel containing a dialogue in which a character proposes his original theory on the detective genre, which happens to correspond to the conception of the novel we are reading. In the course of this discussion, then, we become aware that the theory—about the detective genre—is both the object and the subject of the novel. These are examples of what we often refer to as metaliterary discourse, or a theory *of* literature. In these cases, all there is to find is a discourse referring to the process through which literature is constructed or through which it thinks—its aim would be to explain how such a process occurs. Literature, then, can only think about literature or function as a theory of literature; hence all other disciplines are automatically excluded. From this angle, the theoretical discourse, once again, subordinates what might be the “primary” discourse of literature to a “higher-order” proposition that questions and thinks about its object. While taking part in the illusion, one is somehow able to observe from afar, at the same time, the thought process and devices of this “game.” The presupposition is that theory can detach itself from the practice of literature to constitute itself as an object—there is a distance and hierarchy between the practice and theory of literature, even if both are intrinsic to the literary discourse. Formulating a theory of literature amounts to making literature an object of thought—of its own thinking process. This kind of metaliterature is self-referential and, as a matter of fact, imaginary and narcissistic in nature. By tracing distinct lines of demarcation and hermetically sealing its boundaries, it excludes every

alien form of thought. It is the ivory-tower of literary discourse that desires nothing except its own image in the mirror.

To speak of literature as a form of thought or a “literature that thinks” is to adopt a different perspective to those corresponding to a theoretical use of literature and to a metaliterary thought or theory of literature. The above mentioned positions either include literature in their theory or literature is the one discourse that excludes other forms of thought. Without completely dismissing these understandings, my claim is that there is a third possibility which allows for many other readings and redefinitions of what literature is capable of doing and thinking. Hence, to traverse the impasse and redefine the space of literature, I begin, once more, by affirming that literature thinks and is a form of thought. Literature thinks, it is a theory, but it produces a theory and forms of its own, rather than adopting previously existing models that reproduce other paradigms and shape a text into an easily digestible material. Literature thinks but it does not only think about its own procedures and doing. It is a form of thought—just as any other discourse, it has its own language and is capable of creating concepts, logics, forms, figures, and structures. Therefore, literature is neither completely autonomous nor dependent and overdetermined by other discourses. My claim is that literature as a form of thought exceeds the confines of literature while maintaining its specificity. Literature is in dialogue or contradiction with—not subsumed or read through the lens of—other theories, history, politics, etc. And literature, as well, is permanently reflecting upon its own doing—which does not mean that it creates a theory to explain its procedures. In this way, literature is a form of thought that reflects on—its own and other— anticipated certainties and procedures, thereby creating logics, concepts and structures that are in dialogue with other theories and discourses.

That literature is a form of thought does not mean it is the result of certain discernible forms we can systematically define or categorize. When trying to define literature, even as a form of thought, there is the risk of falling into the trap of creating yet another category to stabilize and constrain the immensely creative impulse of a literature that thinks. Rather than creating a new label such as “literary forms of thought,” my project aims to think and outline the structure of a series of literary operations *in motion*, as they travel from one place to the other but cannot be fully grasped. The kind of literature I am interested in is one that neither conforms to categories nor can be categorized. Instead, it is a literature of exercises, projects, endeavors, experiments, prologues and recommencements. And, even further, through exercising and experimenting, this literature constantly reflects upon its own doing in terms of form, the process of writing and the materiality of the writing itself. While tracing itineraries, these literary projects question the very same lines they are drawing. This perpetual questioning of the foundations, however, does not mean that this kind of literature is necessarily conscious or that its purpose is to expose the artifice of its structure but, instead, that it seeks ways to sustain desire and faith in finding a form capable of articulating experience. With this conception in mind, my proposal is that literature is neither a given theory nor a point of departure for thought, but a wandering practice and, simultaneously, a wondering thought. It is important to reiterate, however, that literature is a distinct sphere whose specificity is that of a space in which a particular form of thought and a certain use of language are structured. In all its wandering, the literature that thinks does not give up its specificity because it repeatedly inscribes its doing in tradition and history. Literature wanders and wonders, and yet, it is anchored in its practices and specific use of language. This means that literature refuses to merely have a communicative, argumentative, philosophical, historical or rhetorical linguistic function. To define—ground in an anticipated

certainty—the space of literature and the site of its enunciation, the space from where it reads its tradition and context, means to drop an anchor as the necessary act to set sail. Only because *there is* a space of literature are wondering and wandering possible.

From the affirmation that there is a space of literature, it is possible to examine more concretely both its—material or immaterial—conditions of production and the effects and consequences of its operations. In terms of the conditions of production, it is important to determine the *space from* which literary works are written—not the *place in* which an author writes. Without a doubt, an author writes in a certain place, context and time, where various geographical, political, social, generic and philosophical standpoints overdetermine the text. This means, in short, that the text is located in a specific tradition. While this is the necessary ground for any artistic creation to exist, in my view to subscribe and insert a work in a tradition is a choice. The author cannot choose, of course, his birthplace, the historical moment in which he writes or the social position where he stands. But what can be chosen is if, how and to what extent these circumstances and tradition take part in the work. Thus, in the kind of literature I work with tradition is neither some kind of hereditary terminal disease nor an implicit supremacy or legitimate right to colonize territories—it is not simply taken for granted or passively inherited, predetermined. Tradition in these literary endeavors is, instead, an always adjusting and modifiable net of relations in which a work is inscribed. There is, certainly, an inherited history and a tradition, but history is full of holes and tradition is assumed only as pierced. What I am proposing here is that literature neither carries on its shoulders the whole weight of an overbearing tradition nor is it detached, autonomous, and separate from history. Neither assuming nor negating tradition but assuming it as the tradition of what has been crossed-out. Thus, the time of literature is that of the historically atemporal, which means that the work is

both located in history—assuming its place in a tradition and line of continuity—and in an atemporal instance—where there is no identity, no causes and no effects. So, within the historical, the atemporal is assumed as a voided or crossed-out identity, as a web of inherited holes. Or, perhaps, the atemporal is assumed as the verbal tense of the always present history in an impersonal form—the “present infinitive”— as if on a museum of the eternal. These figures suggest that history and genealogy are traversed by the non-subjective and atemporal occurrence of events or luminous fleeting experiences—which, nonetheless, are located within logics, sequences, journeys and recommencements. What matters in this kind of literature is that this paradoxical conjunction displaces the logic of a tradition with an identity, self or cultural account of pre-determined uses of discourse. Literature is a form of thought, a conjecture rejecting any pre-existing sense imposed by history and other discourses. And, at the same time, it continues a timeless tradition and literary imagination not attached to a current episteme or theory, but rather to an urge and desire to begin again, to move and shape forms of thought, projecting alternative possibilities to those already in place.

The literature as a form of thought is not determined by an author as individual, a national tradition, a geographical demarcation, a political stance or any other kind of identity. In this sense, I claim that literature does not have attributes. Literary thought is not defined beforehand; it is constructed as it is being written, it only exists as a process; it is defined by its form and results, and not by any intention or purpose. Nowadays—and perhaps always—both the reader and the writer are conditioned and condemned by extra-literary contexts for economic, political, and social reasons. In book covers, reviews, academic articles, editorial publicity, and even in social media, what usually matters, in the first instance, is the identity of the author—who he is, what he looks like, his nationality, etc.—as well as when and why the work was

published and the literary genre to which it ascribes—or does not belong to. As a result, whenever we approach a literary work something is expected from the text—whether this expectation is fulfilled or not, is irrelevant. These pre-given extra-literary elements are devised by institutions and systems of knowledge that attempt to neutralize or make invisible the kind of thought that literature produces. It would be naïve to say that literature can and should get rid of this extra-literary context. But I believe it is necessary to assume these neutralizing attributes and then devise an intervention to fracture and redefine these stifling conditions and currencies of use and exchange value. The literary forms of thought cannot escape their site—geography, position of enunciation, political condition or image. And yet, literature can work through these categories while affirming that they do not necessarily have to be asphyxiating but, instead, a gulp of air, one of many points of departure. The origin—the attributes—must be undone: in order to write, it is necessary to create a form to write. Where everything has already been created, said and done, from “the ancient yawning nothing” there is yet another possible beginning. Through affirming this site, then, the desire for a creative space for thought generates a discourse with an immense potential that goes beyond literature itself.

In the beginning, there was pleasure and a mere intuition. All I had was a series of literary works I enjoyed reading and was interested in. But any research project requires a justification and hypothesis. So in order to make my intuitions and taste in literature coherent, I desperately tried to find if the texts I enjoyed could be related thematically, if I could argue there was an historical connection, a formal structure or an alternative geographical configuration in which to place them. I needed to find *the* thread, but none of these threads was coherent or interesting enough for me. Slowly, however, from this “duty” to write as a result of an

imposition—a demand—the desire to write was set in motion and a series of connections in my mind led me to realize that what these texts have in common is what they refuse to do or what they negate—which is, not surprisingly, their duty. Perhaps my “discovery” was the discovery of the thread of my desire and not the secret theme of the literary works themselves, but I am certain that my intuitions can assemble an ambitious theoretical enterprise whereas reading the works would just amount to a flat parasitic discourse. So the thread I discovered in my own desire is that the texts I am most passionate about and therefore chose to work with in this dissertation conform to a poetic of narration that refutes, voids, and negates the traditional narrative categories of plot, character or narrative perspective, and time as cause and effect. This negation, however, is neither destructive nor deconstructive in nature. These works do not destroy the plot, characters or causality, nor do they disassemble their mechanisms. First of all, these negative gestures do not destroy or want to annihilate these categories, calling for an absolutely new foundation. Destruction would imply that there was, in the first place, an identity to be shattered, whereas here the movement is to negate—not shatter—such an identity, in order to affirm and create something different. As such, this gesture cannot be reduced to the complete negation of narrative laws because it uses and depends on these very same laws to posit other tactics. So the position of negating these narrative categories is not that of a violent destruction of the inherited forms, but rather of creating new arrangements where there is nothing—or almost nothing—left. What is left is, perhaps, a net full of holes of an art capable of weaving *naderías*.

Secondly, the categories of character, plot and causal time also need not be deconstructed. A deconstructive criticism would imply showing how these categories are not natural or given but a contradictory edifice. Working through the genealogy of these concepts, a

deconstruction of these instances would determine that, at some point, they fail or do not function and that, in the end, we find that it is impossible to fully describe or name the *true* contradiction, let alone resolve it. Finding the true contradiction or weakest link disarms the categories forcing them to surrender. But what is to be done after this discovery? The categories remain incapacitated because they cannot operate in the same terms or in the same form. And this kind of criticism accomplishes nothing more because, in being overly aware of the fundamental problems, it does not dare to decide upon a new form, out of fear that it will fall back into the same kind of trap it had discovered. If my project were deconstructive in nature it would embark on a thorough analysis of the categories and the places in which their logic betrays the construction of the whole literary tradition, to show how the construction of certain narrative concepts is inconsistent and reaches its end-limit where it is not possible to decide upon meaning. As such, the same as destroying the narrative categories, in deconstructing them there is not an affirmative stance but rather an always differing position that moves along the always already displaced categories sustaining narrative that seem to not have a foundation, kernel or meaning.

My project is, instead, affirmative in nature, as it ventures to begin with uttering an unfounded affirmation: “Yes, literature is a form of thought.” A genuine critique of a set of laws such as those of narrative implies, first of all, to fall in love with them. This commits the critic to engage with them, in their own terms, to explore both their possibilities and what they do not allow or are blind to. Only after such a relationship can a fallout make sense. Whether something is then affirmed in the same terms of these laws, though, is a risky choice to make. With this in mind, the territory that my project outlines is that of a series of affirmative breaks—or break-ups—and conjectures about literature—its form of thought and how it can intervene in the

reconfiguration of how we conceive of the world and comprehend our experience within language and in a work of art. While in the works I analyze there is a negation of basic narrative categories, there is also an affirmative project of reconfiguring the kind of thought and procedures that literature is capable of creating.

One of the conceptual operations that at some point I deemed appropriate for describing this movement of the affirmative part of negation was “subtraction,” and for some time my project was defined along those lines. In a basic sense, subtraction as an operation articulates at least four procedures which are central to my position regarding literary procedures: subtraction from knowledge, from boundaries, from concepts and from the singular. The first one—a subtraction from the laws of knowledge—means to get away from the ways in which we have usually classified, evaluated, and thought of literature—a subtraction from the laws of knowledge. The second one is a subtraction from how we define and trace what literature means and can or cannot do in terms of its limits and relation with other discourses. In the third operation, literary forms of thought are ungraspable as predicates or concepts because they do not have an identity and cannot be grouped together under one banner. And, lastly, these works subtract from the singular because there is not a metalanguage capable of conveying their particular traits. These operations articulate what it means for my project and a certain kind of literature to subtract itself from the demands of knowledge, definitions, conceptualizations, and singularities and, instead, venture to affirm other forms of thought, with and through these instances. In order to subtract from these demands it is necessary to traverse what they mean as fantasies to momentarily see through them, not to instate other paradigms but to construct other more productive ways—a minimal difference—of maintaining illusions and desire for our theories to be consistent.

Even though my “relationship” with subtraction helped me to accurately describe the movement of what I explore in this dissertation, my speculations led me to experiment with other images which, as we will see, are not, as subtraction is, necessarily formal, logical or philosophical in nature, but rather literary. Despite the fact that I am still very much in love with subtraction, I needed a break and a space that literature granted me. A whole other series of conceptual images, derived from literature, illuminated the firmament so as to create and imagine richer images with the ability to convey something other than a theoretical reading by providing us with new routes to explore, traversing the impasses and deadlocks of some fossilized debate or other. By the way, this project, perhaps, is the result of my falling in and out of love with philosophy and theory, but also of my always faithful and obsessive relationship with literature—hence, literature as a form of thought or theory in its own right.

In this sense, certain literary works—such as the ones I analyze in this dissertation—subtract from the demands of modern narrative categories, negating them so as to create something else—what they craft is not only a form of thought but also conceptual images and movements. I locate the tripartite voiding and avoiding of the categories of character, narrative and time as cause and effect in the junctions of what I call *nadie, nada, nunca*—nobody, nothing, and never. Tired as I was of using or trying to debunk, cleaning up or scraping the bones of everybody else’s concepts, I decided to propose other contours to trace the fluidity of literary forms of thought. In this case, the novel *Nadie nada nunca* by Juan José Saer provided the terms for my own constellation. Regarding this, I just want to mention how Saer’s novel can also function as a counterfeit retrospective origin of my project and its three partitions. Once again, it was not only until my dissertation arrived at its beginning that I read the—almost incomprehensible—text and found another possible commencement.

*Nadie nada nunca* begins by stating that there is nothing. Nothing at all. And yet, in that nothingness, the smooth movement of a river, without a single ripple, can be guessed—where there is nothing, a stream is always already there or, perhaps, the river is the prolongation of this nothingness and cannot be separated from it. Now I can say that, in the same way, my project seems to locate three core modern narrative categories as voided premises. But, in reality, they are not “the beginning,” but rather the background against which, simultaneously, there are always already many rivers. In my project more than one river is discovered. While these rivers certainly refute their background, they also create another course, departing from it. In this way, Saer’s smooth and luminous river also seems to have traced the shores of a course I was to follow, no longer as mere nihilism—dwelling in the “nothing at all”—or as an ungrounded utopic attempt to build something completely new—an unpolluted river in an island of thought.

These three conceptual clusters or intersections, *Nadie*, *Nada* and *Nunca* are also the name of the three divisions of this dissertation. The texts I explore conform to a poetic of narration that, as said before, voids and negates the conventional narrative categories of plot, character or narrative perspective, and time as cause and effect. As an alternative, they map another way of conceiving literature across three intersections: the creation of a subject instead of an identity, the conception of a timeless history and heritage instead of a genealogy, and the weaving of a plotless story around the absence of the novel, instead of a seemingly cohesive structure. These movements, as I proposed before, are negations on the basis on which there is an affirmation of something else, an opening for new literary forms of thought. It is important to say here that the fact that the kind of literature I work with negates certain categories does not mean in any way that *nadie*, *nada*, and *nunca* are better or more accurate images or that it is necessary to overcome the strategies of plot, characters and causality. They are not opposed to one another

and neither is one more relevant or newer than the others—they are only different approaches to the problem of narrative and literary forms of thought, departing from and leading to different aesthetic paradigms and configurations. In what follows, I will describe some of these different paradigms along the axes of the figures of thought *nadie*, *nada* and *nunca*.

The figure of *nadie* gets away from the figure of a character or a narrative perspective constituted as an identity or as imaginary. Instead of this closed horizon of—opaque or transparent—idealized fixed images, what *nadie* affirms is that *through* and *with* writing a subject can be constructed or even discovered. Where the origin of discourse was located either in the narrator or the author claiming authority in order to make a work consistent, in *nadie* the discourse and the process of writing is what creates a place for the ones that not even in their place have a place or take place. Where in other works characters have attributes or constitute a core of signification, here we find that characters are non-existent, travelers, generic figures reduced to their basic functions or mere carcasses of “nothing.” The process of construction of a subject is derived in this case from the duty the writer imposes upon himself to inscribe his body, language, and existence in writing. Through a desire to briefly widen the scope of the visible and the desire to capture ungraspable experiences, the trajectory of the luminous and fleeting subjective processes are momentarily seized. So in *nadie* a subject is unlike the image of the “self” and of a discourse of identity. The subject is, instead, an exercise, a trajectory and it is only fleetingly graspable as the result of an empty discourse.

In *nada* we run into the problem of the plot and the structure of narrative which, I propose, circle around “nothing” or function as the weaving of nothing—as logics that materialize non-existence. Thus, the plot here does not function as a principle of intention and linking, but as the suturing of the wounds of empty incidents. Rather than a goal-oriented and

forward moving narrative, with an origin, evolution and organizing dynamic, which I call narrative locomotion—the plotless novels suffer many accidents and delays. In fact, it can be said that there are only prologues and postponed stories, always moving towards their object or final destination—the “novel,” or the “luminous novel,” which never comes, because it is empty or already defined as a necropolis. To seriously consider that there is nothing at the core of narrative implies a radical act of deorigination and dislocation of the production of meaning by frustrating the fulfillment of desire. Since no beginning or end anchor the plot, it can only function in the sphere of eternity, as if the plot were within a museum that deactivates the context of objects and subjects, to render them—empty or full—objects of analysis. In *nadie*, whatever happened, is happening or will happen is impossible to describe and grasp except in a list of elements that never amount to the event. Thus, *nada* is at the core of every affirmation in this project, it is the raw non-matter with which the works I explore function.

In *nunca* the temporal inscriptions provide an alternative route to that of chronological time or causality. In these works, something happens and yet, there is no movement except that of conjectures about this instant—in some cases a timeless instant, in others eternity, and in still others a non-personal infinitive tense. The task of literature here is that of constructing or destroying identity in relation to history and the instants—through images, speculations, representations, prologues or paradoxes. If identity is based on the principle of continuous sameness of an entity through time, in *nunca* it is impossible to presuppose an identity—if there is no succession, no narrative locomotion, or even “self,” there is no identity. As an alternative, *never* works through and with the impossibility of identity or the inherited holes and, with this materialized “nothing,” creates a different kind of temporality, sometimes that of simultaneity,

others of superimposed or diverging times. *Nunca* is, in this way, the temporality in which *nadie* thrives, weaving *nadas* or *naderías*.

In the beginning, there was a speculation. I propose one last term to understand literature as a form of thought from where I stand, from my place as critic. If the underlying assumption of my dissertation is that literature can not only be an object of thought, but also *is* a form of thought, more than looking for a rightful place for literary thought, I propose that it can be devised as a bridge to traverse many of the impasses and divisions dominating a large part of literary criticism here. It is important to say here that there is also a *donde*, a place and a concept which is also a nowhere. In this *donde*, my work is concerned with creating networks and connections across different literary and critical traditions in Latin America and beyond because I believe similar operations could be argued for in many other latitudes. In many conceptual and theoretical *approaches* or in the theory *of* literature—no longer defined by disciplines—there is an increasing need to redefine the *objects* of study, even though they continue to be shaped by imaginary mappings. Taking into account both of these endeavors, my project is founded on the articulation of a much needed framework to go across geographical demarcations, themes, trends, conceptual approaches, genres or historical moments, and so my inquiry works towards an ever changing method and engagement with literature capable of traversing these multiple categories.

Fostering a dialogue between the poetics of heterogeneous authors, my endeavor continues to bring to light new procedures and critical terms to shift the discussion from the constraints of existing categories toward a more transversal understanding of literary works. The

texts I analyze are separated by decades, envisioned in diverse national settings, and modeled upon the thresholds of different genres. At the same time, they have the ability to cut across all of these categories and boundaries which is why I consider them as part of what I call “transliterature.” Not only in terms of identity, the weaving of the plot or causality, but also in terms of a broader understanding in literature my argument is that there must be a movement across and through these categories without revolutionizing or reforming them—overthrowing or displacing them. As I define it, transliterature is capable of crossing categorizations and traversing the boundaries of the literary discourse to articulate its own thought. I propose that transliterature does not work in opposition to traditional narratives, but rather that these particular works open up the space of a literature that critically thinks its own place within narrative tradition.

My critical analysis is also a transversal reading of literary works to relocate current debates in Latin American criticism in particular—but also in other circles—towards thinking the movement across pre-established boundaries and categories. These terms are needed to shift the discussion from the constraints of existing categories towards a more transversal understanding of literary works, and that is why I propose that transliterature is neither limited alone to Latin America nor to poetics. My project implies that transliterature exceeds geographical confines, disciplinary boundaries, and the boundaries separating the theoretical from the practical, the critical from the analytical, and the philosophical from the non-philosophical. In this way transliterature is a crucial undertaking to be considered in contemporary debates about theory, philosophy, aesthetics, and politics.

Since I conceive literature as a kind of thought instead of an object of analysis, this calls for different readings and criticism. What has made and will continue to make my many projects

unique is the ability to create terms and definitions drawn from literature to rethink and shift the paradigms not only of my discipline, but also of broader debates, cutting across boundaries and crossing divisions. As in deriving the terms to define the three lines of this dissertation from Juan José Saer's *Nadie nada nunca*, my project uses and proposes new concepts, images and terms to relocate the forms of our thinking literature as a literature that thinks. These terms I derive from literature and coin them so as to build a whole constellation with which to think again our theoretical and aesthetic paradigms. Some of the terms you have already encountered here—drawn from the texts I work with in this dissertation—are, for example, terms and logics such as narrative locomotion, our heritage as a net full of holes, the verbal strategy to deoriginate or undo the origin, the empty discourse, the luminous experiences, the suturing of the holes of the plot, the figure of the crippled wanderer, the crossed-out writing, and many more. As such, the texts I work with are more likely to open up spaces for thought, interventions and reconfigurations, and desire.

In the beginning, there was a dissertation. The last first beginning is the body of my dissertation. The first section of my dissertation, “Nadie,” focuses on the “autobiographical” novels by Mario Levrero and on various texts and drawings by Eduardo Lalo. I suggest that they reject any kind of identitarian reading based in psychological depth or autobiographical facts and, instead, I argue that these works assemble a subjective function through writing. In Levrero’s case, my argument is that *El discurso vacío* and *La novela luminosa* emblemize two clearly defined literary procedures or dynamics—first, the desire born out of a demand to write what the author calls “luminous” or “transcendental” images and, second, the exercise of circling around the unattainable object of the novel—as a result of which a subject is formed. This

process of construction of the subject, I argue, is far from an attempt to reflect the author's complex psyche or morals through a kind of confessional writing to uncover his true hidden "I." Instead, my reading inquires into the relationship between narrative and the process of constructing subjectivity through writing. In the same vein, I propose that Eduardo Lalo's work—I focus on *donde* and *Necrópolis*—reshapes the borders of what literature has the right to articulate when it has historically been "crossed-out" by hegemonic structures that legitimize only some aspects of a discourse. In order to do so, I argue that Lalo locates the material traces of his writing, drawings and "alfabetografías" as they become part of a body—the author's body but also a textual body—and that he then formalizes in these traces the figure of a subject. The creation or "discovery" of a subject introduces a temporal and spatial cut, a gap, in the configuration of the given world—what Lalo conceptualizes as "donde"—and crafts a space for literature to exist within thought and as part of a life but also as an exception to it. For this exception, Lalo proposes the idea of "el quedado," the remainder or that which is left, the crippled wanderer capable of traversing literature through life in hours of words or hours made out of words.

My second division, "Nada," examines Macedonio Fernández's twin novels, the sentimental *Adriana Buenos Aires* and the impossible *Museo de la novela de la eterna* which, I claim, have to be read as two sides of the same coin, the plot and plotless articulation of nothing. In the work of Macedonio, "nothing" is one of the fundamental subjects, both in the sense of subjectivity and of subject matter, and, as such, it is possible to attribute to it a logic, form, and dynamic. Through affirming the being of nothing—the impossible novel—in the frame of eternity, I argue that the work of Macedonio Fernández can be read along three conceptual images related to basic literary categories: the act of suturing, which is the logic of the plot; the

construction of a home for non-existence, the “Novel;” and locomotion, the metaphor of a train, its movement and accidents, related to the dynamics of narrative. In this sense, I rely on the work of Macedonio as the heart of the matter of this dissertation, because “nothing” *is* the heart of the matter. I maintain, as well, that he is the first and last good and bad novelist of the map I am tracing, first, because he performs the initial act of renovating a narrative form in relation to a tradition not by destroying such a tradition but by challenging its logics. And, second, because this initial act is not initial, but just another recommencement in a long line of timeless gestures inserted in the history of literature and philosophy.

“Nunca,” the third line, examines the parallel experimental projects of José Emilio Pacheco and Salvador Elizondo. In both cases, my argument is that they tackle the problem of locating their texts within a tradition and history by offering a different conception of identity through time or timeless instances. I suggest that *Morirás lejos* by Pacheco is an uncommon text in its context because its interest does not lie in the quest for a national identity nor in a mere experimental rearrangement of narrative schemes. Instead, my reading proposes that Pacheco’s text confronts narrative techniques and the idea of tradition as mere heritage that it would be possible to simply acquire or rebel against. In contrast, I read Pacheco’s text through the idea—derived from a verse of his—that “heritage is but a net full of holes.” Thus, I examine how Pacheco is able to inscribe, within fiction, both the dismantlement of modern narrative procedures as well as an inquiry into the ways in which literature relates to tradition and historical materials by questioning the sense of identity both at a particular instant and across history. In regards to Salvador Elizondo’s short fictions, I argue that his literary experiments and paradoxes, tending towards the dead-end of “pure art,” frame the grammatical tenses of the impossible, the possible but not actual, and what never came into being. My suggestion is that

the lack of story and history in Elizondo's brief sketches in *El grafógrafo* and his notes in *Cuaderno de escritura* displace the customary ways of formulating time in narrative. As an alternative, I propose that Elizondo centers his attention on finding the logic of three verbs—"desoriginar," "acontecer," and "conjeturar"—and their negation of a traditional conception of time in narrative. These three logics are, in my eyes, strategies to devise a kind of literature capable of representing and theorizing instances where the order of time breaks down and becomes disjointed.

Now that I have introduced you to my obsessions and you are acquainted with each other, we must begin, once again.

Defined as a project, my work is a speculation, the plan of an undertaking, a projectile, and a missile. As such, it was, is and will continue to be encouraged both by conversations and by readings. In particular, the intuitions I developed in this introduction emerged in conversations with Geraldine Monterroso, Bruno Bosteels and Edmundo Paz Soldán. As for the readings, there are countless books and authors that have informed and helped me articulate my vision of literature as form of thought, as well as of transliterature. In what follows, I will succinctly name only a few of the readings that were part of the development solely of this introduction. In *L'écrivain pensif*, Natacha Michel proposes the idea that literature thinks and that there are two kind of writers: the writer-artist and the writer-thinker. Alain Badiou, in an essay collected in *The Age of Poets*, takes Michel's essay and novels and asks the question "What does literature think?" and argues that literature's effect takes place at the level of

thought. For his part, Pierre Macherey in *A quoi pense la littérature?* asks a similar question:

“What is literature thinking about?” and later proposes the idea of a literary philosophy.

Regarding the attributes or lack of attributes of literature, I used Juan José Saer’s essay “Por una literatura sin atributos” to rethink the categories in which criticism and the market often place an author. As said, I also name my chapters after Saer’s novel *Nadie nada nunca*. To think the paradigm of what I call “transliterature” I used two main methods or logics of reading. The first one, the method of “transcritique,” as defined by Kojin Karatani, consisting in reading a critical text through another system so as to drive it beyond its own limits. And, the second one, Félix Guattari’s concept of “transversality,” aiming to relate different levels and meanings so as to overcome the impasses of verticality and horizontality. The rest of the terms come from the works of the authors I analyze in this dissertation: Eduardo Lalo, Salvador Elizondo, Macedonio Fernández, Mario Levrero and José Emilio Pacheco. Always in the back—or front—of my mind, Jacques Lacan and Alain Badiou.

## NADIE

### 1. MARIO LEVRERO

Cure stroke by stroke  
release of gear, sudden veer, stroke by stroke  
Strokes: our therapy, our hygiene . . .  
Survival stroke by stroke  
To detach oneself, reattach oneself, redetach oneself  
—Henri Michaux

For a long time, one of the main sources of income of the Uruguayan author Mario Levrero was designing crossword puzzles. And it could be said that all of Levrero's work is shaped by his passion for assembling and solving puzzles whether in the literal sense, in his personal life or in his literature. From his early works in "La trilogía involuntaria" and the perplexity suffered by the protagonists inside estranged worlds with unknown rules to his late autobiographical works where therapeutic and daily exercises put together a subject, what prevails is a sense of incompleteness. There seems to be always something to discover, to get to, to put together, to complete with all of the pieces of images Levrero offers in his narrative. And the pleasure, the author claims, lies in the process of putting together the necessary elements to create something new: "Si pudiera reunir toda la información, si pudiera armar toda la historia, perdería interés de inmediato, y por supuesto me olvidaría de esa historia—porque lo que cuenta para mí es el descubrimiento, el ir armando el rompecabezas" (Levrero, *La novela* 250). The interest of the author resides in the inquiry, in the experimental part of writing. It is in this sense that Levrero's work is experimental—always looking to discover new ways to tell stories and manners to assemble himself in the face of his literary activity. Levrero is not a master plotter

who designs up to the last detail in his work, nor does he rely on characters or pre-conceived ideas. Instead, he works along the way with his desire, his interests, and in that way assembles puzzles. What is more, for Levrero, not only the story is to be assembled, but also the world and his own self. Just as novels are composed by threaded images, the self is made up by “bits and pieces” of experience, information, fiction, among other things. According to Levrero, from the day an individual is born he assembles piece by piece the world in which he wants to or agrees to live and consequently “va armando un rompecabezas infinito, al que siempre se le puede agregar, y de hecho se le agrega, nuevas piezas” (*Irrupciones* 31). This complex puzzle is ever-changing and whenever a new piece comes to the picture it changes the signification of that “trozo de mundo, tal vez del mundo entero—de ese mundo que nos hemos creado o nos vamos creando mientras vivimos” (Levrero, *Irrupciones* 31). The same way in which Levrero describes this procedure of assembling a puzzle of the world in life is the process of what happens in his novels: a constant, repetitive and vital inquiry. The writing process of the novels—not the novels themselves as objects—are what allow Levrero to explore his curiosities, delve deeper into his memories, exercise his imagination and work on his own subjective constitution. Thus, Levrero’s novels are multi-dimensional puzzles and as such I will approach them here, trying to maintain and work with their sense of incompleteness. While it is true that the designer of a puzzle already knows the solution, in this case, Levrero has not yet found either the solution or the form of his own existential puzzle.

Mario Levrero calls his late texts *El discurso vacío* (1996) and *La novela luminosa* (2005) “novels,” but they are formally and inherently more akin to the construction of an autobiographical discourse in the form of a diary. He insists on characterizing these texts as “novels” not due to their formal aspect but because nowadays, according to one of his ironic

remarks, a novel is whatever is included between a front cover and a back cover (*La novela* 26). It can be said that the category of the “novel” is devoid of content—its only condition is that it be contained within the limit of two covers—and does not have a specific form, which consequently gives Levrero the freedom to fill out the empty signifier of “the novel” with his own discourse. Both of these late novels by Levrero can be thought of as exercises in search for a subject—the subject or subjects with which the empty category of the “novel”—the space between front and back cover—will be filled. Throughout these two late novels Levrero tries to assemble and build a subject. This assembled subject can be understood in a twofold sense: as the subject matter of discourse or as the “self” being included within the narratives where a subjectivity is being constructed. By doing this, Levrero’s writing and pursuit does not presuppose the existence of a subject, nor does it aim to find an inaugural subject to legitimize its fiction. His writing rather creates a subject in the double sense of theme and of fictionally constructed being. Furthermore, the production of a subject entails more than the invention of a “self” if subjective practices are considered. As we will see, it is not only the subject that is created but also practices such as self-observation, the desire to return to the self, the spiritual implication of the subject in his writing, among others. These practices give way to literary, therapeutic and spiritual discourses within fiction, as will be discussed later. And, what is more, this construction of a subject also entails that it is being written throughout the novels and that the narrative lines of the novels are in fact the lines of the subject as it is being assembled. It cannot be said that Levrero’s two novels are *about* a pre-established set of themes nor that are they trying to reflect the author’s complex psyche through a kind of confessional writing in an attempt to uncover his true hidden “I.” Instead, the subject is a narrative conjecture posited by means of writing itself—the fictive point

of view of the subject is created as a place from where to thread experiences and assemble the world in fiction.

In these novels the subject writes itself while pursuing its own material composition. The subject comes to encounter its true composition in its use of language. But it also finds its own figure in the narrative displaying the “bits and pieces” of experience represented in the literary work the subject is writing. It is precisely this self-constructed subjective function what I want to trace in the present chapter. My argument is that in *El discurso vacío* and *La novela luminosa*—subsequently divided in two parts—there are two clearly defined literary procedures or dynamics. The first one is the desire born out of a demand to write trite transcendental images. And the second one the exercise of circling around an unattainable object, as a result of which a subject is formed. What is more, I claim that the process of construction of this subject calls for an inquiry upon the relationship between narrative and, through writing, the constructive process of emergence of subjectivity.

While it is true that one of the predominant forms of fictional narratives works by blurring the boundaries between the life of the artist and his work<sup>1</sup> and it might seem these autobiographical texts follow such path, in these novels by Levrero there is still a specificity of literature where the frontier of what belongs to art and what belongs to ordinary life is not breached. Far from fusing these two spheres and thus relying on presentation rather than representation, Levrero’s work testifies precisely to the aesthetic process specific to literature. The specificity of such process resides for Levrero in the way in which the writer’s life is at stake when he decides to write. With respect to this, he makes an ironic remark for the readers in

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<sup>1</sup> This has been argued by Rancière regarding what he calls the aesthetic regime of art in which “the distinction between those things that belong to art and those that belong to ordinary life is blurred” (5). Peter Bürger also says the avant-gardist protest against art as conceived by bourgeois society aims to reintegrate “art into the praxis of life” (22).

“Diario de la beca” where he says: “Amigo lector: no se te ocurra entretejer tu vida con tu literatura. O mejor sí: padecerás lo tuyo, pero darás algo de ti mismo, que es en definitiva lo único que importa. No me interesan los autores que crean laboriosamente sus novelones de cuatrocientas páginas, en base a fichas y a una imaginación disciplinada; sólo transmiten una información vacía, triste, deprimente. Y mentirosa, bajo ese disfraz de naturalismo” (*La novela* 72). Thus, for Levrero it is not about blurring the limits between life and literature, but rather about making literature part of life, having it affect the subjectivity of the creator and readers. The intertwinement between life and literature opens up the subject to being vulnerable and modified, touched by what he writes. That is the reason why he is also against the “naturalist disguise” where art tries to imitate life in an attempt to prompt the imagination. He will propose instead that literature is “dar algo de ti mismo,” giving oneself and all of one’s certainties to try to disentangle and arrange a subject through writing—subject whose constitution can only emerge, in this case, as a result of weaving his fiction in a literary discourse.

### **Of Exercises and Diaries**

Constructed “a semejanza de un diario íntimo” (Levrero, *El discurso* 6), *El discurso vacío* is structurally divided in two alternating sections: the handwritten exercises and the “empty discourse” proper. The exercise section is devoted to the practice and reflection upon a series of handwriting exercises of self-therapy through which the narrator tries to modify and improve his personality. The exercises are based on a therapeutic premise that if a subject habitually and rigorously practices re-shaping his handwriting this will eventually lead to modify and improve his personality traits. These calligraphic exercises—working by means of repetition, continuity,

and an obsessive attention to a discourse based in self-reflexivity—are an endeavor to go back to the most rudimentary writing practices through which the subject of a philosophical and literary discourse is literally constructed. On the other hand, the “empty discourse” section which the author claims has a “more literary” intention (*El discurso* 6) is assembled as a series of images. The images included in the section are in fact deviations from an apparently “empty form,” a discourse capable of containing any topic, any image, any thought. When the narrator deviates his attention from the form of the discourse itself and his attention drifts towards a “contenido trivial” (Levrero, *El discurso* 38) images come up and with them he tries to “rellenar el discurso vacío, o aparentemente vacío” (Levrero, *El discurso* 45). Consequently, the images he uses to “fill in” the empty discourse progressively reveal aspects of his own desire. As will be discussed later, desire as a mechanism of movement progressively creates its own aesthetic, ethic and erotic motivations as an attempt to find an object that would satisfy such a desire. And this desire also strives to be told as a coherent narrative “discourse” with its own systematic expression. Here, the subject is what emerges “en función de cierta conciencia práctica” (Levrero, *El discurso* 95) as a result of a desire, of curiosity, of an underlying voraciousness. As such, the “I” is another one of the images included in the “empty discourse,” another one of the elements that “fill in” the empty form. However, an image unlike the rest of them, the position of the image of the “I” is by definition set up to play a role in both sides of the discourse: there is an “I” that utters and writes the discourse but there is also an “I” created as subject-matter of such a discourse, as a result of its dynamic.

*La novela luminosa* is a two-part text comprehending the lengthy 450 pages prologue titled “Diario de la beca” and the brief “La novela luminosa”.<sup>2</sup> As in the exercises of *El discurso vacío*, in “Diario de la beca” one can read about the narrator’s activities of daily living and his long lasting obsessions—a bird’s cadaver that appeared outside of his window,<sup>3</sup> his time-consuming compulsion to play computer games and design a software to remind him to take his medicines, the vicissitudes of his failed love relationship with Chl, the way in which he spends his money and leisure time preparing to write the “novel” for whose writing he won a fellowship, etc. What “Diario de la beca” aims is the following: “poner en marcha la escritura, no importa con qué asunto, y mantener una continuidad hasta crearme el hábito” (*La novela* 23). In this way, the narrator imposes upon himself the duty to write something every day, no matter what, even if it is to say he has nothing to say at all. “Diario de la beca” is the excessive and spread out version of the initial “empty” calligraphic exercises of Levrero, where the only commitment is to write whatever comes to mind or happens. Both forms—the daily events and the attempt to get to a profound meaning, as Chejfec says, constitute the mechanics that drive both narratives (193). All of this effort is a preliminary practice to finally come to the writing of “La novela luminosa” for whose completion the author won a Guggenheim Fellowship. Meanwhile, during the time this effort is not progressing, the narrator’s life becomes the object of the narrative in the form of a chronological diary, whilst there is an obsessive circling around and postponement of the real object of the text, that is, the promised “novel” for which everything is being prepared and disposed. The *end* of the novel somehow takes place *in the middle* as the perpetually displaced writing of *La novela luminosa* results in another kind of pursuit: the return to the self. Even if at

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<sup>2</sup> I will distinguish between the book and the section by italicizing the title *La novela luminosa* and using quotes when referring to the specific part “La novela luminosa.” The same goes for *El discurso vacío* and “El discurso vacío” section in the novel.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Levrero and the significance of the birds see Echeverría 95-102.

first this return to the self is considered by the narrator to be the *means by which* he will eventually get to the core of what he needs to write—the transcendental luminous images—the reflexive circle of the subject’s movement towards itself is a process that consciously and explicitly represents its own conditions for being. Furthermore, this self-conscious representation—which implies the subject’s constitution and is not merely part of a cognitive effort striving for knowledge—is in many ways an inquiry into the specificity of the literary discourse as a kind of autobiographical spiritual knowledge or truth. The so-called “return to the self” performed by Levrero in his last novels functions explicitly as an experiment that pushes the boundaries of what is to be considered literature and what is beyond its sphere, further promoting the possibility of life being a material among others to be elaborated aesthetically to finally come to create a subject that would stem from such aesthetic process. In the end, for Levrero’s literature is not *about* ideas<sup>4</sup> but is instead the theater, the body where truths come to be encountered and where a life’s narrative begets the crossing points of threads that transcend it, its subjectivity.

The much planned and awaited “La novela luminosa” that comes after “Diario de la beca” is not a plotted and coherent narrative, but a concatenation of images very similar to the ones Levrero had already described in *El discurso vacío*. The reader is most likely unable to pinpoint a single story and there is no sequence nor a thread of events—one could go as far as saying that, in fact, there are *only* events.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, these events seem to be stripped down from their content and site—the place and circumstances where they take place—so they appear

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<sup>4</sup> In “La novela luminosa” Levrero says that ideas should not be what drives literature: “me resisto a la idea, a las ideas –y muy especialmente a la posibilidad de ideas como impulsoras de la literatura” (*La novela* 456).

<sup>5</sup> For an account on how *La novela luminosa* dealing with events that do not break with the state of affairs see Laddaga 235.

to function as a catalogue or a list of untied events, told through images and sensory impressions. What the author calls “luminous moments” are in fact extremely profane “autobiographical moments” (Levrero, *La novela* 456). The autobiographical moments include, for example, the narrator’s realization that a male dog was smelling in the grass the track of a female dog as if he were not merely tracking its scent but the object itself or the description of a particularly thick paper the narrator is using to write on at the moment, which turns out to have been a gift from a woman who had heard of the author’s economic hardships and stole it from her office. The narrator recognizes and gives meaning to the so-called transcendental events with the purpose of stringing them together as a novel, that is, as a series of significant and meaningful images escalating towards an ecstatic feeling—a climax and an ending. And yet, the final moment—the moment in which the assumption is the subject would finally get to be a whole and uncut “I,” and encounter itself in the elated luminous moment—never arrives because, according to the narrator, it is inherently impossible to narrate the luminous images. The narrator says that as soon as the luminous images are plotted and declared to be meaningful, they lose their luster and disappoint, they sound trivial (Levrero, *La novela* 19). Thus, the attempt to construct a whole, uncut “I” in the discourse, as a result of narrating transcendental images, is frustrated by the structure of language and narrative and by the threading of events. Moreover, the images, even if trite, mark for the narrator moments of encounter with the eternal. The images are timeless moments captured through impressions. It is precisely this effort to capture the timeless moments what Levrero deems to be worthy of narrating and therein lies what is different in his approach to what constitutes the knot of literature and life in its highly problematic conjunction.

Along these lines, it is important to analyze what is at stake in Levrero’s two novels—*El discurso vacío* and *La novela luminosa*—which is more than merely the construction of a subject

through narrative or of narrative through an implied subject. What is crucial and will be the center of this chapter is the analysis of two procedures and their implications in the construction of a particular kind of subject. First, the desire to write the impossible luminous images; and, second, the compulsive repetitive drive to circle around an always unattainable and sublimated object or image of an object. The first procedure can be found at the core of the structure of “El discurso vacío” and “La novela luminosa.” In both there is an insistence on desire thematically—what the narrator seeks is to seize the hidden content lying behind the apparent emptiness of discourse (*El discurso* 50) and to write about certain luminous experiences to follow through on his profound desire—“deseo profundo” (*La novela* 455)—to register them. Desire, nevertheless, functions also as the underlying structure of these two parts. The desire to produce a narrative, a discourse, creates a series of images—objects—functioning as what propels the narrative and also produces a desiring subject. Conversely, this desiring subject is trying to find itself as the unity, cause and origin of the discourse it is writing. Desire is the desire to constitute an “I,” an almost mystical need for unity with an experience that would *express* and coherently *represent* such an “I.”

The second procedure is at play in the “Exercises” and in “Diario de la beca.” The determination to get to a certain end result is what moves these texts and so they have an almost circular structure, because they are repeatedly circling around an object they want to attain that nonetheless does not arrive during the writing of these preliminary exercises. There is a paradox at play because even if the goal is to reach an object—the luminous novel and the therapeutic effect of the calligraphic exercises—this goal itself is false. The true aim of the exercises and the diary is to reproduce their own movement by way of repeatedly missing their object, by circling around it. If the subject is looking for itself through these auto-graphical practices and exercises,

we come to find that there is not a subject to be found as an object of writing, but that the reflexive exercise itself is the subject and object. The plasticity of the form allowed by the exercises and diary lends itself to the form of life as conceived by Levrero, that is, as monotonous, repetitive, always circling around something whose unattainability opens up the space for literary creation as an inquiry, the assembly of an unsolvable puzzle.

### **The Desire for the Novel**

The premise of both *El discurso vacío* and *La novela luminosa* is the “duty” to write as the result of an imposition—a demand. Whether this demand comes from the outside—a friend compelling the narrator to write an extraordinary experience he had told him during a conversation or the concrete need to have a finished product to show the Guggenheim Foundation for the Fellowship he received—or is self-imposed—the graphotherapeutical premise of exercising one’s handwriting to improve one’s personality—the fact is that the writing of these texts is born out of what we can call an ethical imperative. This imperative is the initial demand from which simultaneously desire develops. For Levrero there is a constant duality at work in writing that creates a dialectical relationship between a certain duty and desire itself. When talking about the opposition between the dark novel and the luminous novel, the two paths of the project he is trying to work out and face up to, he states: “Ahora debo escribir (la novela oscura) y deseo escribir (la novela luminosa), pero no sé cómo hacerlo. Se ha fugado de mí el espíritu travieso, alma en pena, demonio familiar o como quiera llamársele, que hacía el trabajo en mi lugar. Estoy a solas con mi deber y mi deseo” (Levrero, *La novela* 465). The dark novel<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In a later conversation, Levrero says his “novela oscura” was finally published with the title *Desplazamientos* (Levrero, *Un silencio* 32).

and the luminous novel function as two sides of the same coin. In the dark novel what is at stake is the duty to write given that the starting point is an unconditional “must”—the novel *must* be written. On the other hand, in the luminous novel there is a desire to write, the desire to bridge the gap with the lacking object, that is, the telling of “dos o tres chispazos o relámpagos o momentos luminosos” (Levrero, *La novela* 465). However, the specific way in which this might happen is unknown to the narrator since he believes the writing impulse comes from giving way to the voice of another “I”—“el que hacía el trabajo en mi lugar”—be it a playfully mischievous spirit or a doomed lost soul. What is left is a solitary “I,” alone with *his* duty and *his* desire. The occupations of the subject are reduced to these two basic functions and ways of relating to the world, while at the same time that “I” is looking for his own structure and being in his duty and desire. In other words, the initial duty to write already implies the duty of a return to the (lost) self through writing and from there arises the desire to write “La novela luminosa.”

In the prologue to *La novela luminosa* the narrator confesses to being confused as to which was the initial impulse leading him to begin writing the novel. He claims to remember it began with an image arising in a conversation he had with a friend of his. But, at the same time, when he read again the first chapter of “La novela luminosa” he realized that according to what he had written, there had been another obsessive image that triggered the writing of the novel. From the onset, there is a split origin of the whole project of the novel. The first of these two images is about the special arrangement or layout of the necessary elements for writing<sup>7</sup> and the second prompt is the writing itself of certain experiences that can be catalogued as luminous (Levrero, *La novela* 14). These two images are also two possible paths in the novel: the “Diario

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<sup>7</sup> In “Diario de un canalla” Mario Levrero hints at what might be the image: “Cuando comencé a escribir aquella novela inconclusa, lo hice dominado por una imagen que me venía persiguiendo desde hacía cierto tiempo: me veía escribiendo algo —no sabía qué— con una lapicera de tinta china, sobre un papel de buena calidad” (*Diario* 20).

de la beca” and “La novela luminosa.” “Diario de la beca” is a neurotic attempt to display, reflect upon and obsessively arrange the layout of the essential materials needed for writing<sup>8</sup>—implying writing itself as metaliterary gesture—with the intention of finally getting to write “La novela luminosa.” And “La novela luminosa” is the above mentioned catalogue of luminous experiences exhibited as if on an inventory without any kind of relationship of cause and effect between them. The narrator speaks of these two paths and their dual origin and later on writes that they are not intertwined, but rather function in a parallel manner. The two images and their consequences are not opposed to one another but turn out to be both at play throughout the novel and therefore it is not essential to determine the “true” origin. However, the reader never gets to know either the exact content or the form of those two initial images that are said to have triggered the diary and the novel, even if the entire project is an effort to find such origins at the core of desire and duty. It is possible to say that by looking for a cause, the narrator tries to explain and give coherence to the effects, which seem to be a series of unrelated and purposeless images and repetitive events, and thus bind his literary effort as a meaningful enterprise. Nevertheless, what is of interest here is precisely the lack of meaning, the impossibility to produce a complete image both of a subject and of a narrative theme. This is the reason why this possibly double bound of the origin of the novel is never clear and instead seems to be born out of a certain duty deemed to be blindly followed.

The following passage from *La novela luminosa* is part of the novel’s beginning where, as mentioned before, the narrator says one of his friends imposed upon him the duty to write a story, knowing very well beforehand the experience was impossible to convey:

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<sup>8</sup> For a reflection on Levrero’s new materiality of writing see the Zambra.

Me llama la atención que ahora, pasado mucho tiempo, vea tan claramente la relación causa-efecto: mi amigo me impulsó a escribir una historia que yo sabía imposible de escribir, y me lo impuso como un *deber*; esa *imposición* quedó allí, trabajando desde las sombras, rechazada de modo tajante por la consciencia, y con el tiempo comenzó a emerger bajo la forma de esa imagen obsesiva, mientras borraba astutamente sus huellas porque una imposición genera resistencias; para eliminar esas resistencias la imposición venida desde afuera *se disfrazó de un deseo venido desde adentro*. Aunque, desde luego, *el deseo era preexistente . . .* tal vez supiera de un modo secreto y sutil que mi amigo buscaría la forma de obligarme a hacer lo que yo creía imposible. Lo creía imposible y lo sigo creyendo imposible. Que fuera imposible no era un motivo suficiente para no hacerlo, y eso yo lo sabía, pero me daba pereza intentar lo imposible. (emphasis added) (Levrero, *La novela* 14)

As much as the narrator tries to erase the traces of the imposed duty, the residues of the demand placed upon him come back to haunt him articulated as desire to write. The assumption of contingency as cause—the moment when the narrator’s friend demanded a written story turns out to be what set writing in motion—is what retroactively seems to have launched the metonymical chain of desire. By metonymical I mean that there is a constant displacement of signifiers reshaping the teleological dynamics of meaning, for example, on the perpetually changing idea of what and how the novel will work out and what kind of shape it will take.<sup>9</sup> At

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<sup>9</sup>As the autor debates, the text cannot be a novel, “¿tendrá que ser, pues, un ensayo? Me resisto a la idea” (Levrero, *La novela* 455); it might be a “lista mental de experiencias que quería dejar escritas como testimonio, antes de enfrentar el bisturí” (Levrero, *La novela* 464) or the narration of an anecdote “(la pertinencia de cuya inserción en esta novela luminosa sigue siendo para mí un element de duda), pero . . . la imagen sigue viniendo obsesivamente. . .

first, as stated by the narrator in the quote, duty is rejected or repressed only to come back later disguised as desire “stemming from the inside.” Desire is not the “origin” of the novel, but rather is created retroactively as an a priori of the duty imposed and from which the dictum, the urge to write, then develops. By saying that any demand or imposition generates resistance and such forces impress themselves in images, the narrator wants to explain the obsessive character of the image that keeps coming back to his consciousness. And the impossibility to write the image, appears to be due to the image being a concealed cluster of repressed desires that can only return as something other than a narrable image. And yet, the narrator is ready to attempt the impossible—even if this attempt is not frustrated by the impossibility to satisfy his desire to narrate, but will be so by his laziness. The result is a constantly frustrated narrative, always stalled by those “resistencias a la imposición,” only capable of generating a small catalogue of luminous images intertwined by their adjacency in the novel. In many ways, the desire to write the novel only arises when the narrator makes the outside imposition his own. It is the subject who makes this outside duty his own and then has to answer for it. This is one of the principles of what here I called an ethical imperative: to become an imperative, it has to be supplemented with an actual act of the subject. In this sense, the imperative is constituted retrospectively, based on the act that submits to its duty. It is not that the duty to write the novel is always already there working as a pre-given law, it functions only when the subject submits to this duty.

The duty is, then, to write an image and from that need stems the desire to write the novel. The narrator’s realization that there was a preexisting desire in the whole enterprise of “*La novela luminosa*” marks how he reads the project as part of his own subjective construction. He

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aparentemente, no tiene relación con el tema de la novela” (Levrero, *La novela* 469). The signifier of what the novel is or should be is constantly displaced and follows the ever-shifting metonymic law of the dynamics of desire.

says he lives *for* the novel and that his life has become, while writing the novel, an uninterrupted monologue no longer depending on his will. That is why he talks about “la imposición del trabajo que debo realizar—quíéralo o no—con la única, borrosa esperanza de llegar algún día a un punto final, quedar vacío, exhausto, limpio” (Levrero, *La novela* 480). The duty is here intimately related to the self, to a concrete work upon the self that must be done to reach an end point and complete the project. Nonetheless, as Levrero elaborates further, getting to attain the object of desire and saying that the project is complete is in this case impossible, since it is not merely a literary endeavor—it is also related to the construction of his subjectivity. Reaching the end would mean death for him, “eso sólo se alcanza con la muerte” (Levrero, *La novela* 480), he says, because it would be precisely the moment in which desire stops and he could finally claim to have completed the literary-subjective project.<sup>10</sup> That is why he says that none of the luminous experiences have led him to be able to say “‘ya está’, ‘ya llegué’, ‘era esto’” (Levrero, *La novela* 480). Instead, he is always looking to tell one more image, yet another luminous experience, or narrate it in a different way. The end-goal is posited only as an unreachable horizon of completion. Even if he approaches and narrates his experiences as objects of his desire, for example, the long endurance trial he had to go through to be with a woman, it is in the nature of the project to work as a chain of displaced desires. For example, when narrating the luminous moment when a young girl looked at him, he describes not the image of the girl herself nor her eyes or appearance but the ineffable quality of her look that he keeps in his memory. He says that her gaze does not have an owner and it is not subject to space or time and in fact does not belong to her, it is not part of her being (Levrero, *La novela* 475). Thus, it seems that what prompts the

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<sup>10</sup> In the best article written on *La novela luminosa* Inzaurrealde (1046) argues that the novel has three axes that are: the luminous experiences, the daily melancholy, and death.

narrator to keep on writing is the search for these instances where he finds nothing other than his own emptiness: in the end, as quoted above, he is left empty and exhausted.

Most novels are constructed as a meaningful structure, as the weaving of threads set up to have meaning. Plotting is precisely the “dynamic aspect of narrative—that which makes a plot ‘move forward,’ and makes us read forward, seeking in the unfolding of the narrative a line of intention and a portent of design that hold the promise of progress toward meaning” (Brooks, *Reading* xiii). In “La novela luminosa” there is clearly no plot in this sense: there is no unfolding of a narrative or a line of intention and, as we just saw, there is no ending in the traditional sense.<sup>11</sup> However, there is a certain promise of meaning and a dynamic aspect, since desire is what moves the text forward. It can be said that “La novela luminosa” is a novel stripped of a meaningful structure in a general way and that instead is a collection of encounters that were meaningful for the narrator, told in images. The narrator constantly approaches the luminous moments with his narrative—more on the line of descriptions and essayistic elaborations on these descriptions. With each image we seem to come closer to the telling of a transcendental moment, and yet there is an unbreachable distance. There seems to be always one more effort to make in the narration or another woman in the alphabet to add to the collection of transcendental instances and thus the writing proceeds exceedingly slowly, bit by bit, image by image. It is this postponement of the attainment of the transcendental what actually turns out to be more pleasurable and present in “La novela luminosa.”

At the same time, the writing of the events or encounters narrated in “La novela luminosa” are determinant for the transformation of the subject that emerges from the telling of

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<sup>11</sup> The author even has, at the end of the novel, a line of the topics he discussed in the novel which “no pretende cerrar esas líneas abiertas sino apenas mostrar el estado actual de algunas de ellas”, because the book is somehow a “museo de historias inconclusas” (Levrero, *La novela* 561).

these moments. Constantly, the narrator reminds the reader that it is a vital operation and he must continue writing: “debía continuar, porque me resultaba vital averiguar esas verdades que estaba descubriendo” (Levrero, *La novela* 508). What the narrator is after is the discovery of truths that transform him and constitute him as a subject. And the truths he encounters in different instances where he experiences a timeless moment, in fact modify his “estructura de valores, o de jerarquías” (Levrero, *La novela* 524). The recalled luminous moment is told in an image, which forms part of a list of other transcendental images that depict an encounter with the timeless. In this case, the timeless does not refer to the endless circling of time, but to some rare moments when the subject encounters its own self. In these moments, circularity appears and becomes tangible in the encounter of two temporalities—the timeless and the temporal—which is the event as such. And these encounters affect both the past as well as the future, they make a “hole in time,” they are timeless moments and as such they can be narrated only as images and not as plotted threads. The luminous instances are not what can be concluded or derived from the anecdotes the narrator tells, but rather what is revealed as an image “simultáneamente en mí” (Levrero, *La novela* 521). In those moments there is a mystical perception. The narrator argues that at the core of pleasure there is the possibility of “el desmoronamiento de un yo hipertrofiado en favor de la percepción de la realidad *con todas sus dimensiones* o, al menos, con todas las dimensiones que estamos capacitados para percibir” (Levrero, *La novela* 527). As such, these images are multi-dimensional and the “I” is disintegrated in order to perceive the unity of things at the center of desire. That is also why the images are about the particular events in the life of the narrator and his encounters with women or with insects, but what they try to capture in reality is the generic and timeless quality of truths, and that is why the narrator, for example, describes one of the luminous moments by saying: “No era una mujer, sino todas las mujeres. Una

abstracción viviente y presente” (Levrero, *La novela* 555). In other words, these luminous events transform and form the subject because of their universal quality. The subject in this case is nothing other than the moment of a certain universal timeless encounter where a demand determines his desire. It is not a subject with “subjective baggage” (Zupančič, *Ethics* 61), bringing his characteristics and morals to a given situation, but rather an instance that emerges from the situations, from the “desmoronamiento de un yo hipertrofiado.” The universality of the events described, the totality they dare to encompass and establish as true are what result in an ethical subject which, in this case, is opposed to the “I,” shattered in the process of making the events and narrative images universal.

### **The Circle of the Drive**

“Ejercicios” and “Diario de la beca” function as deviations from their different objectives. In “Ejercicios” the narrator wants to get to the therapeutic aim of his writing—the improvement of his personality. And in “Diario de la beca” the narrator keeps postponing and exercising his leisure time to finally get to write “La novela luminosa.” Repetition and the accumulation of motifs are the main procedures in both texts. Even if the author claims not to be able to tolerate repetitive and monotonous routine works (Levrero, *El discurso* 18), that is precisely what he needs to do in order to exercise his handwriting through the idea that there should be no reflection upon the materials he is writing about. He tries to adhere to the repetitive principles he set out at the beginning of “Ejercicios” but he is constantly interrupted and is unable to continue. About these interruptions he comments that he feels a pressing need to “conseguir una continuidad en mis actividades, un orden, una disciplina—porque la dispersión y

la inanidad de los días son apabullantes, deletéreas, conllevan pérdida de identidad y le quitan significación al existir” (Levrero, *El discurso* 24). Levrero’s literary gesture in these texts is the interruption of narrative continuity and subsequently the fact that this interruption leads to the dispersion of his identity. In consequence, Levrero grapples with the rhythm of his own work as it is also the rhythm of the construction of his identity. And this is only accomplished with order, discipline, and rigor to maintain the focus and not let thoughts go astray. However, this hope and constant mantra for the narrator—his need for an illusion of discipline—seems to always deviate due to an interruption, to laziness or even due to bad health and the physical need to interrupt his writing-rhythm.

In a very clear manner, the narrator of *El discurso vacío* formulates a “law” describing how his family dynamic works, but this law could very well also be an accurate description of what happens in “Ejercicios” and “Diario de la beca” and their entire logic or functioning: “‘Todo impulso hacia un objetivo será desviado inmediatamente hacia otro, y así sucesivamente, y el impulso hacia el objetivo primero podrá ser retomado o no’” (Levrero, *El discurso* 25). It seems as though this “law” could also be an account of the law of the drive, since the drive functions precisely by way of missing its satisfaction, as does here the series of impulses—specifically the ones related to writing. In “Ejercicios” every impulse goes awry and is deviated from its goal. At the same time, these deviations precisely constitute the subject of the diary and the exercises. Writing and the subject of these texts are nothing other than a deviation from an aim and instead what is left are the registers of the unfulfilled goals, the sublimation and its product—which is the process itself—that is, the diary and the calligraphic exercises. As Verani notes, there is no narrative evolution and every attempt to attain causality fades away in the wanderings of the protagonist (“Mario” 55) and his postponement of the pre-established goal

without being able to follow any path in a straight-line. The drive's goal here seems to be the correction of personality via exercising the handwriting or in "Diario de la beca" the goal is to reach the object of the novel. But these are false goals. On the contrary, the true aim of these deviated impulses is to reproduce their own movement by constantly not-attaining their object—but wanting to arrive to it, nonetheless.

In this sense, the first person narrator of "Diario de la beca" repeatedly complains about not having the necessary leisure time to prepare for writing, nor an appropriate environment to write. There are endless distractions that do not allow the narrator to concentrate on the project of the novel. He always has a new detective novel to read or to re-read, he has to go on walks with Chl who seemingly has stopped loving him, and he has to buy a comfortable couch or teach his literary workshops. But even after buying a couple of couches with the money from the Guggenheim Foundation—he could not make up his mind on whether to buy an appropriate couch for sleeping or a bergère ideal for reading, so he bought both—summer comes and now he has as an excuse that he needs air conditioning to be able to work under the heat of Montevideo. The narrator is haunted by the accountability towards the imaginary figure of Mr. Guggenheim and as Graciela Montaldo says, "en lugar de una práctica creativa, la literatura/el arte se vuelve una carga, una tarea que no se puede cumplir y por ello aparece siempre el fantasma de estar ante un tribunal" (28). This is another one of the instances that are part of what deviates the writing impulse, but that nonetheless produces the diary and its lengthy discourse and reflection upon all kinds of matter. While apparently not writing anything worthwhile except for the diary, the narrator says that at least he is writing something and he is exercising his fingers on the keyboard. And he adds: "Estoy lejos todavía de poder enfrentar mi proyecto de la beca; no quiero ni pensarlo, no todavía. Quiero llegar a eso naturalmente. A través del ocio. A través de

una verdadera necesidad de escribir eso” (Levrero, *La novela* 44). For the narrator of the diary, leisure time is a way of being in the world: “el ocio no tiene sustancia propia, no es un ente en sí mismo, no es nada; el ocio es una disposición del alma ... es, cómo decirlo, una manera de estar” (Levrero, *La novela* 109). The movement *towards* something is what drives the whole writing of the diary, but at the same time the movement conceived within the framework of the diary is never enough to get to the novel. Meanwhile, the diary keeps on working as a kind of exercise to let go and attain the necessary fluidity for the larger project. The project becomes also an aim and an objective, a need, and therefore also what the author tries to avoid or circle around since, as seen before, it is also imposed as a demand in a double sense—his friend’s demand and the institutional demand by the Guggenheim Fellowship. Leisure time functions in this case as the means through which in his fantasy the narrator will attain his goal. But, at the same time, it is leisure itself what constitutes the literary framework par excellence.<sup>12</sup> It is no coincidence that the narrator is looking for what the reader needs in order to go through the diary: time, and a certain disposition. What is needed is a certain exception from the productive society, from the scheme of usefulness. And here Levrero is reflecting upon literature itself and its place between its commercial demand and its leisurely unproductive enjoyment. The economy of time in Levrero is of course also tied to the necessary time to examine himself and take care of himself. This maneuver is as literal as the register of how much time of his day his addictions devour: “estas adicciones . . . al estado de trance; un medio de abreviar el tiempo, de que el tiempo pase sin que yo sienta dolor. Pero así también es cómo se me va la vida, cómo mi tiempo de vida se transforma en tiempo de nada, un tiempo cero” (Levrero, *La novela* 138). In this manner, his life-time and its repeated inventory in the diary are part of the activities that follow the exercises and

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<sup>12</sup> For a very interesting reading of *La novela luminosa* in the lines of the relationship between the artist and institutional instances through money and the law see Montaldo 26-9.

training for the novel, while at the same time conforming the peculiar ironic discourse of the diary.

Throughout Levrero's late novels there is a clear therapeutic endeavor where the writing-act functions as an inquiry to delve deeper into the knowledge of his "self"—the constitution of his subjectivity and desire. Instead of being an instrumental part of an intellectual venture to access a certain "truth" through knowledge, the writing-act demands from the subject a change or alteration in its being, a transformation of its structure and composition. The writing-act is conceived in Levrero's work in two simultaneous ways. In the first one, writing has a therapeutic function, that is, it is the means by which—with discipline, as habit and through repetition—the subject is able to go back to its own "self" and discover its motivations and desires. The second function of writing is a spiritual one. It is spiritual in the sense that it registers in literary images—and according to Levrero his literature is nothing but images—the effects produced and opened up by the access to the truth a subject is constantly looking for in the form of enlightenment.<sup>13</sup> This spiritual function of writing deals with the transfiguration the subject suffers after these luminous moments or encounters with the real, in other words, the encounter with death, love or the writing-act itself. Ultimately, the subject, according to what we will see, is fabricated from a truth and is nothing but what subsists of truth in partial fragments. Thus, if writing is both a therapeutic and a spiritual practice, this entails that the subject of the diary and the novel are not only the daily occurrences in the life of a character-narrator, but it is actually the narrative and creation of a subjectivity. The construction of a subject in and of narrative in *La*

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<sup>13</sup> In an answer to an interview he made up himself, Levrero says: "No cultivo las letras, sino las imágenes; y las imágenes están muy próximas a la materia prima, que son las vivencias" (qtd. in Rocca 87). And he adds later on: "En mi literatura no hay búsqueda de claves, sino de imágenes y situaciones" (qtd. in Rocca 101). For more about the role of the image in Levrero in general see also Montoya 13.

*novela luminosa* and *El discurso vacío* is what opens up the possibility for a subject to create and transform itself through writing.

Along these lines, in “Diario de un canalla” the narrator claims the following with respect to his writing and the autobiographical form of his late novels:

Pero no estoy escribiendo para ningún lector, ni siquiera para leerme yo. Escribo para escribirme yo; es un acto de autoconstrucción. Aquí me estoy recuperando, aquí estoy luchando por rescatar pedazos de mí mismo que han quedado adheridos a mesas de operación (iba a escribir de disección), a ciertas mujeres, a ciertas ciudades, a las descascaradas y macilentas paredes de mi apartamento montevideano, que ya no volveré a ver, a ciertos pasajes, a ciertas presencias . . .

No me fastidien con el estilo ni con la estructura esto no es una novela, carajo. Me estoy jugando la vida. (Levrero, *Diario* 25)

What the narrator is looking for are the pieces of his self that are affixed to certain past experiences, spaces or moments in order to construct his subjectivity at the present moment and as a result of the writing act itself.<sup>14</sup> He needs both the relevant instances that through time have constituted him and his act of self-construction in his writing in the present progressive verb tense. This implies not only the surgical operation and dissection of the subject’s experience but also the reassembly of these instances in the image of an “I.” It is important to note, again, that it is an image, because this means it is an imaginary instance, a form of identification with the subject that is being written in order to consolidate the bits and pieces of a body. Writing at this point then might serve therapeutically as that which gives consistence to the pieces of the

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<sup>14</sup> For an interesting account of Levrero’s dealings with his surroundings and the city see Kohan 113-26.

narrator's self which, now dissected in a narrative, are striving to conform a sense of self and an image of the self. This "recovery" is also a "make up" of the pieces of the subject encountering its own "self"—but in this case not by chance—as what has been left on the dissecting table.

Levrero repeatedly tells the story of what triggered the writing of his late novels and their autobiographical form, which was that he was going to undergo gallbladder surgery.<sup>15</sup> The fear of dying in the intervention is what made him decide he had to write his most transcendental experiences before facing his surgery. And these experiences were in part collected in "La novela luminosa." In the last affirmation of the quote above the narrator says he is putting his own life at stake by "writing himself" in the act of constructing his "I" and assumes in his writing-act the subject, whose whole structure is implied in its saying, in its language and in the literary task. And again, it comes back to a reflection on the literary form: the narrator claims this is not a novel or, actually, that the form does not matter. Thus, the "recovery" of those pieces or "ruins" as Levrero calls them elsewhere (*El discurso* 95) is what happens in the writing of *El discurso vacío* and *La novela luminosa*. In a sense, this is a therapeutic enterprise in the line of the practices of the self as conceived in a sort of medical operation—a therapy. A self-therapeutic practice, which is what this "recovery" means here, implies taking medical care of oneself, serving oneself and devoting one-self to one-self (Foucault, *The Hermeneutics* 98) as well as creating a subjectivity through a literary discourse. It is a matter of recovering the self in literature, an act of self-construction by telling one-self in a novel to be able to rescue experiences in writing.

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<sup>15</sup> Facing the possibility of death, the author wants to consign his transcendental experiences to paper before going into surgery. He says in "Diario de una canalla": "Han pasado más de dos años; casi tres desde que empecé a escribir aquella novela luminosa, póstuma, inconclusa; dos años, dos meses y unos días desde el día de la operación. El motivo de aquella novela era rescatar algunos pasajes de mi vida, con la idea secreta de exorcizar el temor a la muerte y el temor al dolor, sabiendo que dentro de cierto plazo inexorable iba a encontrarme a merced del bisturí. Bueno; lo cierto es que no he muerto en aquella sala de operaciones" (Levrero, *Diario* 17).

As said before, the premise of the graphological therapy the narrator of *El discurso vacío* is practicing is that if the calligraphic writing “behavior” changes then other aspects of a person can change as well (Levrero, *El discurso* 13). This graphological self-therapy constitutes the framework for a series of reflections on writing and its relationship to its most material aspect—the letters and their tracing, their dimension of existence as mere characters without significance ascribed to them. For example, in an exercise the narrator writes: “Debo permitir que mi yo se agrande por el mágico influjo de la grafología. Letra grande, yo grande. Letra chica, yo chico. Letra linda, yo lindo” (Levrero, *El discurso* 29). There is an intimate relationship, then, between the subject that writes and its writing, not only in the sense that there is a writing act, but also in the sense that the subject is not the master of its own language. The subject’s language, however, is capable of expressing the constitution of the subject. The exercises progressively develop disciplinary codes to follow regarding writing and its daily practice: “ciertamente, durante este período extrañé bastante esta disciplina diaria que, aunque recién iniciada, ya se había perfilado con el carácter de un hábito sumamente positivo, amén de placentero, y ayudaba en no poca medida a centrar mi yo y a prepararme para una jornada de mayor orden, voluntad y equilibrio” (Levrero, *El discurso* 15). The exercises require a certain discipline and rigor, they must form a habit—and inhabit—the writer since their objective is “centering” the “I” and maintaining an equilibrium. Against all interruptions of his repetitive discipline, the writer tries not to lose his writing rhythm that contributes to improving his health and character. Healthy habits such as these exercises help maintain and conform the character. It can be said that in *El discurso vacío* the typographical impression forms the character in both senses of the word: as letter and as the qualities of an individual, his personality and defining traits. Writing makes an impression and is engraved in the subject while it is also the practice that builds the subject.

The therapeutic function of writing, the narrator of *El discurso vacío* notes, is an operation that is different from that of literature, since in order to trace letter by letter a word, its meaning is displaced from the center of attention:

Es preciso poner mucha paciencia y gran atención: tratar en lo posible de dibujar letra por letra, desentendiéndose de las significaciones de las palabras que se van formando—lo cual es una operación casi opuesta a la de la literatura (especialmente porque se debe frenar el pensamiento, que siempre—acostumbrado a la máquina de escribir—busca adelantarse, proporcionar nuevas ideas, establecer nuevas relaciones de ideas y de imágenes, preocupado —tal vez, deformación profesional—por la continuidad y coherencia del discurso).

(Levrero, *El discurso* 17)

Paradoxically, however, even as the narrator conceives the literary operation in these terms, at the same time what he is doing is precisely providing “continuity” to his exercises in order to conform *El discurso vacío*. His letter-drawing activity conforms more than mere letters—characters—without significance, because he coherently assembles his words to reflect upon the “empty discourse” and how a discourse and a subject are constituted through his writing. “Drawing” the letters instead of “using” the letters to form a word to which one can attach signification would be the therapeutic function according to Levrero, and ultimately by making these exercises dependent on this therapeutic function results in a certain continuity and coherence subjected to the ultimate aim of transforming the “self” through writing. However, this transformation through writing requires not only a simple act of knowledge, but for the subject to have “right of access to the truth he must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become, to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself” and therefore truth “can

only be given to the subject at a price that brings the subject's being into play" (Foucault, *The Hermeneutics* 15). By making his own life the object of writing, the narrator of "Diario de la beca" seeks this transformation and the truth he wants to be able to convey in "La novela luminosa" for which he is exercising and accumulating materials.

The therapeutic function of writing is also related to the central inquiry of "El diario de la beca," which is what the author calls "el retorno a mí mismo que estoy intentando" (Levrero, *La novela* 38). The "return" is his premise. The narrator jokingly tells that the I Ching answered his questions with certainty "con un hexagrama que se llama 'El retorno', y me dijo que habría formidable fortuna" (Levrero, *La novela* 39). The narrator is striving to find or to go back to his "self," to find what he is constituted from and what are his inner (unspoken) desires. The question of the subject becomes a reflexive activity, a reflected activity which turns the narrator back to himself, and at the same time asks: what is this "self" to which I need to "return"? What does it mean to return to the self? This reflexive movement implies a certain kind of loop, a circle, a falling back that must carry out a certain motion or shift. But at the same time, the question is if this return is just a manner of coming back or else implies a kind of transformation of the subject in the movement towards itself and the self's turning back on itself. What is certain is that Levrero is neither looking for a conscious or imaginary "I" nor wanting to explore his personality. Instead, his desire is to find the profound "I" that is alienated from himself (Inzaurrealde 1047). Hence, the return to the self in this case does not come through discipline, rigor or continuity, but rather through the deviations and the postponement of the goals, as discussed before. In the process of deviating from and not getting to the goal of the enterprise, a literary subject is constructed. The narrator's struggle is to keep some kind of continuity, because this closed obsessive drive to exercise and register as practice the daily occurrences are

detrimental to how he imagines his identity as unity, order and discipline: “Es, en el fondo, una lucha por rescatar mi identidad y mis principios, en un momento de gran desbarajuste. Debo evitar ser arrastrado por el torbellino” (Levrero, *El discurso* 52). As the narrator says, if he feels he must make an effort to obtain something, that thing he wants to attain is naturally not meant for him (Levrero, *La novela* 106). Although, according to the narrator, this reasoning has led him to have less willpower, this is the kind of mechanisms he develops for his writing. The self he wants to return to is perhaps none other than the anxious, worried, and clueless old man, “[el] sujeto confundido por el tema del retorno” (Levrero, *La novela* 39), but that finds in his own image some kind of authenticity. He looks at his own image in the mirror, “veo a alguien que no me gusta del todo... estas contemplaciones interiores: no importa si percibo un retrato feo, mientras sea auténtico” (Levrero, *El discurso* 95). The search for the self or the meditations in fact are not looking for an image, but some kind of truth lying inside the “self.” But all throughout the exercises and the diary, the answer is not to uncover what lies behind those images, but rather to maintain the drive to continue the search, the desire to return. That is precisely how the subject is constructed as a process, and not as an end-product; not as an “I” with subjective baggage and psychological traits, but instead as a moment of a creative literary desire.

In the end, the narrator of “El discurso vacío” goes as far as to say that his “self” is something unknown for him and he tries to define the “I,” “el yo no es otra cosa que una parte modificada, en función de cierta conciencia práctica, de un vasto mar que me trasciende y sin duda no me pertenece” (Levrero, *El discurso* 95). And, in another fragment, he elaborates the same idea: “La verdad de los hechos es que no somos otra cosa que un punto de cruce entre hilos que nos trascienden, que vienen no se sabe de dónde y van no se sabe adónde, y que incluyen a

todos los demás individuos” (Levrero, *El discurso* 23). For Levrero, at last, that subject he is looking for is in fact a crossing point of a series of threads that transcend us, a kind of net of intersubjectivity. The self is alienated and we cannot attain it because it does not belong to us, it is not a property and it is modified according to something larger than the individual. The subject is, rather, a crossing point in the weaving of a whole network whose limits we are unable to see because they surpass our individuality.

Thus, the construction of a subject through literature as well as the spiritual practice of including one’s subjectivity in one’s writing and thought is for Levrero part of a larger task—over which he has no control, it goes beyond his individual assemblage and experience. The luminous experiences already indicate the movement towards these threads that transcend the individual subject, since what they portray is the moment of the encounter with a generic timeless truth and thus it might very well be said that it is the crossing point or the encounter between two threads. In this way, Levrero makes literature part of his life just as he is completely invested in constructing his own subjectivity through writing.

The adventure of the puzzle Levrero offers in his late autobiographical “novels” is one that challenges the boundaries between life and literature by redefining some of the most basic mechanisms of narration—desire and drive—and the ways in which they function to redefine the writing-act. Not only do these mechanisms reflect upon writing, they also imply the construction of a subject at the same time that they are producing a discourse. Weaving his life along with his literary practice, the narrators of both *La novela luminosa* and *El discurso vacío* are constantly looking to redefine their position and “self” vis-à-vis their duty to write, from which a desire is born as well as the therapeutic function of writing. And this leads to experimental texts where the basic question is the assembly of a subject in both senses of the word, where the product is not as

important as the process itself. The empty category of “novel” is in this case filled with processes, with attempts and puzzles left incomplete. Through this incompleteness the whole writing-act becomes a quest to look for the moments in which there is a subject, where two or more threads encounter one another and cross paths for a timeless instant. In those moments, the puzzle seems whole. But literature turns out to be an endless puzzle. *La novela luminosa* was published after Levrero’s death and this means that it was indeed a life-time project in which he put his own life at stake. In the same way in his late novels literature was redefined as a vital venture where a subject can be built.

## 2. EDUARDO LALO

No zurcí de éste y aquí, sino saqué en mí mismo.

Van escritos, no en tinta de academia, sino en mi propia sangre.

—José Martí, *Versos libres*

“En cualquier momento, a pesar de mis títulos publicados,” declares Eduardo Lalo, “todo lo que he escrito, probablemente todo lo que escriba en el futuro, podría ser *Lo invisible*” (*Los países* 125). This brief statement found in *Los países invisibles* can be read as one of the master keys to the frequently undefinable, multifaceted, and puzzling work of Eduardo Lalo. The fact that, at any given moment, he is able to define his entire work by the title *Lo invisible* signals that the neuter—“lo,” the neuter article, precedes “invisible”—and the neutralizing condition of invisibility remains, and most likely will remain, a fundamental way to characterize his creative endeavor. Despite all of his published titles, which are by definition public and therefore visible, Lalo indicates that his writing is imprisoned and condemned to be invisible. But this condemnation forces Lalo to think how invisibility has conditioned his writing in order to assume this lockup as a productive space. This is true insofar as Eduardo Lalo’s texts, films, photographs, and drawings stem from the need to see what lies beneath the surface, beyond the sphere of the visible and outside of any narrow confinement. This need is further articulated in his work as a demand to think and write not only *about* the invisible but *from* the invisible as a creative space eliciting desire. Thus, the notion of the invisible is not necessarily a stifling definition of everything Lalo has written or will write but is, instead, the propelling force of his

work. The author's gaze, through different types of media and forms, forces the reader or spectator to *see* and think the consequences of the operations of exclusion that have made invisible certain aspects of reality and experience. It is precisely in the realm of invisibility and the mechanisms of exclusion, regardless of time and space, that the multifaceted work of Eduardo Lalo traverses imaginaries, identities, and visible places. His writing assumes invisibility as a state of affairs—one that has been imposed by hegemonic power and knowledge discourses. And yet, his minimal gesture is to direct his and the reader's gaze at the invisible so as to affirm it as the point of departure for the desire to write, the desire to break away from the extolled prison of the visible.

The quote from *Los países invisibles* goes on to say that writing from the invisible implies broadening the short-sighted field of the visible in such a way that it becomes possible to challenge, even if only slightly, hegemonic traditions, narcissistic literatures, and literary centers of the world in their pretensions to totality. This totality, denounces Lalo, “nunca nos ha incluido” and his inquiry stems from this exclusion: “¿La literatura—el texto—no sería la que crearía la visibilidad? ¿Existir es, por tanto, poder ser leído? Pero he aquí el dato esencial: lo invisible no es silente” (*Los países* 126). As a result, Lalo's claim is that literature—even if derived from the invisibility that has been forced upon some spaces to neutralize them—is capable of creating a discourse and raising its voice.<sup>16</sup> Affirming the rather material visibility of absence, Lalo declares, “Aquí están estas marcas y su silencio. Y nadie puede extinguir al silencio” (*donde* 155). The task of literature, then, is to mark and scar the body of discourse in order to signal what is not there, what has never been included or considered within the exclusive

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<sup>16</sup> It is not a coincidence that the collection of Eduardo Lalo's early texts is called *La isla silente*. This 2002 compilation including *Ciudades e Islas* (1995), *Libro de textos* (1992), and *En el Burger King de la calle San Francisco* (1986) is a multifaceted disquisition, among many other things, about the silencing of “minor” stories in the context of a hostile geography—the city and its textual exclusions.

corpus of hegemonic statements. Here, what is visible—the trace or mark—is the unrelenting silence. In many ways, this idea can be thought from the formula claiming that “what cannot be said must be shown” (Žižek, *Less* 23), what cannot be uttered must be inscribed. Or, in Lalo’s terms, “las palabras enmarcan lo que es imposible decir” (“Noticias”). It is precisely in this timely inscription in a “here and now”—“aquí están estas marcas” and “las palabras enmarcan”—that literature, for Lalo, operates.

Therefore, from the conception of a literary corpus with a voice it is possible to open up the field of the visible while also signaling its blind spots. Lalo does not wager on creating yet another image to be included in “the visible,” but rather insists on writing as an act that widens the scope of the visible. Instead of producing images or stories as objects, he privileges actions and practices in order to reframe these images and inquire about their origin in fiction. “Los orígenes y las fronteras son veladuras y éstas esconden y afirman en el acto que esconde,” says the author (Lalo, *donde* 25). The concealing act of origins and boundaries is to veil and affirm, simultaneously, that they themselves are fictions. But these are fictions that expose their own concealing act. These fictions are “veladuras” in the photographic sense of the word—they manage the exposure or amount of light that the camera’s shutter lets in. Origins and boundaries are operative fictions that inconspicuously cross-out what does not fit and cannot be singled out, such as “the invisible.” Lalo’s method draws attention to—exposes—the fact that every system rendered as a coherent totality with origins and boundaries is, in fact, erasing and concealing countless images and discourses. In this sense, departing from the invisible and working against the censorship of silence is the imperative of Lalo’s literature: literature must raise its voice and speak about—or show, as Žižek says—what one must be silent about, that is to say, the violent

practices of discourses of colonization that determine what is visible according to their own narcissism.

Eduardo Lalo's entire project can be defined as the insistence to see the invisible and how this unrelenting act shapes the writing of a subject.<sup>17</sup> In the present chapter, I will focus specifically on *donde* (2005) and on some of the poems and drawings collected in *Necrópolis* (2014). My intent is to delve deeper into how Lalo's gaze forms a literary project that thinks its own invisible space as it forces the reader to face and see the limits of the structures of representation—such as literature itself, but also others like photography,<sup>18</sup> drawing, and film in the rest of his work. This means that Lalo's project compels the reader or spectator *to see* what is left out of the frame of representations and images or, in some cases, to question the act and nature of framing itself. I argue that the main theme of *donde* is the problem of crafting a literary discourse within a specific structure, a “donde,”<sup>19</sup> while voicing and questioning the limits and “veladuras” of such a structure. Along the same lines, the poems and graphic elements—“alfabetografías” and “iconografías”—in *Necrópolis* are an inquiry into how words—and

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<sup>17</sup> There is a polemic criticism of the notion of invisibility in relation to Puerto Rico—without mentioning Lalo's name—in an article by Marta Aponte. In it she claims that: “A riesgo de nadar contra la corriente, declaro que Puerto Rico no es, para nada, un país invisible. En todo caso, es un país muy visto, leído hasta el agotamiento, estudiado, cuadrulado, vigilado y controlado” (“¿Una literatura invisible?”).

<sup>18</sup> In an essay about the photographic elements of *donde*, Lourdes Dávila argues in favour of a photo-textual writing in Lalo's work that can be read as “el medio necesario para ‘hacer visible’, para representar la invisibilidad producto de esa pérdida originaria” (663).

<sup>19</sup> Throughout the essay, I will maintain the Spanish writing of the word “donde” because in the book *donde*—also notice the first letter of the title is not capitalized—is not conceived merely as a spatial location—“where”—but it functions as a concept, as a space of articulation and cutting determined by geographical and mental schemes. Thus, there is not a particular and specific “donde.” There is, rather, a structure, defined as “un determinante de origen y una estructura de límites” (Lalo, *donde* 25). At the same time even if “donde” is a concept befitting many contexts, as Juan Duchesne says, the book is deeply anchored in its particular “donde,” San Juan: “Es un ‘donde’ que no es ‘dondequiera’, pues se inscribe en el destino y la fatalidad del lugar como sólo puede hacerlo ese nómada enamorado del *nomos* que seduce el lugar justo porque no lo posee ni lo sedentariza, sino que lo tienta y acaricia en su recorrido. [*D*onde es una apuesta radical a la fatalidad del lugar. San Juan de Puerto Rico es la atracción fatal de Eduardo Lalo” (Duchesne 65-6).

specifically poetry—operate in the territory of the incessant undoing of their history and conventions. In this chapter, my proposal is that in order to open up the possibility of writing in a given “donde,” Lalo finds the material traces of his discourse—“la palabra como cicatriz de una herida” (*donde* 131) and the “grafías”—as they become part of a body. And when the traces of writing become part of a body—literally part of the writer’s body but also of a textual body—they are formalized in the figure of a subject. “Se trata de descubrir un sujeto,” says Lalo (*donde* 198), and through this “discovery,” it comes to be possible to think again the temporal and the spatial configuration of the world in its “donde.” This means that the figure of a particular subject allows for imagining structures such as the gap or the instants that break the temporal and logical continuity. This reshapes the borders of the invisible, the given structure—“donde” and its language—and the crafting of the space of literature that, as we will see, exists within thought and as part of a life. And yet, the space of literature needs to be understood also as an exception to life and thought in general.

For the purpose of this chapter I will follow the order of *donde* because, as I argue, the structure of the book is not only not accidental, it also traces the logic of the writing of a subjective process. It is the trajectory of a voyage—a “periplo,”<sup>20</sup> as Lalo defines it—circumnavigating different territories but usually ending up at the same point of departure. The end of a periplus, nonetheless, only comes after a series of encounters and adventures. Hence the ending is not exactly the same as the beginning: *donde* begins with the idea of a “panoptical gaze,” but ends with the birth of “la mirada de alguien.” Along these lines, every section of this

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<sup>20</sup> In *Países invisibles*, Lalo quotes François Hartog when he defines a periplus: “Periplo: circunnavegación del mediterráneo. Deseoso de inventario, el periplo tiene horror al vacío (al blanco): avanza empíricamente de un punto a otro, construyendo un espacio que es un trayecto” (83). A periplus can also be a journey along a coastline or, as in ancient Greece, a maneuver in naval warfare involving sailing round an enemy fleet. It is a genre of Greek geographical writing that provided “detailed, concrete information for seafaring folk about distances at sea and anchorages near land” (Kish 21).

chapter corresponds to one of the sub-divisions of *donde*.<sup>21</sup> “The Novel as Panoptical Gaze” follows the logic of “donde,” the first and longer section of the novel. This section thinks the consequences of imagining the project of *donde* as a novel, resulting in a panoptical gaze that makes the space of fiction and of life consistent. My second subtitle, “The Material Traces of Writing” is paired with the essay “La escritura rayada.” Here, I argue that the writing-act is physically inscribed in the writer’s body and also in the *corpus* of the book. Likewise, from a political and historical standpoint, writing is the inclusion and articulation of words and worlds in a hegemonic discourse that, by including them, also crosses them out. “The Discovery of a Subject” is traced along the lines of the third subdivision of *donde*, “alguien.” Through the analysis of a series of split articulations, I propose that the “discovery of the subject” is the moment when a new temporality and gaze can be retroactively charted as the possibility to open up a gap in the prison of words. Finally, “The Crippled Wanderer Manifesto” is the corollary in this chapter that corresponds to “pequeño manifiesto” in *donde*. Autobiography, geography, and the document are paired with philosophy so as to anchor thought in order to unearth and create the lineage of a different beginning at the end of the book.

### **The Novel as Panoptical Gaze**

The premise is the following: “De las pequeñas aberturas de la tinta salen ojos” (Lalo, “Entre el infinito”). Ink traces that seem to be shaped as eyes are among the most recurrent

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<sup>21</sup> [*D*]onde consists of four sections of text—“donde,” “La escritura rayada,” “alguien,” and “Pequeño manifiesto”—and several photographs with recurring motifs placed in between each division and subdivision of the texts. This chapter does not analyze the photographic elements of *donde*. For an analysis of this aspect see Dávila and Barchiesi.

drawings included in *Necrópolis*. In fig.1 (Lalo, *Necrópolis* 14), for example, there is a shape that appears to be an eye, on top of the page, gazing at the main cluster of circles/eyes from where several lines—perhaps eyelashes—emerge.<sup>22</sup> Two constellations of consistent—in the etymological sense, standing together—circular formations are supervised, seen from above, by an eye. I propose that the premise of the drawing is that there is a multiplicity of eyes but there is only one fundamental operation of seeing and surveilling. The drawing’s structure is defined by the cluster of eyes that can be grasped as multiple, as effect of the one-gaze. At the same time, the upper eye only exists as a result of the surveilling operation it performs, as a result of how the multiple eyes are drawn consistently. In this sense, it can be said that the one-gaze on top of the page acts as a panoptical gaze—an empty space that nonetheless functions through the belief that there is an all-encompassing gaze at the center of a structure or, in this case, on top of the page. This operation of a panoptical gaze, conceived as an effect of the multiple consistent elements or fragments, defines how Eduardo Lalo structures his work.

For the most part, Lalo’s work presents us with multiple—seemingly inconsistent—reflections, quotes, drawings, anecdotes, or images. Afterwards, however, a text or an image draw these elements together, by representing them as consistent and not merely as isolated fragments. Indeed, one of the fundamental strategies of Lalo’s drawings and texts is to weave threads between the multiple elements so as to present them as a continuous story. And this continuous story is created through the illusion that there is a single all-encompassing gaze—which could be that of a narrator or a photographic lens—whose operation is to render visible—“discover” the undercover agents—what was invisible, namely, the multiple inconsistent

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<sup>22</sup> The figure on top, maybe unintentionally, is very similar to the “light bulb” or sun—perhaps also a bomb, “bombilla”—in Picasso’s *Guernica*. This association makes me think that the figure on top of Lalo’s drawing also works as a source of light. What seem to be sunbeams or, perhaps, eyelashes, are a kind of web traced to sustain and illuminate the rest of the figures.

elements. That is to say that, the various fragments which constitute Lalo's work are consistent, even if only as fiction, because there is a gaze weaving them together.

In the same way, the beginning of *donde* derives its consistency both from the form of the text—a particular kind of “novel”—and from the place where it is envisioned—a “panoptical gaze” (Lalo, *donde* 24). The narrator deems his gaze to be panoptical because it is “plural” and “consciente de la imposibilidad de su totalidad” (Lalo, *donde* 24). This kind of gaze, he says, is an attempt to look from *all* angles knowing beforehand that this is impossible (Lalo, *donde* 61). The first and most obvious reason why the narrator asserts that his gaze is plural and panoptical is because the whole book is composed of a series of fragments in different forms: some are quotes, anecdotes or small vignettes, and others are brief reflections on writing, photography, and countless other subjects. Hence, the narrator's gaze is comprehensive in its inclusion of literary forms and other media, while recognizing that the series of fragments could never forge a single cohesive piece. The panoptical vision operates in the structure of the book: there is a gaze—that of the narrator—consciously visualizing the whole of the composition and the multiple components of fiction.

The second and less obvious reason for the narrator to envision *donde* as panoptical is that the book constantly tackles the problem of making conscious the control exerted over the visibility—or invisibility—of the writing-act. Along these lines, the panoptical gaze is defined by the illusion of the existence of a central device of surveillance and vigilance, capable of controlling the totality of the observed elements. The effect of this panoptical gaze is to induce the illusion of a “conscious and permanent visibility” (Foucault, *Discipline* 201). Here, in this illusion, as in the previous quote about the panoptical gaze in *donde*, “consciente de la imposibilidad de su totalidad” (Lalo 24), “conscious” is the key word used to characterize the

gaze—in terms of the paranoia the panoptical gaze produces. In fact, the word “conscious” in its etymological sense implies sharing the knowledge of something secret or being privy to a crime or plot. In this sense, a secret or crime made conscious would amount to dis-covering the panoptical gaze. And isn’t paranoia—the feeling of being intruded upon by the gaze attributed to the other as a sort of crime—also the very foundation of the ego and consciousness? This entails that the functioning of power and dominance not only lies in the “permanent visibility,” that induces paranoia in the observed subject, but also, and more importantly, in the conscious rendering visible of that visibility.<sup>23</sup> This means that the subject’s conscious awareness of being observed operates as the paranoid fiction—the ego—that fuels the machine of dominance. The assumption that there is an all-seeing gaze is, in fact, a trap that perpetuates the dominance exerted by an unverifiable power, seemingly residing at the center of the panoptical device—the place where the gaze is strategically located. It is in this very precise way that *donde* is a text that makes the structure of the panoptical gaze conscious. The whole book constantly reminds the reader not only that the text and images are determined by the structure in which they are inserted—a structure of dominant traditions overshadowing others—but also that the writing-act itself is the awareness of the panoptical gaze as a fiction that both structures and defines writing. This brings us back to the beginning of the introductory idea of this essay: the narrator knows beforehand that his text is destined to be invisible, to be imprisoned within a regime that neither has nor produces images.<sup>24</sup> Through writing, however, the narrator of *donde* strives to make

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<sup>23</sup> Lacan formulates this very same idea succinctly: “consciousness, in its illusion of seeing itself seeing itself, finds its basis in the inside-out structure of the gaze” (82).

<sup>24</sup> Natalie Belisle argues in her article “*Literatura Nullius*: The Untranslatability of Eduardo Lalo and the Multirelation of the Puerto Rican Intellectual” that “*visibility* is a metaphor for political and literary translation, since translation renders what is veiled and incomprehensible—that is foreign—into something transparent and legible... ‘invisibility’ symbolizes not only what is unrepresentable but, more important, what fails to translate in the universal language of the law and the world republic of letters” (68). In this sense, invisibility can also be thought of as a space that cannot be translated into images or symbols so that the “world republic of letters” cannot digest it in

conscious the imprisonment of his textual traces within the walls of the short-sighted field of the visible.

The narrator of *donde* is obsessed with a “certain lucidity” that arises from the panoptical gaze, and he defines writing in terms of the same obsession: “Escribir es una obsesión, pero es estar obsesionado por las consecuencias de la mirada. El resultado es, a veces, la lucidez. Una lucidez inútil. Pero no podría vivir sin ella. Ésta es mi única creencia. Probablemente no vale más que otras, pero es mi fe” (Lalo, *donde* 126). Lalo writes about the consequences of the gaze and the luminous moment—or conscious instant—he is always striving for as his only belief. His faith dwells in the belief that there is a moment of lucidity attainable through writing. In fact, it seems as though writing can only happen as a *consequence* of the writer’s faith. We can rephrase this by saying that the panoptical gaze only functions through a subject’s *faith* in the existence of an all-seeing entity possessing an undeniable lucidity. The author’s belief in the consistency of multiple elements as seen through his gaze is precisely the beginning of writing as he conceives it. Writing is only possible as an act of faith. And this is what the narrator deems necessary for him *to live*—faith in the lucidity writing provides. The logic to follow here is that living and the formation of a subject through belief and faith are inevitably bound to the writing-act as a consequence of the panoptical gaze. This means that the narrator’s obsession with the lucidity that writing provides is, at the same time, the faith allowing him to construct himself as a subject.

The other formal aspect of *donde*, as established by the narrator, is the labeling of the text as a “novel.” Eduardo Lalo—as we saw Mario Levrero contend with *La novela luminosa* in the first chapter—insists on using the form of the novel to define *donde*. Of course, we must add

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its structure. Are you in dialogue here with the debate over translatables and untranslatables? As in Cassin, or Emily Apter’s *Against World Literature*?

here, the fact that Lalo claims his work is a novel does not mean we necessarily need to define it in those terms, but rather that the book creates its own form, beyond and with the novel. Even though the text includes images, quotes, essayistic fragments, and poems, Lalo claims that *donde*, in spite of it all, is a novel. He even goes as far as saying that *donde* is not written in a groundbreaking or innovative form, but is a rather plain and simple novel. He defines the novel, however, through rather particular terms. A novel, he says, is constituted by “[l]o indecible, lo inasible, lo supuesto, lo fragmentario que componen una historia. Y esto es la ficción. La ficción que siempre traiciona las certezas” (Lalo, *donde* 28). The narrator here locates the novel within the terrain of fiction. And to add another term to this equation, Eduardo Lalo defines *donde* as a story, but a story consisting of fragments, suppositions, and what can neither be said nor grasped. The narrator here takes the freedom to use the terms novel, fiction and story as equivalents because, as Eduardo Lalo says, his genre is merely “writing,” and not a particular form. This first definition of what constitutes a story already emphasizes certain aspects of the novelistic genre—if it is at all possible to convene on certain characteristics for such a form—that are not the traditional ones. Instead of continuity, there are fragments, and instead of clearly stating events leading to certainty in a narrative, there is an emphasis on the ungraspable and unsayable aspects of fiction. And yet, the operation of fiction is still that of *making up* a story, of fabricating a textual composition capable of bringing together—making consistent—the elusive materials that Lalo mentions, for example, the unsayable, the ungraspable, the assumed, and the fragmentary.

The desire of the narrator of *donde* is for the text to be a narrative with the ability to produce a story or even concoct its own history (Lalo, *donde* 79). Fiction, for him, is about “betraying certainties,” and its task consists of piercing the imaginaries of history, geopolitics, and identity (Lalo, *Los países* 150). The text is the creation of a space, a “donde,” for someone—

or “the one”—who not even in its place has *a* place or takes place.<sup>25</sup> Lalo writes: “Intento por crear un lugar para el que ni en su lugar tiene lugar. Texto sobre la nada de nadie. Pura ficción, pura irrealdad, escritura que parte en dos la noche” (Lalo, *Los países* 150). The attempt to create a place for the one that does not have a place nor takes place is the unprecedented writing-act that breaks the night into two, fiction, and the nothingness of no-one—or not even one, “the one” that is not even “one” in its lack of place. The night, split in two, is broken along the fault line of what these double negations—the lack of place of the one that does not have a place and the nothingness of nobody—signal. But at the same time, creation and writing emerge as weapons, as Lalo says, to “betray certainties,” (Lalo, *Los países* 150) and they mark the very break which takes place with and because of writing. Consequently, *donde* is a novel in the sense that it is not a conclusive work, but an inaugural space assuming its core invisibility. It is a novel opening up a space for fiction where there is still room for, plain and simply, making up stories. That is the reason why the exercise of the novel as Lalo conceives it does not necessitate the destruction of the conventional frames of fiction or the logic of stories. Instead of destroying or deconstructing narrative frames or the main components of the traditional novel, *donde* works from within the form of the novel to frame its own act of making stories consistent. The novel, in this sense, is the construction of a story with countless possibilities and forms that open up a space for the ones that do not have a place.

Through this operation that defies the idea of a closed and total novel and instead defines it as the creation of a space, it is possible for Lalo to put forward his own novel as “una forma de teoría” and “la teoría como ficción” (*donde* 81). The formula is, then, the following: the novel is

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<sup>25</sup> This is a reformulation of the famous Mallarmean formula: “Nothing will have taken place but the place.” The line continues: “except, perhaps, a constellation” (Mallarmé 178-81). This constellation, perhaps the poem itself, as an exception, is the place of poetry. And this constellation might very well be what Lalo ultimately desires to create.

a form of theory,<sup>26</sup> and, consequently, theory can also be defined as fiction. As mentioned before, the structure of the panoptical gaze in *donde* has as an effect of making conscious the composition of fiction as well as the narrator's own constitutive fiction—the paranoid foundation of his ego. And, isn't theory a kind of panoptical gaze? If theory is conceived as a privileged gaze or a speculation, then it has as one of its attributes to bring into consciousness what it observes.<sup>27</sup> In *donde*, we might say, theory functions as the gaze that makes conscious its construction as fiction. However, declaring that the novel is a form of theory implies more than merely equating the novel to a kind of consciousness or the rendering visible of a structure. Far from the idea of the “thesis novel” and its didactic purpose to embody the principles of a theory, *donde* is a novel whose effects take place at the level of thought. Lalo wants to write a kind of literature that thinks or a thinking literature: “Siempre he querido hacer una literatura que pensara, no solo una literatura que contara en el sentido corriente y banal, porque un cuento también puede ser, depende de su naturaleza, una forma de pensamiento” (Tineo 235). Lalo has a steadfast faith in the craft of the novel to constitute a form of thought and theory in its own right. The novel as the betrayal of certainties, bearing the spear of fiction, becomes an art of theory.<sup>28</sup> The formula “art of theory” can, in fact, be an accurate description of Lalo's method throughout his entire project. And theory, in the context of Lalo's work, is a form of consciousness aware of the impossibility of its totality, aiming to widen the scope of the visible.

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<sup>26</sup> Salvador Elizondo, another one of the authors I analyze in my dissertation, has a similar formulation in his diaries—he even uses the same language as Lalo, the necessary obsession with writing—where he puts forward an idea for a novel: “Idea para una novela. Una novela que se llamará *Teoría de la novela* y que tratará de la teoría de la novela, ilustrada con ejemplos de una novela que se está haciendo. NOTA: Esta pudiera ser la obsesión que necesito” (Elizondo, *Diarios* 152).

<sup>27</sup> Theory, etymologically, in ancient Greek, means the “action of viewing, contemplation and sight, spectacle” or “speculation” (“Theory”).

<sup>28</sup> Bruno Bosteels uses this same term to formulate a notion derived from Guillermo Kuitca's work. See Bosteels 20-31

The aforementioned quote defining the novel as a form of theory continues as follows: “La novela y la teoría como formas de la primera persona (que es la primera y única y, a la vez, no existe). Queda la escritura/la vida. Es decir, no las horas de minutos, sino las horas de palabras” (Lalo, *donde* 81). Taking his prior affirmation a step further, Lalo defines both the novel and theory as forms of the “I,” the grammatical first person. The first person is both the first in time—the initial figure from where the discourse stems—and the implicitly inexistent person or, as mentioned before, the no-one and nobody. Here, the first person functions as an empty signifier that nonetheless supports both the structure of writing and of life. This is why the formula would be: writing is the same as life and life is the act of writing. Accordingly, time becomes not an abstract measurement, but is instead measured by words. The main component of life, existence within time, is measured in “las horas de palabras,” that is to say, by writing, by words. But this could also mean that hours are in fact *made out of* words, their prime matter is words. So, life and literature are inextricably bound together through the form of the first—inexistent—person or the structure of the subject, devoid of content. But this subject is only the result of a certain faith in the writing act. Lalo states, “Para poder escribir hay que crear la manera de escribirse” (*donde* 62). The reflexive act—*escribirse*—through which the subject writes itself is the condition of writing itself.<sup>29</sup> The temporality of the phrase establishes the order of the acts: writing oneself precedes writing. But, at the same time, it seems that we are dealing here with a simultaneous act, a paradoxical temporality in which writing is, simultaneously, writing oneself. This premise that there is a subject that explicitly writes or inscribes its “self” in its writing in order to write is, in my view, the underlying proposition of Lalo’s work.

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<sup>29</sup> In “Extranjería, comunidad y escucha,” Juan Carlos Quintero Herencia describes the work of Yara Liceaga, José Liboy, and Eduardo Lalo as texts where the act of naming (oneself) and imagining entail following the traces of the—always out of place or displaced—subject: “Nombrar(se) o imaginar en estos textos es ir tras el trazo de sujetos desalojados por una escena social radicalmente enrarecida” (153).

[D]onde is a novel in the sense that the kind of writing it proposes is that of the creation of a subject through the subject's own discourse. As Lalo says in *Los países invisibles* alluding to *donde*:

¿Qué género es uno sin fronteras, un género-vida, hecho sin otro propósito que el de su escritura? ¿No será ya, de entrada, una incursión en lo novelístico el hecho de que este texto aborde como objeto de estudio la invisibilidad? ¿No ha sido siempre la novela (como también la fotografía) ese empeño que hace descubrir a un lector lo que no había visto? O lo que había visto mal, es decir, desde el canon cegador. ¿Novela que tiene como protagonista lo que no se percibe? . . . Novela donde verdaderamente se juega algo, donde se escribe el relato de lo que no existe para la mayor parte de sus lectores. (150)

Once more, Lalo uses the term “novel” to characterize his work but he is in fact erasing all generic constraints with the act of equating a genre to life. If a genre is the same as life and life has no other purpose than that of writing, then literature seems to not only be part of life but life itself. However, why does the narrator still have the need to define his work as a novel and as a genre, even if he proceeds to erase the boundaries of these constricting categories? Upon a closer look, it is crucial to note the form in which Lalo frames the above phrases, which is that of questions, and he is, in spite of everything, holding onto the overly codified terms to be at least read in terms of the blinding—or blind—canon. He needs to conceive of his writing as “crossed-out” and “invisible,” but the writing-act is neither the complete erasure of the visible nor of the colonizing discourses. The writing-act is an incursion, an exploration of life in terms of writing. It is also important to note that the protagonist of the novel is neither a character nor an individual, but rather that which—again, notice the neuter article “lo” in “lo que no se percibe”

(Lalo, *Los países invisibles* 150)—cannot be perceived. Invisibility is the protagonist of the novel, and also the basis of the novel as a form of theory. This means that the gaze at the center of the panoptical structure is invisible and has no consistency, and, therefore, cannot be perceived. And yet, “lo que no se percibe” or “es invisible” constitutes precisely the core element—the object of study and the protagonist—of Eduardo Lalo’s speculative novels.

### **The Material Traces of Writing**

The second section of *donde*, “la escritura rayada,” marks the transition from anecdotes and theoretical inquiries—or the “art of theory”—to reflections on the subjective and political sphere of the writing-act. This section begins by describing the premise of writing—the writing-act in its material dimension. Lalo’s work constantly revisits the physical dimension of writing in a concrete space and time. And by revisiting such a physical dimension, his work also meditates on how there is a tangible effect of the writing-act in the writer’s body. He defines this effort aiming to dig up the most basic layers as the “archeology of writing.” In the following quote from *donde*, for example, the precise moment of writing and its precarious conditions are described. The narrator states that the immateriality of thought is untranslatable into the writing-act—the hand is not capable of putting into words or of physically impressing, the extraordinary paragraphs a writer imagines:

He perdido las gafas. Escribo no a ciegas, pues sería absurdo, escribo viendo mal, con una lejanía inhabitual en relación a las letras. Es una oportunidad. Conviene, a veces, escribir con ruido, de pie, caminando, sin luz. La escritura de escritorio, la más lógica y común, establece una estructura y unos límites. A las letras le

convienen los despistes, las rupturas de sus convenciones. Escribir posee una dimensión física que normalmente se menosprecia. Todo escritor ha compuesto párrafos en su mente suponiendo que construye textos extraordinarios, pero es penoso intentar ponerlos en papel. Se descubre así que no es lo mismo, que no es igual imaginar que escribir, que la inmaterialidad del pensamiento no se traduce en la mano que escribe. (Lalo, *donde* 123)

While the conventional posture of writing—sitting quietly in front of a desk—sets up certain structures and limits, a different bodily stance and movement—standing up or walking, in the dark or surrounded by noise and chaos—opens up new possibilities. For Lalo, it is only by way of uneasiness and discomfort that writing comes into being: “Una obra sólo puede hacerse desde sus contingencias, a partir de la incomodidad, a partir de la falta. En esto y no a partir de otras cosas, está la base de su identidad” (*donde* 124). Lalo displaces the conception of a literary work that would be stable and sustained by a cohesive identity guaranteed from the outside. Instead, he puts forward the idea that contingencies and a split identity—or the rupture of the narcissistic discourse—are the basis upon which writing originates. Of course, this does not mean that a literary work has a discernible origin, but rather that the very contingent act of writing is by definition the only possible—alienated—identity of writing. It is clear that a return to the more often than not disdained physical dimension of writing is not to be understood as a return to the phenomenological conception of the body in its physical dimension where the body would be the constitutive site from where experience originates. Against this conception of the body as the origin or as an instrument for writing, Lalo states in the previous quotes that there is neither an originary experience nor a body that precedes writing. Instead, as I argue here, *writing already implies writing a body*—it necessarily implies a corpus.

It seems as though in “la escritura rayada,” the immateriality of thought is inscribed in the body, in any body—the dimension of the “beyond” is inscribed in the here and now of the body and its posture. Words are (material) objects and are part of the body. Conversely, if life is formulated in terms of writing as discussed in the previous chapter, then the necessary consequence is that writing has a direct effect on the body; it is necessarily inscribed in the body. As Lalo suggests elsewhere, “no tenemos cuatro, sino cinco extremidades: manos, pies y palabra. Esta pertenece también a nuestro cuerpo y, como las palmas de las manos y las plantas de los pies, produce huellas” (“Las cinco”). Here, words cease to be an abstraction, and they are not merely *embodied*—words do not become a body or put on the disguise of a body—they are, essentially, the body itself—the fifth extremity. And just as other extremities leave a print—finger-prints, foot-prints—words are printed, they leave a trace.

In order to delve deeper into how this conception of how writing already entails writing a body or tattooing a body, it is important to examine how “la escritura rayada” is structured. “[L]a escritura rayada” is divided in three sections. Each one of these sections maps the logic of the conceptual movement of crossed-out writing and the way in which this movement implies a political intervention. The first section departs from a definition of crossed-out writing to later describe the particular instances where a writer encounters this logic when reflecting upon the writing-act in its concrete material sense. The segment continues with a disquisition on how the “discovery” of the Americas meant and was the violent erasure of a word and consequently of a whole worldview. The second section of the essay further explores how identity—or the lack of identity—is determined by geographical demarcations as conceived by the West, the outside, or the Other. The third and briefest section contemplates the “end” and “ending” of crossed-out discourses, inquiring into what is left beyond and after the erasure, after the inflicted violence.

The question this section poses is if it is possible to be outside of the West and its permanent revolution. To which the text replies by defining itself as a paradoxical “negative” of the hegemonic discourse while situating itself inside of it—or acting “as if” this discourse was not everywhere. At the end, “la escritura rayada” opens up a minimal possibility, a gaze. And this opening of a very small crack is what Lalo’s project aims at: from impossibility and uselessness, from invisibility and a particular “donde,” there is a space for words where images can be created.

Eduardo Lalo coins the term “crossed-out writing” to define the archeological logic through which it is possible to regard a text: behind a text, there is another text, the text haunted by the ghost of lost texts; the text is a remainder, a remnant. As Lalo explains, “detrás, debajo, de un relato hay otro y otro, y en el fondo (¿fondo?) unas míticas escenas fundantes... Se escribe desde el ‘vacío’ de los textos perdidos” (Lalo, *donde* 123). The archeological logic of the crossed-out writing operates simultaneously on two levels: at the more intimate level, the marking of a body by the writing-act and, on a broader scale, the violent suppression of cultures and worlds by hegemonic structures— specifically those of “the West.” “Occidente,” says Lalo, “es una condición del pensamiento, más que una geografía o historia (sin por ello dejar de ser también éstas)” (*donde* 197). Here, the crossed-out writing is also the veiling of a structure: writing is the camera’s shutter crossing-out and not allowing a certain amount of light to come into the photographic gaze, the lens.

As the main example of crossed-out writing—and maybe one of the first instances of violent suppressions in America—the narrator of *donde* explains what it means for the taíno word “canoa” to be the first word recorded by Christopher Columbus in his *Diary*. According to the narrator’s argument and a brief quote by Sebastián Robiou Lamarche, the anecdote stating

that canoa was the first word recorded by a colonizer is the utmost irony of colonization and conquest: the word for a vehicle used for traveling was appropriated by those who came to conquer through a process born out of the instrumentalization of traveling, both literally and in a conceptual sense. The conquest began with the colonization and crossing-out of the most basic means of transportation, and this was the beginning of the end.<sup>30</sup> The concept of traveling—colonization—included in its structure the “traveling concept” of canoa, thus condemning the discovered world to silence and stagnation. The recording involved in the writing of “canoa” meant both the destruction of a whole world and the beginning of a new regime—a new regime of meaning—as defined by the Western world’s practices and hegemony. As he wrote down this word, Columbus performed the very first act of crossing-out: “En el Caribe, se llega a la escritura—Colón anota en su *Diario* la primera palabra taína que se escribe—mediante un acto, la selección de un concepto, que la conquista y colonización se ocuparían de rayar” (Lalo, *donde* 127). The disembarkment of writing, the arrival of writing in the Americas, condemns the territory and its inhabitants to silence—from then on, they will be named by the Other, they will be recorded in an alien textual form, and all of its culture will necessarily be inscribed in a tradition that, from the very first day, has denied them. Perhaps the best condensation of this sentence condemning a territory to be written by an Other is a verse from Lalo’s poem “La noche”: “Sólo hay adopciones/ Las palabras provienen de extraños” (*Necrópolis* 92). The word canoa is readable and exists only because it was recorded by Columbus. It is not a word from before Columbus, “before the discovery”; it is the inscription of the discovery itself in a foreign language.

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<sup>30</sup> In a section symptomatically named “El inicio del fin,” Robiou Lamarche transcribes a part of Columbus’ *Diary*: “Ellos vinieron a la nao con almadías, que son hechas del pie de un árbol, como un barco luengo, y todo de un pedazo...Remaban con una pala como de fornero, y andan a maravilla....El viernes, 26 de octubre, Colón registra por primera vez en su *Diario* la palabra ‘canoa’, el primer vocablo taíno que figuraría en el idioma español” (5).

We can also think of crossed-out writing as the distortion of a word—and a world—in the act of writing, thus marking the very attempt to erase and distort this word. “The distortion of a text is not unlike a murder,” says Freud, and this distortion can be defined not only as a change in the appearance of something, but also as the act of “wrenching apart” (52). In Lalo’s literary project, the distortion of words is an inherent disease of writing. To write is to distort, “[e]scribir es *alterar*” (Lalo, *Los países* 125) But writing is also the repetitive act of wrenching apart “la experiencia del mundo para recomponerla en la pluma” (Lalo, *Necrópolis* 109). Crossing-out or distorting how the world is experienced—and knowledge acquired—is the necessary dismemberment of experience so that writing can include it in its symbolic register.<sup>31</sup> Appearances are shattered—the narcissistic discourse of the West—and then there is a desire to write, to recompose the wrenched experience of the world. The desire to write—“el deseo del lápiz”<sup>32</sup>—is not to reinstate the original version of a text, but rather to reproduce the distortion itself.

There is, however, a remainder. A word is undoubtedly crossed-out but there is still a word underneath. The crossed-out writing is the testimony of its erasures and its distortions—it is the scar and evidence of a series of inflicted wounds. It is also the testimony that even if a structure tries to colonize and render invisible certain literary traditions, there is still a remnant of

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<sup>31</sup> Ana María Amar Sánchez in an article that relates the two authors that I analyze in this chapter, Eduardo Lalo and Mario Levrero, considers *La novela luminosa* and *Los países invisibles* as texts where it is possible to read “the political” and find an historical assessment of certain social transformations in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Although these texts do not explicitly talk about the political, Amar Sánchez says they offer an articulation of aesthetics and politics in the form of “self-fiction” (“Máscaras” 6). A fragment is particularly relevant for my argument around experience and its inscription in writing: “Leer y escribir parecen ser las practicas—por momento agónicas—que permiten alguna forma de experiencia, las únicas con las que se alcanza alguna plenitud. En ellas se encuentran las huellas del fracaso político” (“Máscaras” 6). My take on this is different in the sense that I believe that writing, in the work of Eduardo Lalo and the other authors I deal with in this project, is not the space of failure or defeat, but rather the space to counter the political defeats, to resistant them in every possible way.

<sup>32</sup> *El deseo del lápiz. Castigo, urbanismo, escritura* (2010) is the title of another one of Lalo’s books where he works with photographs and reflections about what prisoners wrote on the walls of the Oso Blanco penitentiary in San Juan.

those traces, the word that survives behind the erasing mark, which can also be thought of as the previously mentioned not-silent-invisibility. Abusing Slavoj Žižek’s terminology, we can even say that the crossed-out writing is the “indivisible remainder” (*The indivisible* 52). It is not a kernel that cannot be internalized by symbolic discourses or some kind of resistance to Western hegemony, but it is the “irrationality,” the “unaccountable ‘madness,’ of the very founding gesture of idealization/symbolization” (Žižek, *The indivisible* 52). To be clear, the crossed-out writing is neither a victim of war nor part of the resistance movement. Adding Lalo’s historical account of the crossed-out writing, then, it is possible to say that it is, instead, the very unaccountable and mad founding gesture of the symbolic structures of colonization and conquest. Underneath all of its erasures,<sup>33</sup> the word “canoa” meant the beginning of the conquest of the Americas.

In “primer donde,”<sup>34</sup> Lalo asks with a certain hopelessness: “¿Pues hay otra vida que la de/ poner el pie en el grillete y sentir/ la cicatriz sobre las cicatrices?” (*Necrópolis* 92). Once again, his answer is that there is something left: “Queda el caudal real de la noche/ algo yaciente y palpitante más allá de la desesperanza/ que es el aquí y el ahora... Algo así como huellas/hijos/mentiras/posdescubrimientos/inconquistas” (*Necrópolis* 92). Something remains; there are remnants from the scarring over of scars, the repetitive re-inscription of a violent act. Beyond the sign announcing “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here,” there is still a possibility of writing about the experience of descending to hell and coming back up to tell the story. The story is the post-discovery of the “writing of the discovery” which was Lalo’s coincidental finding in

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<sup>33</sup> Graphically, it is possible to see this in fig. 2, the word “NO” written repeatedly on the lines of a ruled notebook. The word has been crossed-out, but under its erasures we can still see the word (Lalo, *Necrópolis* 75).

<sup>34</sup> Lalo tells the story of how he had written a collection of poems he was planning to include in the middle of *donde* but in the end decided not to so as to preserve the rhythm and dynamic of the text. After this, he lost the original manuscript of the poems, and he later recovered it from a friend who had kept a copy of the text (Tineo 230). This “primer donde” is most likely the one reproduced in a section of *Necrópolis*.

Robiou Lamarche's book. What is marked as the inheritance of an impossible identity is the hole located "beyond" hope.

One of the prevailing gestures in Lalo's work is what I will call, using one of his own terms, "lo *quedado*."<sup>35</sup> Lalo does not use the term, though, to designate an abstract idea, but rather to introduce a "new" protagonist of literature and history. As opposed to the worn-out and seemingly more exciting conceptual character of the exiled, he introduces the figure of "el *quedado*, el *regresado*, el que no puede (o no quiere) ir a ninguna parte" (Lalo, *donde* 95). Lalo's tactic is to propose this figure to further question and disturb hegemonic discourses. He is explicitly avoiding talking about the exile or the exodus after the catastrophe—of colonization, of exclusion, of invisibility—and he is instead putting forward the figure of the "left one" or the "remaining one" after the rapture—the leftovers. Against the idea that there is an outside of language or of writing and the possibility of fleeing from hegemonic discourses, Lalo works with remnants, the stumbling block refusing to run away and go somewhere else. As he says, "[m]i trabajo consiste en usar lo que tengo y lo único que tengo es el *donde*" (*donde* 26). This "*donde*" is what remains after everything has been crossed-out, the indivisible remainder. And his work both departs from the invisibility of "*donde*" and works on "*donde*" as what remains, "lo *quedado*," which is the only thing he has left.

So, Lalo thinks about what is left after the destruction. As Duchesne says, Lalo's gaze is "una mirada despojada que acaricia lo que queda después de los proyectos, de las utopías, los progresos, los desarrollos y la babelización una vez colapsa la obra humana sobre el desperdicio de su verdad" (66). This can be noted in the endless passages where there is what I would call a "subtractive vocabulary," meaning that this vocabulary comprises remainders, "what is left," the

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<sup>35</sup> For a reading of the figure of "el *quedado*" and a thorough reading of most of Lalo's works see Avilés.

positive affirmation of a remainder after a negation, or after the destruction or shattering of utopic and progressive discourses. In Lalo, “quedar”—what is left and stays—and “permanecer”—what remains but also what is immobile—are the key words. These are, for example, a few lines from *Necrópolis*: “Queda así esta ausencia de caricias” (94); “Quedan las muchas reticencias” (113); “Pero permanezco permanezco permanezco” (121); “Queda esta historia de la literatura/que no existe” (128); “Queda esta desaparición de mí mismo” (22). And these are a few sentences from *donde*: “Y sin embargo, permanece la voluntad del texto” (146); “Soy lo que queda luego de la destrucción” (126); “Pero quedan las heridas de los nombres...la escritura incomprensible de una herencia de huecos” (197). These examples indicate that for Lalo, even though there is a violent crossing-out, there is always something that remains, even if, as in the previous examples, what is left is an absence—albeit, a visible absence—non-existence, disappearance, reluctance. These negative stumbling blocks are the “unaccountable” remnants constituting the possibility of beginning anew, of recommencing while taking into account what has been denied. After all, writing is only possible as an act of faith.

### **The Discovery of a Subject**

The last section of *donde* is entitled “alguien.” In order to better understand this section, it is necessary to sum up the trajectory of *donde* up to this point. The novel begins with “donde,” the site and concept that define the form of the text and the position envisioning it as such—the panoptical gaze. It then continues with “la escritura rayada,” where the reader finds a physical conception of the writing-act as tattooed in the writer’s body and life. In addition, there is a disquisition on how the discovery of America and other similar colonial enterprises were a

sentence that condemned entire geographies and worldviews to be written and included within the prison of Western discourses and structures, hence crossing them out. The remainder, however, the crossed-out writing and the scarred and tattooed body, are the basis upon which a subject emerges: “Soy lo que queda luego de la destrucción. Esto es lo que produce la mirada que es lo mismo que la vida: el caerle a martillazos a las imágenes que uno se ha formado de sí, de la gente del mundo. Lo que queda es otra imagen, un complicado retrato provisorio. Lo más que se puede hacer es resignarse a estos pedazos” (Lalo, *donde* 126). With an affirmation in the first person, making this sentence all the more powerful, the narrative voice affirms itself as a remainder.<sup>36</sup> The idols—the image one has of oneself, the ego ideal—are what must be shattered with a hammer, so as to see their twilight. Or, in another reading, the hammering of images would assay and test the solidity of the idols as statues or bronze images. The affirmation of the emergence of a subject as crossed-out remainder is what “alguien” articulates. And precisely from the retroactive “discovery” of this subjective instance, the narrator of *donde* formulates a series of split articulations that fracture the prison of the inscription of writing. In spite of it all, from the interstices, a gaze is forged. The consequences of this gaze are articulated in the last and very brief section of *donde*, “pequeño manifiesto.” Again, to sum up, the trajectory of *donde* departs from a site and gaze. Then, the text maps out the material traces of writing to formulate logics of intervention and a subjective break.<sup>37</sup> Finally, it fleshes out the consequences of this intervention and break. And, the corollary, “pequeño manifiesto,” is a declaration of how

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<sup>36</sup> “Soy lo que queda luego de la destrucción,” as Duchesne notes (66), echoes Paul Verlaine’s first verse of “Langueur:” “Je suis l’Empire à la fin de la décadence,/ Qui regarde passer les grands Barbares blancs/ En composant des acrostiches indolents/ D’un style d’or où la langueur du soleil danse” (Verlaine 130).

<sup>37</sup> “Material traces” and “subjective break” are terms I borrow from Badiou, although I use them in a loose sense, more as logics and operations and not as restrictive or descriptive terms. Badiou uses both terms. See Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* 28-9 and 33-4.

thought—or the art of theory—is intertwined with geography, autobiography, and documenting to affirm the impossible, invisible, and shattered space of “donde.”

From the beginning, there is a fundamental question in “alguien:” is it possible for Puerto Rico and similar national and neocolonial conditions (Lalo, *donde* 196) to put an end to their absence in the “Gran Discurso de Occidente”? The author replies not with an unequivocal affirmation, but rather by imagining and tracing logics and structures devising other potential positions within this capitalizing discourse. Lalo works with what I consider to be a series of dichotomies functioning as conceptual blocks: the marks of a taíno stone axe and alphabetical writing; stigmata and the gap; ~~alguien~~ and alguien. However, as I will argue, these dichotomies are not forged as two separate spheres or terms. They are, instead, intertwined in a split articulation. This means that when two terms are articulated there is no fusion, but a split, a gap that persists in their junction. After laying out the terms separately, Lalo twists them precisely at the point of their impasse so as to think in their juncture the coordinates of “alguien,” and of a subject—the “nobody.”

Lalo claims that the only object “independiente de la escritura” (*donde* 197) he possesses is a taíno axe made out of stone. One can still see, Lalo says, the carved indentations through which a rope banded together the axe to a wooden stick (*donde* 197). This is an object that could be considered both an object prior to writing and a kind of first writing—carved indentations on stone. The object does not yet bear the marks of the father that came to conquer “los cuerpos, las voces, las miradas” (Lalo, *donde* 197). But, of course, the matter is not all that easy. The taíno axe is only the imaginary illusion of there being an a priori of writing. It is the illusion that there is an essence that would provide a stable core to guarantee the cohesive and meaningful identity of writing. It is a retroactive ideological fantasy which obfuscates the fact that the unity and

harmony of the taíno axe's world never existed, a retroactive projection engendered through writing. However, there is not an experience or body that precedes writing, but rather a corpus that can only be thought via its repeated occurrence, simultaneous with its inscription in writing. So the taíno axe is a lost—albeit very precise and particular—object from an untraceable and unimaginable time in the past—it is a brute pre-symbolic object. It would be senseless to search for the axe's traces in a pre-Columbian time, but the axe nonetheless needs to be presupposed if we want to account for writing within chronological time. Lalo understands the axe more as a structural instance and that is why he defines the axe as “*el Objeto X*”<sup>38</sup> (*donde* 197). The Object X—an emptied out, interchangeable but singular instance—presupposes a time which is present only in a series of effects in the present, but always in a distorted, crossed-out, displaced manner.

The other term of this dichotomy, alphabetical writing, is the symbolic rendering of the taíno axe. Lalo's attempt is to hold both reins in one hand—the imaginary pre-symbolic a priori of writing and its symbolic rendering, the inscription in writing. In the impasse of these two notions—which is also the site of their articulation—the narrator desires to write a text that would be, at last, unreadable, so as to escape hegemonic discourses: “Añoro un tiempo anterior a los diez dígitos y las 27 letras” (*Necrópolis* 108). But, the narrator says, this is impossible and his desire cannot be fully satisfied. The narrator as subject can escape neither himself, nor words, nor the West. Hegemony is inherent to language. In this site of impossibility, however, he finds a position—one departing from the “impossible” taíno axe and its alphabetical engraving, “alguien” proposes and is a kind of philosophical disquisition, a form of theory, that

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<sup>38</sup> In many ways, the axe as Object X can be thought of structurally. As Deleuze argues, using the very same term, “the object = x . . . it is perfectly determinable, including within its displacements and by the mode of displacement that characterizes it . . . for each order of structure the object = x is the empty or perforated site that permits this order to be articulated with the others, in a space that entails as many directions as orders. The orders of the structure do not communicate in a common site, but they all communicate through their empty place or respective object = x” (*Desert* 188).

assumes the impossibility and the loss of origin “como un continente (o isla) mental el enorme espacio de tiempo que precedió a la ruptura, el exterminio y la imposición de los nombres” (Lalo, *donde* 198). Instead of trying to repress the reality of the taíno axe—a whole continent—Lalo’s writing includes it in his discourse as an island. It is a philosophical speculation which not only *says* that there is not a time that pre-exists “the break,” the extermination, and imposition of foreign names, but a speculation which assumes this lack of origin in order to endow itself with consistency—the very consistency of an island. The form of theory—the novel—functions as a conceptual map to organize and rationalize chaotic ideas and make them consistent—chart the cartography of a continent or an island—to trace and vectorize their trajectory even if within a stable image. Lalo includes the axe-island not as an object-space with a particular identity, but rather as an inherited hole—“lo roto . . . una herencia de grietas” (*donde* 210)—that pierces the imaginaries of history, geopolitics, and identity. This is the kind of literature Lalo produces and proposes: a literary endeavor capable of assuming its impossibility, its lack of identity—in short, its invisibility. This, however, does not imply an outside where one could at last retreat and escape the walls of hegemony. This prison breach project is not interested in the margin where crossed-out texts would lie and his intervention does not attempt to legitimize or “rehabilitate” the excluded or debarred. Instead, within the walls of this inherent impossibility Lalo grafts the possibility of a prison break and his movement goes only as far as suggesting that there is a slight breach through which the prisoner can see the horizon, once again.

This brings us to the second dichotomy. Understood as marks, impressions, or signs made upon the body, stigmata are conceived of by the narrator of *donde* as writing, but not just any kind of writing—they are a sign of condemnation or disgrace, a token of subjection. These stigmata are what the West has tattooed upon the skin of “todo el orbe conquistado,” (Lalo,

*donde* 197) words that have been crossed-out by their mere inclusion in the tradition of writing and abstraction—Columbus’ *Diary*. However, the stigmata are also the only way for Lalo to write and exist. There is something that refuses to be symbolized and read in terms of writing. As opposed to the stigmata, the gap is an opening, a strategy, a conceptual dagger to intervene and force open hegemonic discourses. The very presence of the gap reiterates that there is an exception to the discursive forms of closed materiality—“cemento, pavimentación, piedra, madera” (Lalo, *donde* 207-8). Through the gap there is a route beyond what the narrator says are theories producing “comentarios de sus comentarios” (Lalo, *Los países* 123). The route the gap’s traces provides us with, in the middle of the suffocating repetitive comments of comments, “*la esperanza momentánea de una forma*” (Lalo, *Los países* 123). Not even the ultimate structure of writing—the West and its concepts—can bridge or suppress the gap, as it denies historical causality and constitutes a kind of writing *without* words. According to Lalo, the gap is vertical and its dagger can cut across several discourses, forcing these discourses to happen at the same time: “permite una nueva capa de sentido que destemporaliza el saber y abre la posibilidad de una arqueología (es decir, de unos hallazgos) fuera del tiempo” (Lalo, *donde* 209). The impasse of stigmata—a tattoo signaling subjection, but also a mode of existence—and the impasse of gaps—conceived of as a strategic intervention and maneuver of detemporalization without content or identity—can be articulated as an intricate knot. Stigmata are the layer beneath writing, the always-already present signs of disgrace. And the gap is a superficial cut that instates an archeology of concurrent discourses and layers. They are two sides of the same coin and one would be impossible without the other: the underneath and the surface in a simultaneous gesture converge in the writing-act.

The name of the subdivision of *donde*, “alguien,” already announces the next problem: there is a singular some-one, some person, or some-body, but not a particular one person or body. In the same logic of the previous split articulations, for there to be “alguien” it is necessary to depart from and affirm the existence of “~~alguien~~.” The writing-act is the attempt to create a place for the one that does not have a place. Thus, by writing down the crossed-out version of “~~alguien~~,” a place within writing is forged. Eduardo Lalo poses the question: can “~~alguien~~” become alguien? (Lalo, *donde* 207) Can “nobody” become a body? Can the invisible become visible? But the mistake lies in the temporality of the verb “become.” It is important to repeat that there is a paradoxical temporality in Lalo’s work, and there is no a priori that becomes or evolves into something else. The erasure is inherently inscribed in the word. It is not that there is a still legible deletion in a word, but rather that the deletion itself *is* the only possible way to read a word.<sup>39</sup>

In what I consider one of the most significant passages of *donde*, the narrator ventures to affirm: “Se trata de descubrir un sujeto, o acaso de inventar una temporalidad mínima, un momento, unos segundos, para que éste vehicule la palabra de *alguien*. Su estrechez, su mínima existencia no lo hace menos real” (Lalo 198). This key phrase can be broken down into the following instances: the discovery of a subject, the invention of a minimum temporality or moment, the conveyance of somebody’s words, and the narrow minimal existence of a subject. The purpose of introducing the subjective figure at this point of “alguien” is to make an incision in the as yet unbroken discursive logic of the novel. If, up to this point, *donde* has located its art of theory and novelistic effort in the split articulation of dichotomies and paradoxical figures,

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<sup>39</sup> This is why the crossed-out writing or the conception of “~~alguien~~,” however close it might look to the *sous-rature* in the sense of Heidegger and Derrida, cannot be read in these terms. OK but maybe you can explain this a bit more in this footnote, at least in a sentence or two. Because what you describe is not so far from H-D.

now, almost at the end of the book, the text finally takes the “next” step, which is the discovery of a subject. Both the tenuous scintillation of the subject and the invention of its temporality mark the true possibility of creating a place for the one that does not have a place. The subject is the result of the previously analyzed act of inscribing material traces of writing in a body. The “discovery” of the subject is an effect resulting from the split articulation of the taíno axe and alphabetical writing, of stigmata and the gap, and of “alguien” and “~~alguien~~.” In the impasse of these terms the subject opens up a space and introduces a new temporality. Nevertheless, the subject itself is, at the same time, what in a flickering instant arises—as a remainder—from the “invention” of this place. The emergence of a subject as crossed-out remainder is what the segment of “alguien” articulates. And from the retroactive “discovery” of this subjective instance, the narrator of *donde* articulates a series of strategies capable of fracturing the walls of the prison of writing.

The discovery of a subject in the context of *donde* bears the echoes of many of the passages I have analyzed before: the creation of a place for the one that does not have a place; the subject as a result of faith in the writing-act; a subject that explicitly inscribes its “self” in his writing in order to be able to write; the “discovery” of the Americas which meant the crossing-out of a whole world; and the figure of the indeterminate—generic and without qualities—“alguien.” The fact that the subject is nowhere given but must be found—discovered—entails many consequences for Lalo’s particular conception of the subjective process and of how I conceive subjectivity in my project. The first consequence is that the subject cannot be the point of departure or the basis upon which a discourse or experience are founded. The subject is neither the ground of some sort of preemptive consciousness of the “I” nor is it anchored in a particular point. Certainly, for there to be a subject, the support of a body—not necessarily

material—is absolutely necessary, and this is what Lalo traces through his conception of the writing-act as inscribed in the body. But this does not mean that a body or an “I” guarantee the existence of a subject. Instead, the subject is the whole process of discovery; it is a movement. The discovery of a subject cannot be seized in a single moment in time. The subjective process is a thorny and intricate journey of discovery and its trajectory is impossible to graph in a navigation chart. It is, after all, a periplus and it cannot be programmed—only charted after the fact.

The second consequence of the fact that the subject is nowhere given but must be found is that the discovery of the subject is *après coup*—only in the aftermath can the discovery be named as such. The subject is an effect of the discovery that retroactively posits its own cause. Writing oneself—“*escribirse*”—is simultaneous to writing—as an act which is supposedly a cause—and thus the discovery of a subject is the result of writing oneself. Therefore, as Lalo says, “es falso como pretende el metarrelato colombino que alguna vez se halla ‘descubierto’ a los invisibles. Su imagen ha sido producida” (*Los países* 86). Both the invisible ones and the discovery have been, paradoxically, discovered and inscribed. The metanarrative, the story about Columbus’ story, functions here as another level of symbolic inscription. It is no longer about the re-production of a story in its endless versions; it is about the very fabrication and production—and even production in the Hollywoodesque sense—of an image within fiction.

The narrator of *donde* says, “El hallazgo de una manera de decir es una ruptura y la creación de un espacio incierto. En él la voz debe convertirse en cuerpo, materia, es decir forma y símbolo, a partir de los cuales podemos ser encontrados y encontrarnos en el mundo” (Lalo 62). When speaking about the discovery of a subject in order for it to convey the words of “alguien,” Lalo finds “una manera de decir” (Lalo, *donde* 62). “Manera de decir” is a manner of

speaking, a voice, and the discovery—in the previous quote “hallazgo”—of a place for us to be found and where to find ourselves in a map. The “finding” goes both ways: a manner of speaking is found and we are found by means of this discourse. This is why the subjective movement *must* materialize in a body, in a form and a symbolic register; otherwise the movement just drifts off and is unaccounted for in the map. And if the material traces are not inscribed or deployed in a corpus, then a subject cannot be found; there is nothing for the subject to articulate as a consequence because there is no inscription of the “finding.”

Finally, the last part of the already mentioned quote, “[s]e trata de descubrir un sujeto, o acaso de inventar una temporalidad mínima, un momento, unos segundos, para que éste vehicule la palabra de *alguien*. Su estrechez, su mínima existencia no lo hace menos real” (Lalo 198), talks about the narrow and minimal existence of the subject: “Su estrechez, su mínima existencia no lo hace menos real” (Lalo, *donde* 198). This insignificance, as the quote says, does not make the subject any less real. The subject is *almost* nothing—or less than nothing—so its existence is precarious. The subject is in this sense the remainder, “lo quedado.” It is the narrator’s impossibility to leave or escape his own self, words, and circumstances—“irme de mí mismo, de las palabras ni de Occidente” (Lalo, *donde* 198)—which are his prison. However, from this imprisonment and narrow existence he claims that his task is to discover a subject that would speak on behalf of *someone* or, in plural, *some of us*—the one that has no place or is silent vis-à-vis the Western discursive imprisonment. This self-imposed task and its impossibility imply the following shift for the narrator: “Abordar esto significa posicionarse frente a un poder del que es imposible liberarse. Nada cambiará excepto nuestra posición en el silencio que somos para Occidente” (Lalo, *donde* 198). The subject exists when and if there is a movement that, after the “discovery” or event, is able to retroactively posit its cause and contingent flickering moment of

formation. This means that the subject exists through the writing of the process of its construction. The subject retroactively writes its own causes and the moment of its discovery, and it exists only through this very act. Lalo's project is an inscription of the subject as it writes its own process of discovery and produces a change of position and temporality within the narrow confinement of silence.

The desire of the poetic voice in *Necrópolis* is to reiterate and repeat its writing-act and the traces it produces:<sup>40</sup> “Reiteración de la marca, del mismo acto de la pluma. La construcción de una vida alterada por la mancha de tinta” (Lalo 108). As in fig. 3 and fig. 4 (*Necrópolis* 67-8), the writer repeats over and over again the exhaustion of the world and his own exhaustion, the exhaustion of having to trace the same words—preaching in the wilderness—and how this exhaustion is rendered visible in the pen's movement. The traces left behind by words—the fifth extremity—are the material testimony of the creation of a subject as shaped by writing and drawing, the insistence of a gaze forcing the reader to see the invisible, the erasures, the crossed-out remainders of hegemonic discourses. The subjective process, a movement, a line, is the process of constructing a life that is stained, not only by ink but also by stigma or disgrace. In other words, constructing a stained life means constructing a marked, traced, discovered, and crossed-out subject. Both the drawings and the kind of writing that *donde* puts forward are the creation of a place for that which has no place, a place for “the one” or “alguien,” which are the ones that do not have a “donde.” The construction of these subjects—lives altered by ink stains—is the backbone and underlying repetitive maneuver that *donde* performs.

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<sup>40</sup> For a reading of *Necrópolis* in terms of “bio-writing” see Salgado. He argues: “*Necrópolis* hace que la escritura parezca fugarse o desprenderse de la letra para aspirar al estatus primigenio del trazo prefigurativo o analfabeta: su estatuto final, digamos, es el del garabato” (Salgado).

In the last poem of *Necrópolis*, the poetic voice decrees his vision for the future, the tomorrow of “otro día puertorriqueño” (Lalo 134). He prophesizes: “Mañana será un día puertorriqueño/ un día mío/ un día de no se sabe quién/ un día como todos los días” (Lalo, *Necrópolis* 134). Going back and forth between declaring an abstract and a particular day to come, Lalo insists in declaring that the future will not be something different or completely new, but rather that it will be a day like any other day, a temporality for a subject to reconfigure the coordinates of what seems to be frozen in an image and an identity. The poem ends with *the* question or *a* question the poetic voice says he will be asked, once again: “Mañana me harán de nuevo/ la pregunta” (Lalo *Necrópolis* 134). To which the poetic voice will answer or has already answered: “a la que contesté sí” (Lalo *Necrópolis* 134). What these two temporal logics articulate is the following: the future question is a repetition of a prior question, and the answer is what has already been declared and still persists as an affirmation. The question insists and persists, but the answer was, is, and will be “yes.” After tracing the negative gestures of crossing-out, erasing, stigmata, and the veiling and silencing that has been imposed upon political and geographical conditions such as Puerto Rico, Lalo affirms the invisibility of his position while maintaining his posture. This final affirmative verse of *Necrópolis* seems paradoxical given the book’s title, which means the city of the dead or the cemetery. But if we go back to the initial poem also named “Necrópolis,” the affirmation persists and insists every time the question is asked:

Vuelvo a ellos una y otra vez   enfrento

minutos   a veces   horas   con los libros

los opongo

al tiempo real del purgatorio...

Soy un lector si algo ha sobrevivido en mí

Es este hecho

cargo el peso enorme de la tinta (Lalo, *Necrópolis* 11)

The voyage in *Necrópolis* then concludes as it goes back to the beginning. But at this point it is not anymore the negation of the beginning, that is, the heavy load of ink, but rather an affirmative beginning, the future drawn with ink, the discovered subject that at last creates a space to write. In this affirmation, the process of literature surfaces against all odds, erasures, and quarrels with the world.

“[A]lguien” concludes with the following line: “Agradezco a los dioses el tiempo y la provincia menor que me han concedido. Aquí nace la mirada de alguien” (Lalo, *donde* 211). If *donde* begins by defining the form of the text and the book as a panoptical gaze, then its ending goes back to the very same question: the gaze. However, if, at the beginning, the gaze was an all-seeing entity derived from the consistence of a multiplicity of elements, here the gaze is located in “alguien,” a very particular figure. The gaze is no longer a presupposition; it is a gaze that stems from the whole process of the book and is only possible after the emergence of a subject. A gaze is born in “donde,” the minor province of Eduardo Lalo, the province of “the invisible.” The moment to conclude in *donde* and in *Necrópolis* corresponds to the impasse where a subject is at last discovered and the world and words cannot be the same anymore. Only at the end there is a retroactive gesture that fixes or determines the meaning of the text. It is important, however, to add that these endings are not simple gestures abolishing all ambiguity and openness, removing all chance. They are, on the contrary, a contingent cut that sets free multiple meanings

and possibilities. One of the possible implications that the new gaze and the affirmation entail is the very brief manifesto at the end of *donde*.

### **The Crippled Wanderer Manifesto**

[*D*] *onde* ends with a manifesto—it can only arrive at a manifesto after the novel’s entire voyage or “periplo,” as Lalo would say. Since it is located at the end, this manifesto is not a preemptive rule dictating the form of the text, and it is also not a programmatic piece declaring a purpose or promise that would bring some kind of hope or reassurance for art and its never-ending journey. The manifesto can be thought of more like a declaration of principles resulting from the book, the final moment when it is possible, at last, to make a statement. It is written at the point in which the time has come to proclaim—“manifest”—a series of propositions derived from the process of *donde*. The manifesto is not a theorization or conceptual rendering of the book, but an integral part of the text: the novel and the manifesto are inherently bound together. Interestingly, the one-page “pequeño manifiesto” at the end of *donde* deals with the status of philosophy—“thought”—and not necessarily of literature. My double proposition is, first, that literature is the necessary foundation of thought to which we can only arrive and not depart from. And, second, that literature and thought are not to be conceived of as separate spheres. Even though, the philosophical systematization of thought based on the assumption of a universal structure does function through a whole other logic, here philosophy is to be taken merely as a form of thought. Lalo desires to produce a kind of literature that thinks, a literature that would be “una forma de pensamiento” (Tineo 235). Hence, it is possible to say that literature is one of the

ways in which thought can be structured: the manifesto is the space of literary thought or a literary structure of thought.

It is possible to say that “pequeño manifiesto” is about philosophy and its discontents: geography, autobiography, and the document. These three instances are, without a doubt, some of the most significant domains that philosophy often tries to deny in its attempt to affirm the universality of truths by way of the “royal road of ontology and phenomenology” (Cassin 2). Trying to consider philosophy from its very discontent, Lalo intends precisely to avoid abstraction, delocalization, depersonalization, disembodiment, and dematerialization. Lalo anchors thought in “donde,” just as he anchors his seemingly impersonal manifesto in *donde*. Thus, by linking philosophy to its repressed others, the manifesto is able to intervene and conceive of thought as structured through literature and experience. This, however, does not mean in any way that Lalo locates his work in the other side of philosophy. The manifesto postulates three formulas of addition—“filosofía y geografía;” “filosofía y autobiografía;” “filosofía y documento”—where philosophy is to be supplemented by geography, autobiography, and documentation. Ironically, these “supplements” are also the leftovers of the great philosophical banquet. It is precisely as leftovers that Lalo incorporates and adds these three dimensions to thought.

Beginning with the end, the third and last statement relates philosophy to the document or documentation. Instead of defining the document as an evidence or proof of something, Lalo thinks of the paradoxical inscription and uses of the document as handicapped and limited: “La filosofía como documento de las incapacidades. En otras palabras, (qué)hacer del pensamiento en el reino de lo incambiable” (Lalo, *donde* 227). If philosophy is the document attesting to or evidencing our handicap, then it must assume its inability to walk and wander about. A thought

that parks in the handicapped spot, however, is one up to the task of inhabiting its uneasiness. As Lalo says in *Los países invisibles*, “el pensamiento no trasciende la desesperación sino que la habita. La desesperación de la invisibilidad, de la que este texto es documento, es la práctica desnuda de la filosofía” (139). This quote could be rephrased in the frame of the manifesto as the proposal to conceive of thought as a bare practice and inhabit its handicapped body. Here, then, the document functions as the inscription of this particular philosophical task, assuming its limits.

The first statement is on philosophy and geography: the particular geography to which thought is subjected.<sup>41</sup> If concepts have been ruled and enforced by what Lalo identifies as “la política cruel de la claustrofobia” (*donde* 227) then the task is to elucidate and shift the kind of language these concepts display to further understand how the complot of history operates. As thought can be a prison, the project, says Lalo, is the following: “Un pensamiento que se ubique (y lo sepa fatalmente) en las consecuencias de Occidente” (*donde* 227). The imprisonment of thought is just as that of geography—the overdetermined structures that can be imagined. Going back to the initial idea of this chapter—the invisible as point of departure of Lalo’s project—now we are able to establish that thought also begins in this narrow confinement and not in the illusion of clarity, openness, and transparency of consciousness. The kind of thought Lalo works with is the thought of “lo quedado:” “El pensamiento de los cuerpos que no pueden ir a otra parte” (*donde* 227). Locating thought in this uncomfortable place, in the bodies unable to be in some place other than in the space of the consequences of the West, implies having to create not only a structure for the stubborn bodies but also a discourse that will channel and voice their not-so-silent thought. Philosophy supplemented with the left-behind geographies of islands amounts

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<sup>41</sup> For a reading of Lalo’s novel *Simone* in terms of psychogeography see Oliver.

to consciously locating thought in the cruel politics of imprisonment so as to find a space that refuses to be symbolized.

Philosophy and autobiography are the components of the second statement of the manifesto: “El pensamiento es en la medida que sea parte de una vida. Antes y después queda la historia de la filosofía y el academicismo: discursos incapaces de incluir esta mano que, para sobrevivir, piensa y esta tierra que Occidente no incluye en eso que llama el mundo” (Lalo, *donde* 227). Both the novel and theory are forms of the first person and, as Lalo suggests throughout *donde*, writing is the same as life and life is the act of writing. The history of philosophy—in very broad terms, because there is not *a* philosophy and it is impossible to define it unequivocally—and the academic discourse have methodically built sculptures of “life.” Against these monuments Lalo declares that thought can only exist if it is part of life, if it is part of the first person and its writing. In this sense philosophy, as Lalo conceives it, is not an asphyxiating doctrine, but rather an activity—a very physical activity and movement. It could even be said that here Lalo is defining philosophy more as the act of thinking or theorizing as separate to the body, whereas in the Greek conception of the practice and thought of “philosophy,” as Foucault would define it, the problem of subjectivity and truth in general terms has to do with philosophy only taking into account the precept of “know yourself,” having forgotten about the other one, the “care of the self” (*The Hermeneutics* 3), whereas in *donde* we find that knowledge and care of the “self” are both inseparable from the creation of a subject through writing. One of the examples Lalo often uses to problematize the relationship between philosophy and autobiography is the figure of Diogenes. Based on the premises of Cynic philosophy, Lalo says a philosopher is “quien en la sencillez y hasta en la indigencia, introduce el pensamiento en su vida y da vida a su pensamiento. Teje sólidos lazos entre su propia

existencia y su reflexión, entre su teoría y su práctica” (*Los países* 138). It is not a coincidence either, as Lalo mentions elsewhere, that the autobiographical genre is from its very foundation associated with philosophers (*Los países* 129). Thought only exists when it is part of a life, when it is inserted in life, and when someone brings it to life. The articulation of theory and practice here only happens when these terms are anchored in “alguien” and philosophy becomes a matter of beggars and crippled wanderers, the ones that do not have a place. In this precise sense philosophy works with its exception—autobiography and cynicism.

At the end of the “pequeño manifiesto,” Lalo describes a body and its movement: “Otra cosa no hay. Otra cosa no queda. La riqueza de la pobreza, el andar del mutilado” (*donde* 227). This movement can be reformulated in the form of a conceptual figure that traverses Lalo’s project: the crippled wanderer. The crippled wanderer manifests the inherent contradiction of a literature incapable of escaping from its site—geography, position of enunciation, political condition, image. In short, it is unable to escape the invisible. On the one hand, these are crippling circumstances, suffocating discourses, stigmata of a certificate of origin. The crippled—violently or accidentally—has perhaps been deprived of his fifth extremity, words. And yet, he carries with him this lacking extremity and its absence wherever he goes—a literary corpus that carries its lack. On the other hand, wandering or walking aimlessly provides a necessary leeway for literature to work through these stifling symbolic and imaginary categories. Unsettled, the wanderer exists in this very drive of walking aimlessly and it can move about in this precariousness. Where the point of departure and the destination seem to be consistent, they are here voided by the crippled wandering. This is the concrete site of literature, of transliterature—not a fluid space or the absence in presence, but the decision to take a stance: the movement belongs to the wanderer, and he is not going anywhere, anytime soon. The crippled

wanderer and his literature are here and have a voice, manifesting their roaring howl, claiming: “Soy sanjuanero, es decir, nadie. Pero nadie no es nada, sino otra identidad posible” (qtd. in Amar Sánchez 8). Eduardo Lalo’s project in *donde* and *Necrópolis* departs from the invisible and then it wanders, traversing bodies, images, traces. In the end, the crippled wanderer cries: “Nadie puede reconocermé. Literalmente, cualquiera podría mirar a través de mi cuerpo. Nadie, nada, fin de lo que no se conoce ni interesa. La invisibilidad misma. Pero al llegar a esta página el mundo ya no podrá ser el mismo” (Lalo, *Los países* 178).

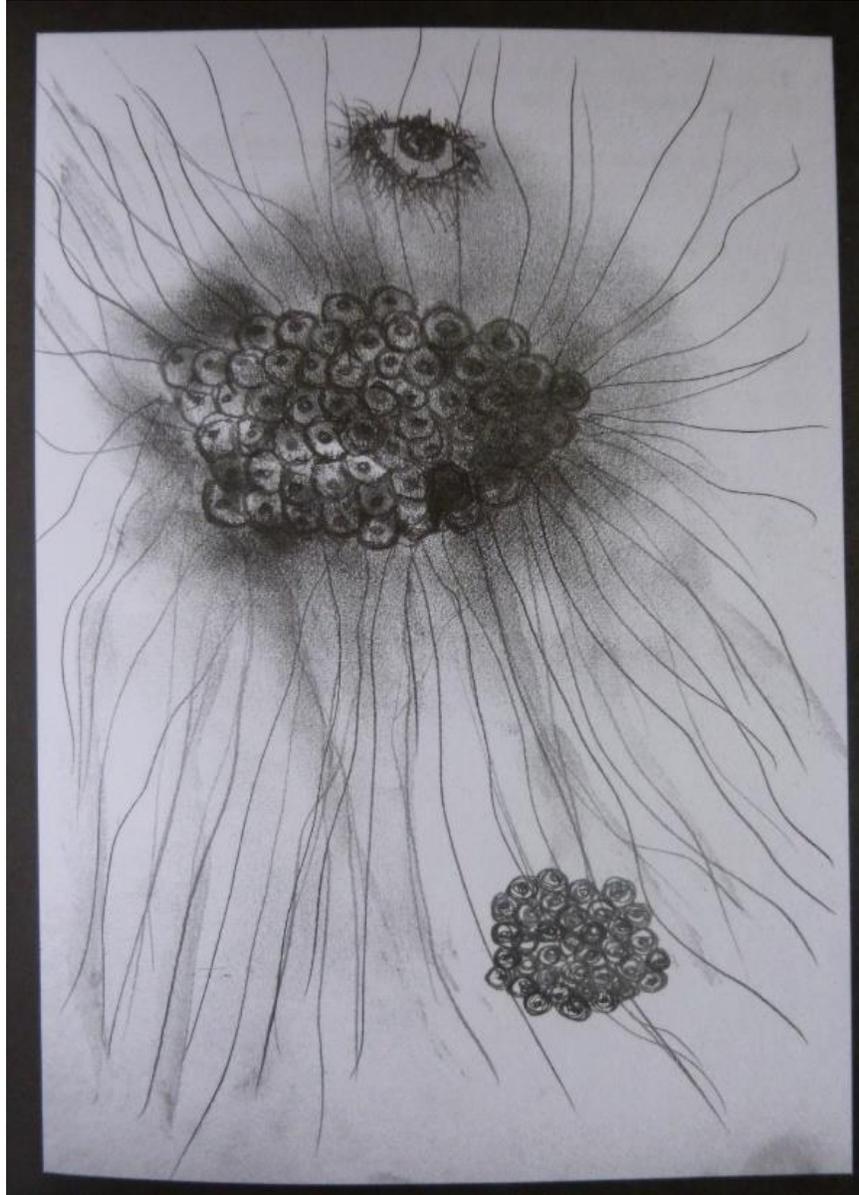


Fig. 1. Lalo, Eduardo. *Necrópolis*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2014. 14.

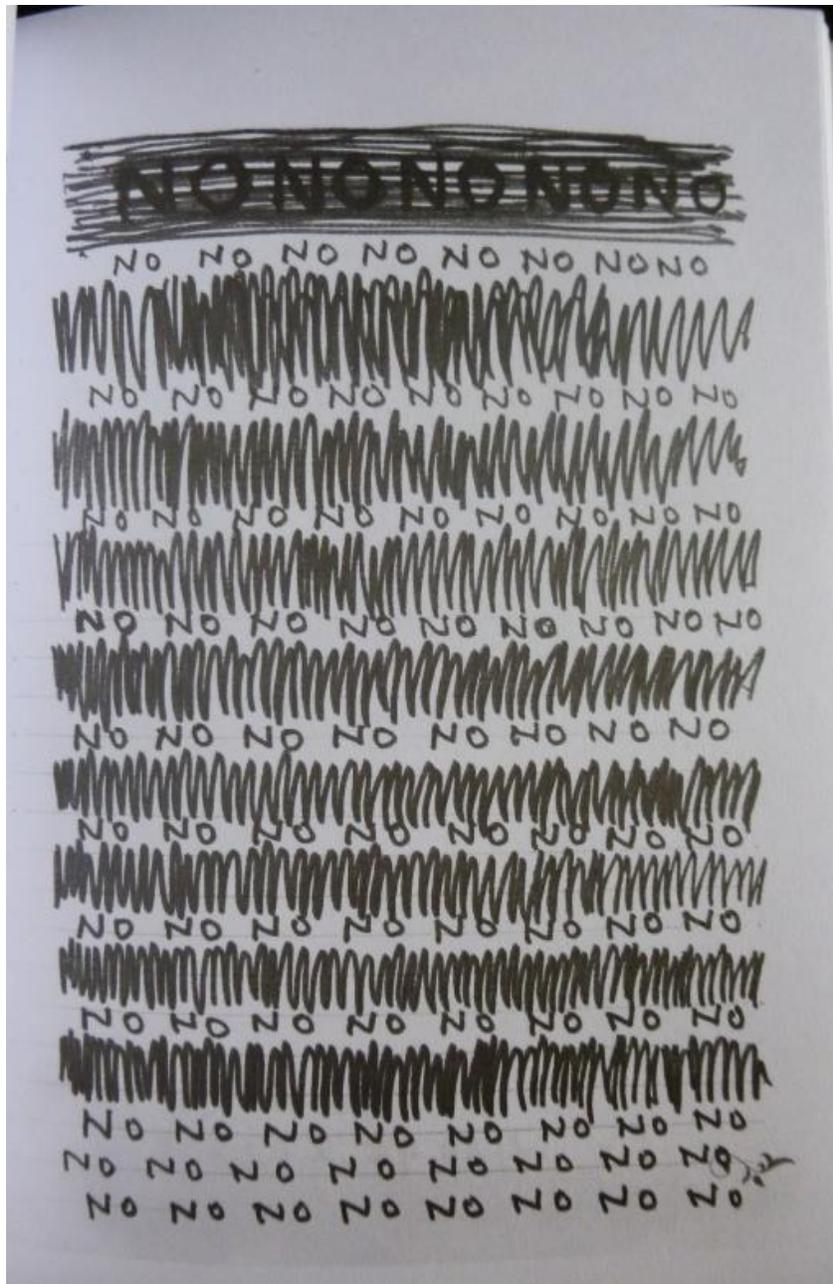


Fig. 2. "Renglones." Lalo, Eduardo. *Necrópolis*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2014. 75.

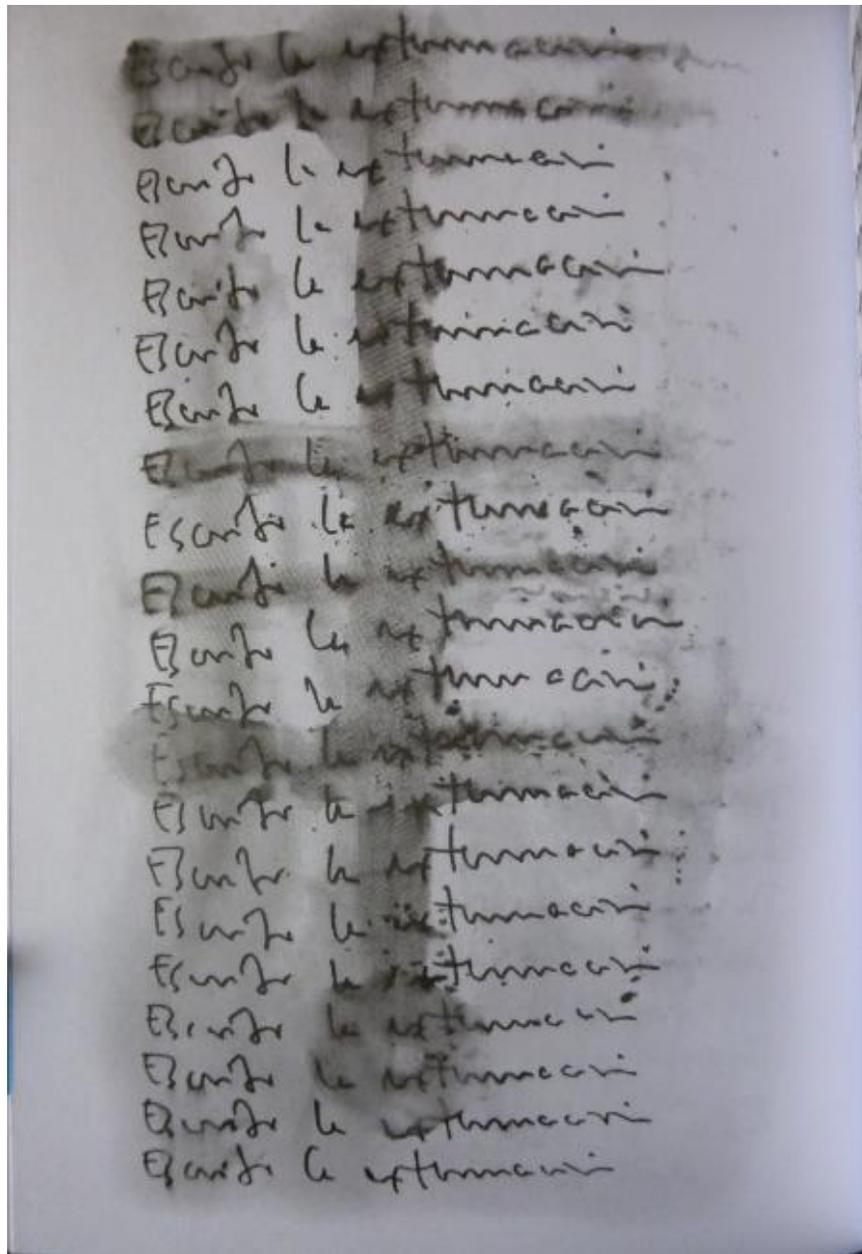


Fig. 3. "Escribo la extenuación." Lalo, Eduardo. *Necrópolis*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2014.

68.

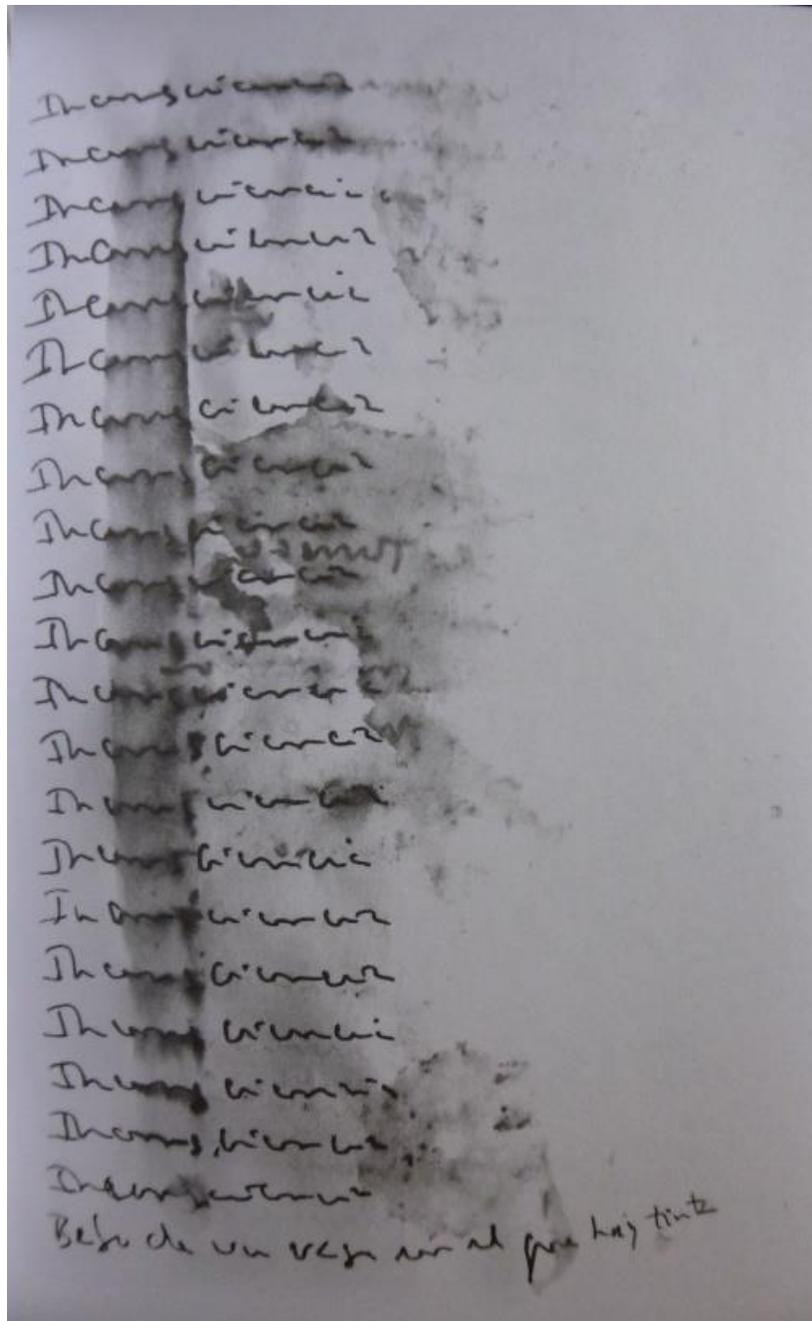


Fig. 4. "Inconsciencia." Lalo, Eduardo. *Necrópolis*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2014. 69.

NADA.

### 3. MACEDONIO FERNÁNDEZ

Don't take a preface seriously. The preface announces a project and a project is nothing until it is realized.

—Hegel, “Preface” to *Phenomenology of Spirit* (qtd. in Jean Hyppolite’s “Preface to Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, qtd in Spivak’s “Preface” to Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*)

A thousand prologues would be insufficient to properly introduce Macedonio Fernández and his work. But allow me to attempt beginning this task by way of a brief prologue and anecdote on Macedonio Fernández’s work and its role in my project. If there exists such a thing as an origin, my project, *A Poetics of Transliteration*, has as its prologue a joke that Macedonio jots down in *Cuadernos de todo y nada*. The “sublime anonymous joke” goes as follows: “Una chica extraviada le pregunta a un transeúnte: ‘¿No vio pasar una señora que no iba con una chica como yo?’ (Sublime chiste anónimo)” (Fernández, *Cuadernos* 31). The logic of that turn of phrase surprised me and led me to reflect on the structure and function of negation—to the possibility of materializing “nothing.” Since then, to relocate the most basic intuitions of my hypotheses, I have returned and resorted to this joke many times. Later on, Alenka Zupančič makes a similar humorous musing to Macedonio’s in an article on negation—this was then also stolen and appropriated by her comrades, Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek. This mysterious logic of absence, found in Macedonio’s sublime joke, then echoed again and again, seems inescapable. Although none of my friends seems to understand what is so funny about it, this joke has also become one of my favorite ones. A variation on the “original” joke goes as follows: “A guy goes into a restaurant and says to the waiter: ‘Coffee without cream, please.’ The waiter replies: ‘I am

sorry sir, but we are out of cream. Could it be without milk?” (Zupančič, “Not-Mother”). In both of these jokes, there is a negation of something—the girl, cream or milk—that is neither merely absent, nor pure nothing nor simply an appendix to what is being negated. By mentioning that both coffee and the woman are *without* their plus-ones, language materializes what otherwise would be invisible: nothingness. *Without* delving deeper into the structure of the phrases, it suffices to say that what is significant for me in these jokes is that what they negate does not simply end up being nothing, but rather that this “nothing” has, or can have, a positive quality and even attributes. So the sublime anonymous joke is the effect of nothing, articulated in a symbolic structure. In a broader sense, my project is born out of a desire to find again, what’s so funny about these jokes: *nothing*. The desire of playing with the different ways and forms that nothingness acquires in language and the many times this logic has been stolen and appropriated in literature and philosophy. Or, perhaps, it is a death drive that insists and repeatedly speculates about something that was never there, that is nothing, and yet, functions—*it* moves and moves me.

In the literature of Macedonio Fernández, “nothing” is one of the fundamental subjects, both in the sense of subjectivity and of subject matter, and, as such, it is possible to attribute to it a logic, form, and dynamic. It is in this sense that the work of Macedonio is at the heart of the matter of this dissertation, because “nothing” *is* the heart of the matter. I can even claim that he is the first and last good and bad novelist of the map I am tracing, circumnavigating this unknown and unlimited land of “nothing.” First, because he performs the initial act of renovating a narrative form in relation to a tradition, not by destroying such a tradition but by challenging its logics. And, second, because this initial act is not initial, but just another recommencement in a long line of timeless gestures inserted into the history of literature and philosophy.

## The Twins

During the decade of the 1920's Macedonio Fernández began writing one of his most important literary projects, the so-called "twin novels," *Adriana Buenos Aires (Última novela mala)* and *Museo de la Novela de la Eterna (Primera novela buena)*.<sup>42</sup> With his usual sense of humor, Macedonio claims that he wrote these novels simultaneously: "escribía por día una página de cada, y no sabía tal página a cuál correspondía; nada me auxiliaba porque la numeración era la misma, la calidad de papel y tinta, igual la calidad de ideas" (Fernández, *Museo* 11). To prevent the twin novels from quarreling he had to make an effort to be equally intelligent in each. In this way, nobody should be able to tell which one of the twins was the author's favorite one, the apple of his eye. The author claims this sparring duty was more often than not an extremely difficult task. For example, he had to sort out which fragment belonged to which novel, especially when the wind blew the manuscript pages around the room (Fernández, *Museo* 11). Once assembled, the original plan was to publish and sell the novels together and for a single price (Camblong LI). The idea was that it was necessary to sell them together because they constitute a pedagogical program. From the beginning, thus, the project of Macedonio was to *value* both equally, even though one of them bore the epithet of being "bad" and the other one of being "good."

The novels as instruments of bad and good examples or *exempla* are strategically built to denounce the deception of certain practices of representation and to propose the insertion of art

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<sup>42</sup> According to Alicia Borinsky, *Adriana Buenos Aires* was written in 1922 and revised in 1938. The novel, Adolfo de Obieta claims, "puede haber sido parte de un Proyecto proselitista de Macedonio ligado a su deseo de presentarse como candidato para la presidencia argentina" (Borinsky, "El aprendizaje" 431). The first version of the *Museo* was published in 1940 with the title *Una novela que comienza*. In spite of the author's promises regarding *Museo*, the novel was not published until 1967—fifteen years after its author's passing, and forty years after he first made mention of it. For more information on this, see Wells.

into reality. The criticism of representation and the intent to construct an effective art, however do not remain inactive on a linguistic or theoretical level; they are, instead, carried out and enacted in the twin novels. In order to do this, the bad novel sets a bad example of how the reader loses itself in the plot by paying attention to trivial and ephemeral topics. And the good novel sets a good example of how to shock the consciousness of the readers and disturb their comfort zone (Fernández, *Museo* 24). *Adriana Buenos Aires* is the stereotype of the novel of novels, the epitome of the realist novel. And *Museo* is a novel without a novel. Just as in the joke where the lost girl affirms her being without the woman, *Museo de la Novela de la Eterna* is affirmed as novel without novel or novelty. It is a novel without novel in at least two forms: first, *without* one of the genres of the novel, the bad novel and, second, *without* the culminating novel that the prologues announce and promise.

In the first sense, *Museo* is the radical other of its twin, *Adriana Buenos Aires*, in every possible way. Where *Museo* negates crucial aspects of *Adriana* like the illusion and hope of love stories, the well-developed and planned plot, the plain characters driven by the role they play in the story, the many deaths and the recurrence of finitude as a theme and form, the chronological advance, and even the form of the text. But the fact that *Museo* negates these instances does not mean it disavows them altogether or becomes a clean slate. Instead, the twin novels are complementary and related to one another by a close and fascinating bond of love and love is a central motif in both texts. *Adriana*, the epitome of the romantic and sentimental novel, narrates the passion and illusion of love stories. And, while *Museo* negates the illusion of these kinds of stories, it is also, in a sense, a novel that revolves around love—the ethereal love of the narrator or the President for Eterna. But Eterna, the sublime and beautiful feminine “being,” is the impossible “todo-amor” and “todo-conocedor” (Fernández, *Museo* 26). So instead of the quest in

search of the physical love of Adriana, in *Museo* love is located beyond causality, in an eternal, incorporeal, and sublime realm. *Adriana* concludes with the death of the three main characters, whereas in *Museo* everything and everyone—or “nothing and nobody”—is in a state of non-existence, in a non-finite state of being. In the first case, as Macedonio says, death is aesthetic—the source of feelings, emotions, and desire—while in the second case death is metaphysic—it touches our “being” (Fernández, *Adriana* 222). Both novels share death as threshold but, while in *Adriana* death is the conclusion of the “closed system” of finitude (Fernández, *Adriana* 235), in *Museo* it is the opening instance for being in a time beyond time.

In a second sense, *Museo* is a novel without a novel or novelty because it is forever promising, announcing, and claiming that, in the end, there will at last be a novel. The novel itself, however, never arrives and nothing is utterly conclusive. This work is comprised of fifty-six prologues, twenty chapters, four final sections and an acknowledgement, though none of these ever account for the non-narrative model they are announcing and postponing. In fact, the least enjoyable and more hermetic part of *Museo* is the twenty chapters that supposedly constitute “the novel”—which, of course, is also, a non-novel. Since the novel is located in the realm of the ahistorical museum, of eternity, metaphysics and non-existence, it does not have consistency, identity or teleology; it is more like a specter. This specter, however, is rendered visible by discourse, a prologue that drives around the unattainable object, that is to say, the novel which is not a thing—it is nothing. So even if the novel is without a novel, it is still a novel. Unlike Macedonio’s avant-garde contemporaries, who “thought the novel to be an exhausted aesthetic form” (Wells) and not only that it ought to be dethroned but sent to the guillotine, Macedonio holds on to the term. It might seem that Macedonio wrote the most avant-garde work of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but my claim is that he situates his work at a

different crossroads from that of the avant-garde that proclaimed a clean slate with respect to the whole tradition of art. In this sense, Macedonio is both the last bad realist novelist of the nineteenth century and the first good future novelist of his self-proclaimed avant-garde. In *Respiración artificial* Ricardo Piglia makes a provocative statement claiming that Borges brings the 19<sup>th</sup> century to an end and Arlt inaugurates the 20<sup>th</sup>. I believe, though, that through the “precursor” of Borges, Macedonio—another one of Piglia’s favorite authors—we can read Borges as the last 19<sup>th</sup> century writer—or even “novelist,” as Juan José Saer would claim—and Macedonio as the first good and bad novelist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Or, better yet, Macedonio is the bridge between both centuries and their corresponding aesthetic projects. Macedonio resists the temptation to ascribe to the aesthetic tendencies of the avant-garde movement in at least two ways: linguistically and historically. First, his language follows a markedly antiquated syntax derived from “every-day” speech (Piglia, “Notas” 518). This style repudiated the “innovative” language and shiny new terms of the avant-garde. Macedonio claimed he wanted to invent an incomprehensible language and tried to do so by opposing and displacing well-versed language against a comical tone and the idealist discourse to “neo-criollo” (Vecchio 96). This is one of the reasons why Macedonio wrote in a convoluted syntax, coining neologisms and re-appropriating an old criollo style of writing in the process. Macedonio’s work is not the best new product on the shelves nor is it appealing straight away; it is stale and refuses to be an instrument of representation. Second, Macedonio writes *Museo* not looking for a new form of art to shatter the past forms, but rather intending the insertion of an eternal art—or an art of the eternal—within the temporal, within tradition. As he defines it, *Museo* is “una novela a cuyo comienzo no ha precedido la nada” (Fernández, *Museo* 54). In this sense, Macedonio is not an innovator nor is his novel a novelty. His work refuses to be part of the “progressive” game and his gesture is both

more modest and more radical. Beyond the violent destructive passion and the proclaimed new foundation of the century in which he wrote, Macedonio merely negates a code—in this case the bad novel—and then affirms that same non-existent code, albeit in different terms, so as to open up new possibilities for such a form. For him, everything has already been created, written, said and done—there is a tradition. And yet, the world has not yet been created, there is nothing, and it is necessary to begin and create an authentic art, a new novel: “Es indudable que las cosas no comienzan; o no comienzan cuando se las inventa. O el mundo fue inventado antiguo” (Fernández, *Museo* 13). To begin, then, his novel must first take into account the old world, the whole of tradition.

In terms of the artistic tradition, the proposal to write—or not to write—a first good novel coincides with the exhaustion of a certain kind of novel or “genre” of the novel. According to Macedonio, there are only two genres of the novel, namely, the good novel and the bad novel. So for Macedonio, the first good novel comes from the exhaustion of realism in art, which is the genre of the bad novel. The fundamental device he wants to negate is the illusion of reality as it appears in a mirror. With the stroke of a pen, the narrator of *Museo* condemns the use of verisimilitude, the misshaped intruder in art, as a device that embraces illusion and makes it seem real. Authentic art, instead, ridicules this kind of mirroring art:

El desafío que persigo a la Verosimilitud, al deforme intruso del Arte, la Autenticidad—está en el Arte, hace el absurdo de quien se acoge al Ensueño y lo quiere Real—culmina en el uso de las incongruencias, hasta olvidar la identidad de los personajes, su continuidad, la ordenación temporal, efectos antes de las causas, etcétera, por lo que invito al lector a no detenerse a desenredar absurdos,

cohonestar contradicciones, sino que siga el cauce de arrastre emocional que la lectura vaya promoviendo minúsculamente en él. (Fernández, *Museo* 41)

This quote, I believe, is the best way to condense not only what Macedonio disavows in *Museo*, but also what the kind of literature I work with in this dissertation negates or declares absurd: which is the “givenness” of identity, the plot and its coherence, and the temporal order of continuity as cause and effect. By negating these three basic categories of modern narrative, Macedonio invites the reader to take a step further than that of merely pointing out the flaws of these contradictory narrative devices. The next step, according to him, is to affirm the authenticity of art. After formulating the terms of a complot to defame realism and verisimilitude, Macedonio insists that what is necessary is to subject art to its intrinsic, absolute, and self-proclaimed truth. So, instead of conceiving of art in terms of mimesis—as the reproduction of copies of reality—the proposition is that authentic art would be *a* reality, an autonomous art inserted in reality.

According to Macedonio, realism in art seems to have been born when store clerks decided to revolutionize their trade and began manufacturing copies of mirrors. And that is how they discovered literature (Fernández, *Museo* 127). So art became the product of salesmen of mirrors whose marketing abilities managed to make these surfaces indispensable for looking reality straight, not in the eye, but in reflection. This trade is realism in art. To this logic, Macedonio opposed his effective art of nothingness. *Museo*, however, must not only be understood as a reaction against this paradigm of art aiming to reflect, copy, reproduce reality or even just to produce a “reality effect.” The novel does not merely invert realism and embark on a journey through the looking glass but, rather, sets realism as the prologue that must be written and then traversed. The first good novel is only so provided there is a last bad novel. Otherwise,

*Museo* is neither a first nor a good novel. This is why realism in art, for Macedonio, does not need to be replaced with yet another resplendently improved paradigm or technique. It is important for Macedonio to maintain his work outside of a system of production, outside of the political economy of the market of art, and perhaps that is why he consistently denounced the manufacture and marketing of mirrors.<sup>43</sup> These mirrors, we might add, establish the illusion that there is an equivalence at the core of representation and therefore that the barter in mirror stores is fair and equitable. Here, Macedonio's endeavor is to criticize this non-equivalence between reality and representation, exchange and use value. But beyond merely exposing the contradictory nature of these instances, he traverses these paradigms by inserting the work of art in reality and proposing instead a novel that goes out in the street—because novels *do* march in the street! By proposing this, Macedonio seeks to increase impossibilities in the city for the public to believe they see “life” and dream the novel but in reverse; in this case, the novel's consciousness is its fantasy and its dream the external execution of its themes (Fernández, *Museo* 19). Thus, instead of the novel as a mirror or an inverted reflection of reality denouncing the falsehood of such a reflection, Macedonio takes another stance. He holds that art must have an effect in reality by eliminating the distance between reality and art. Art, then, is as real as any other object—it is not a copy. It is in this sense that he refuses to participate in the political economy of art. Neither reproduction nor a critique of this ideology. He claims to have no interest whatsoever in equivalence or value, and his plan is not to destabilize the system or reform the system to make it more fair. By traversing these maneuvers, Macedonio locates his impossible art in reality, as any other object, and refuses to participate in the absurd and cheap mechanical reproduction of copies.

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<sup>43</sup>Noé Jitrik, to the contrary, claims that *Museo* is a productive text in other terms: a text that can only be a text if based on the possibility of its production. For more on this idea, see Jitrik, “La escritura” 60.

Even though Macedonio negates the basic instances of plot, identity, equivalence, space, and time as causality, he does affirm that there is “being” or “a being” that can be asserted within the frame of an eternal present—the museum of eternity: “Macedonio Fernández niega la materia y el yo, y con ellos el espacio, el tiempo y la causalidad. En cambio, afirma el ser (lo que siento y soy ahora, en un presente eterno que borra el pasado y el futuro)” (Barrenechea 15). In these affirmative terms, then, Macedonio constructs his first novel or a novel that begins, as implied in *Una novela que comienza*, title of the first version of *Museo*. The ontology of Macedonio’s project is located in his relentless affirmation of being—an eternal being. In an argument against physicists and in favor of idealism the narrator discusses this idea in the following terms: “[idealismo] que afirme como Única concebibilidad, único objeto para la inteligencia: el estado sentido, mío y actual; así nombro, defino al ser: lo autoexistente eternamente, lo eterno en mística de la intelección; es decir que la categoría de ‘ser’ no es pasajera, no puede perderse” (Fernández, *Museo* 69). Without exploring in detail how Macedonio articulates his view of metaphysics as one of the pillars of his literary project, it is important to note here that, just as the novel, the definition of being is that it is auto-existing, eternal, and cannot be lost, because it is not transient. The novel is also defined in terms of “la verdad del Arte, intrínseca, incondicionada, auto-autenticada” (Fernández, *Museo* 41) and, as we saw, this definition is very similar to how Macedonio understands “being.” The novel, hence, is equivalent to the affirmation of being in these terms, and this is the affirmative background upon which “nothing” is presented and introduced in the seemingly endless succession of prologues or “Obras Completas del Prologar” (Fernández, *Museo* 125).

Through affirming the being of nothing—the impossible novel—in the frame of eternity, I argue in the following pages that the work of Macedonio Fernández can be read along three

conceptual images related to basic literary categories. I derived these three particular images from *Museo* because they articulate some of the most basic problems not only of Macedonio's work, but also of a broader literary panorama, so they open up new possibilities for how we can redefine and think our categories to understand literature in other terms. These conceptual images, however, are not metaphors—introducing a metaphor here would be an indirect way to host, once again, that which can be representable or reproduced in our discourse by means of comparison, mirrors.<sup>44</sup> As Macedonio's good novel, these images are real and effective, and not merely a metaphor. The first image is the act of suturing, the weaving or “zurcido” which is the logic of the plot. The second one is the construction of an estate, “estancia” or home for non-existence, which is what Macedonio calls—with a capital letter—“the Novel” (Fernández, *Museo* 27). Locomotion, the metaphor of a train, its movement and accidents, is the third image, related to the dynamics of narrative. So the three components that Macedonio redefines in relation to his project of writing the last bad novel and the first good novel are: the plot, the novel, and narrative, which correspond to the images of suturing, the home of non-existence, and locomotion.

### **Suturing the Holes of the Plot**

One of the biggest challenges for the author of a novel, according to Macedonio Fernández, is managing to hide the seam that sews together multiple passages of novelistic prose (*Museo* 14). For his part, Macedonio claims to have done everything he could in order to accomplish this act of disappearance, or at least concealment, of his labor as narrative tailor:

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<sup>44</sup> For an account of Macedonio's rejection of metaphors see Echavarren 95-98.

He hecho lo que pude para que en el zurcido de pasajes de mi prosa novelística, que arrastra consigo infatigables remiendos de revisión, no se adviertan costuras; y me hago un mérito confesar lo que nadie descubriría, porque si algún libro costó trabajo fue éste, y yo creo que todo el arte es labor y muy ardua ...

Novelas cuyas incoherencias de relato están zurcidas con *cortes transversales* que muestran lo que a cada instante hacen todos los personajes de la novela.

(Fernández, *Museo* 14)

The work of the author is to seamlessly suture together separate passages in a continuous line that hides the edges where these passages were sewn together. So the author must ground his novel in the principle of the illusion of continuity which, as Macedonio says, is the pride or dignity of the art of the novel, “continuidad de mentira es la dignidad del Arte de la novela” (Fernández, *Museo* 209). Here, the author is revealing his method and gesturing in the direction of the ruse novelists often use to build a tenuous line of continuity, although dishonestly achieved, in their narrative. If he hadn’t taken it upon himself to expose this deceptive process, Macedonio claims, no one would have noticed the seams of the novel (Fernández, *Museo* 14). Perhaps this is why Macedonio admits that *Adriana* was a much harder novel to write because he had to purposefully avoid the great temptation of correcting naïvely written passages, ridiculous interjections, sentimental phrases, and even marvelous things that happened by chance (Fernández, *Adriana* 9). The author, as he is reflecting on the process, recognizes how uniquely challenging this task is: “hacer una novela mala en falso es más difícil que hacer la buena en buena” (Fernández, *Adriana* 9). If in *Museo* the author of the prologues wants to hide, through inexhaustible revisions, in the seams of the fabric where the passages come together, and wants to be acknowledged for having composed such a perfect book—the empty book—then in

*Adriana* the task is to avoid any kind of repairing or corrections, which probably takes more of an effort, Macedonio being a “good novelist.”

However, it is clear that, in *Museo*, Macedonio does the opposite of what he claims the author of a novel ought to do. In fact, the suturing of passages (so that no one will notice their incoherence) is one of the traditional definitions of plotting, specifically in the paradigm of the realist novel.<sup>45</sup> As Brooks defines it, the plot “is the principle of interconnectedness and intention which we cannot do without in moving through the discrete elements—incidents, episodes, actions—of a narrative” (*Reading* 5). Here, the plot is identified as narrative dynamic and as interconnectedness. But in *Museo* the presupposition is that these episodes, incidents and actions are disjointed, and it is only through the labor of the diligent narrative tailor that the patchwork can form a plot. That is why Macedonio, before talking about his hard labor of suturing the plot, comes clean by way of a cautionary warning, writing beforehand that, “éste será un libro de eminente frangollo” (Fernández, *Museo* 15), and this disarray most likely will annoy the reader.

The following phrase of the above quote about suturing, posits, as well, an alternative to the perfectly woven plot: “Novelas cuyas incoherencias de relato están zurcidas con *cortes transversales* que muestran lo que a cada instante hacen todos los personajes de la novela” (Fernández, *Museo* 14). Rather than mending the disconnected scenes of the novel to pretend they are coherent, the future novel weaves the *incoherencias* of plot that are sutured with transversal cuts. And these incoherencias of plot can actually be seen. These transversal cuts are without a doubt one of Macedonio’s favorite techniques: cutting across stable narrative categories so as to not only see their holes, where they fail, but also cut and disassemble their

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<sup>45</sup> Brooks also talks about the nineteenth century’s obsession with “questions of origin, evolution, progress, genealogy, its foregrounding of the historical narrative as par excellence the necessary mode of explanation and understanding” (*Reading* 6-7). This is important because realism not only builds a continuity within the plot, but also a historical narrative in the same terms.

artifice aiming to shock the reader. Against a certain kind of “organizing dynamic of . . . human understanding” and “the conception of a plot as something in the nature of the logic of narrative discourse” (Brooks, *Reading* 7), Macedonio proposes a different understanding of the organizing dynamic of the plot, which, for him, is an illusion and a trick from salesmen trying to inflate the value of their products by selling them as natural products or, as Brooks said, as the “nature of the logic.” Additionally, *Museo* denounces how the readers-buyers—or “lectores de vidriera”—often get wrapped up in the classic figure of “enredo novelesco” (Fernández, *Museo* 60), where they are enmeshed in the plot and cannot clearly evaluate it. Therefore, against the trivial diversion of consciousness in a frivolous topic, a “conmoción *total* de la conciencia” (Fernández, *Museo* 24) is absolutely imperative.

Precisely in these spaces where everything seems “natural” or readers “identify” themselves with the characters and are absorbed in the plot, a series of these cuts is necessary. These transversal cuts are gaps that do not merely reveal that the plot is not coherent and is an artifice; they are devices that betray how the novel was built, as in a sewing workshop. Across and through the underlying structure—the warp and the woof of the plot—the transversal cuts, Macedonio says, show what all the characters of the novel are doing at every moment. The key words here are “all” and “at every moment.” The cut diagonally slices through the novel’s chronological time, woven to avoid holes or leaps in the fabric of the plot. And the cut also goes across separate and identifiable characters with a well-defined identity, adding them up—or reducing them—so as to form a “whole” without psychological depth, body, or identity. Every moment is, all of a sudden, simultaneously a cut. And because of this simultaneity the cut provides, all identities are but one undivided instance, not separate from others—there is no time, so there cannot be identity.

In order to counter the plot's teleological structure, moving forward through succession and time, a beginning and an end, Juan Pasamontes,<sup>46</sup> one of the "characters" of *Museo*, demands from the author an open novel: "fijese que su novela no sea con 'cierre hermético' sino con salida a otra, porque soy personaje de transmigración" (Fernández, *Museo* 65). Pasamontes defines himself as a "transmigrating character" needing to migrate through different novels—narrative bodies—every time a novel ends or dies. He lacks, in this sense, any kind of identity, body, or personality traits. So his demand is in fact akin to that of Macedonio when he claims to be writing the "first good novel" as a structure that is never complete and is forever a prologue to its completion. The reader is always on the threshold of the novel and anticipates, alongside the author and characters, a novel that never comes and is almost apocalyptically announced over and over again. But the novel never happens, it is non-existent. We only have the carcass of the novel, the drifting thought, circling around the unattainable land of the novel. For Macedonio, though, this castaway discourse is the only possible misuse of the genre, it is the recommencement of "nothing," the "new" novel rendered null and void of content. In sum, regarding teleology and the plot as an intentional structure "goal-oriented and forward-moving" (Brooks, *Reading* 12), we can see that Macedonio does not attempt to collapse an "order" or break with tradition. In its place, *Museo* postpones the beginning and the end, and so the prose circles around the non-novel, located in the museum of eternity, which is a museum where objects have been removed from the possibility of temporal movement, finitude, and -----.

Macedonio's pages upon pages promise a novel complete with plot, characters, unity and coherence that does not arrive. So then, as readers, we will most likely be either frustrated or will

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<sup>46</sup> Juan Pasamontes might be related to the character Ginés de Pasamontes in *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. Cristina Landa says that "Macedonio usa a Pasamontes para charlar con el lector sobre las estrategias del suspenso y para mostrar el revés de la trama; es el más folletinesco de sus personajes" (Piglia, *Diccionario* 56).

fixate in endless circles on the absent object. There can be no end to the novel, because there is no beginning.

At the end of *Museo* there is another image that might help us grasp the logic of how these promises and prologues are threaded together. In one of the last afterwords to the novel—after the word “FIN” appears—the author claims that his book managed to make connections, “anudador como las trenzas de la Eterna” (Fernández, *Museo* 261). The eternal braids are woven throughout the passages and episodes of the novel, albeit in a timeless sphere without cause and effect, plot or identity. And yet, therein lies the braid: *Museo* assembles its prologues, afterwords and not-novel in a certain discourse—even if it is an unbounded discourse. In this way, Macedonio anchors his novel in the braids of Eterna. This anchoring point is especially relevant if we remember this is the final part of the novel where, traditionally, the threads of a novel are undone or pulled together. Notably here, instead, we find the threads of eternity that annul any idea of beginning and end, existing outside of temporal references. In this final segment of *Museo*, Macedonio points out that the end of a novel is often heartbreaking for readers, because, annoyingly, they beg the author to resurrect one or several characters. To give name to this tendency, the author uses the term “novela desgarradora” (Fernández, *Museo* 261). This expression is particularly symptomatic of how I defined the plot as suturing. This ending is, yet again, the tearing apart of representations and of the plot. At this point of the book, however, we have read fifty-six prologues and a series of chapters that repeatedly delay the plot and never get down to business, as the mirror novels would have done in their shop. Here, then, instead of supposing that the end of the novel must be heartbreaking or to tear apart the fabric of the plot, the emphasis is placed, instead, on the term which is a description of the novel: “novela desgarradora.” This means that the whole thrust of the novel acts as the tearing apart of the plot,

as a heartbreaking deviation. Finally, the reader's expectations of the "heart" come undone—the heart of the book as well.

To sum up, there are two alternatives to the plot, two ways of structuring a plot as the nothingness that is or the nothingness that *it* is. The mechanism of the transversal cut is one of the possibilities for articulating a plotless plot. The second one is the braiding of Eterna's hair that tangles the knots of time, identity, and space in a heartbreaking "novela *desgarradora*." These two strategies can be thought of as the quilting point—an anchor that provides the illusion of stability, fixing meaning—where the indeterminate "nothing" is articulated or sutured with discourse, narrative. The foundation of Macedonio's novel is not the threads themselves, but rather the gaps between the threads, the "nothing" that is necessary for there to be a fabric. "Nothing," the initially negative but then affirmative space between the threads, is the quilting point. It is also the quilting point of philosophy—metaphysics in particular for Macedonio—and literature. It is in this sense that "*nada . . . a algo alude: es una negación condicionada*" (Fernández, *Museo* 70). What is being braided or woven is the eternal and metaphysical nothing, a conditioned negation, perhaps through transversal cuts. This idea also leads to the conception of a homeless non-existence for which Macedonio wants to build a stronghold, a Novel.

### **A Novel Home for Non-Existence**

In *The Theory of the Novel*, Georg Lukács argues that if the "transcendental points of orientation" in our world change, then the art forms are subject to change as well (40). Whereas in antiquity, according to Lukács, there was a perfect correspondence between the artist as form-giving subject and the world of created forms, in modernity this structure has been destroyed and

“the ultimate basis of artistic creation has become homeless” (41). And the form of the novel, he adds, is, “like no other, an expression of this transcendental homelessness” (Lukács, *The theory* 41). Melancholically, Lukács is mourning the fact that modern novels in particular fail to achieve the epic unity, rounded totality or what he deems is “real existence.” Without delving deeper into the problem of the novel in this context, I want to salvage the idea of the novel as a form that is an expression of “transcendental homelessness,” because it is particularly relevant in the context of *Museo*. While the term is appropriate to define the a priori of what Macedonio is thinking in relation to his novel—albeit in affirmative terms—in this particular context, his formula diverges from the kind of realism that Lukács was criticizing here.

When reading these terms in conversation with one another and the ideas of this chapter, I propose, first of all, to reverse the term: not transcendental homelessness but rather homeless transcendence. This means that it is not that homelessness is a transcendental condition of our modernity, but rather that transcendence is what is homeless. Furthermore, in the context of art, for Macedonio the novel is not an *expression* of this condition, but rather the very *form* of this homeless transcendence. A couple of differences with Lukács criticism can also be derived from these reversals. First, Macedonio’s theory of the novel as a house for non-existence and not of the good-old correspondence between reality and art. And, second, the lack of historical development and change in Macedonio’s conception of his timeless project. In the first case, given that *Museo* is “the first good novel,” and that the author is trying to build a novel for “non-existence,” the novel—not as a genre, but as a discourse that shapes and builds its own form and codes—can be thought of neither as an “expression,” nor as a form that shelters the now broken mirrors—reproductions or copies—of what used to be a well-rounded reality. The project is, rather, to create a novel as home or dwelling place for this homeless, destroyed transcendence.

Second, the art form in Macedonio does not change in relation to the form-giving subject or to the historical development. This is precisely why the first good novel is located in eternity, in a metaphysical realm, and therefore it is neither a perfect nor an imperfect mirror of history or society. *Museo*, then, materializes in its project a form capable of building a dwelling for non-existence—that which is beyond the logic of the world, and yet can only be defined in terms of such a world.

In “Hogar de la no-existencia” one of the many prologues to Eterna’s novel, the author says that what drove him to literally construct his novel was that he wanted to build a home for non-existence. As he says, the idea was to craft a novel:

Un hogar para la no-existencia, para la no-existencia en que necesita hallarse Deunamor, el No-Existente Caballero, para tener un estado de efectividad, ser real en su espera, situándolo en alguna región o morada digna de la sutilidad de su ser y exquisitez de su aspiración para poder ser encontrado en alguna parte, en mi novela mientras espera, y cuando llega de vuelta de la muerte su amada.

(Fernández, *Museo* 27)

The author intends to build a novel for the non-existent characters—Deunamor and No-Existente Caballero—to dwell. It is a temporary space, a kind of shelter for travelers—or, again, transmigrating characters—such as the archetypal non-existing knight-errant pursuing his lady. These non-existent characters, nonetheless, are in need of a novel to be truly present and real. These characters demand a novel to be effective because, the author says, “carecen de cuerpo físico, de órganos de sentido, de cosmos” (Fernández, *Museo* 221). The novel, then, is a form that shelters the homeless wandering “seekers” pursuing an almost mystical union with their lovers. In this sense, the novel is a sort of interior castle, a dwelling place or mansion. As

Macedonio says, in rather intricate language in that same prologue, “mi novela tiene lo sagrado, la fascinación de ser el Dónde a que descenderá fresca la Amada volviendo de una muerte” (Fernández, *Museo* 27). It is in this dwelling place—the not-novel—or “casas que no hay,” that the author locates those eternal, auto-existing beings, “mil veces vueltos de la muerte, de automuerte por mero deseo, sin veneno ni puñal” (Fernández, *Museo* 222). What endures is the category of “being,” a not fleeting and stable anchored instance. The novel, as we can see, is repeatedly defined as dwelling; it is a home, it is “el Dónde.” But it is what leads up to a shelter for those that are absent or do not exist. The lover will come back from the dead but, meanwhile, the novel is a waiting room where Deunamor and No-Existente Caballero anticipate a final ecstatic union. Related to the non-existence dwelling in the novel, is the space a soul can inhabit in existence—or a homeless transcendence. In these two instances—the lover’s return from death and the construction of a space for the wandering characters—the Novel is the promise to build a home for non-existence so that this negation can have an effect.

There is another pertinent idea regarding this view of the novel as shelter for the non-existent seekers which is, again, related to the never fulfilled promise that, nonetheless, has an *effect*. It is “nothing,” but with an effect. In “Salutación,” the author talks about the promised “Novel”<sup>47</sup> as having the desire of assuring itself a state of effective non-existence (Fernández, *Museo* 54). The Novel has not come out of the state of non-being because, “como en el alma del prometiente, se le preparan lugares de existencia . . . aún el prometerlo le dio tanta existencia que se le ha reservado premio” (Fernández, *Museo* 54). Here, it is important to note the additional mention of a space or spaces—in this case, spaces of existence or the novel itself—for non-

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<sup>47</sup> In *Museo*, the term “novel,” when referred to as a place or Estancia, is capitalized, “La Novela.” But Macedonio uses capital letters many times when referring also to the novel itself and not to the estancia, so this distinction is not consistent throughout *Museo*.

existence.<sup>48</sup> It seems as though in *Museo* non-existence needs a space in order to be effective, and it is the task of the author to build such a space. However, such a space—the Novel—is always a project; it is always in the works. In these prologues the home for non-existence remains a promise, perhaps the mere blueprints of the building that will never materialize. The promise of a home for non-existence is also the structure of desire, that is to say, desire that is desire because of its lack—its lack of identity. And yet, non-existence has already found its home in the core of the novel, that is to say, in the nothing with which Macedonio builds his lack of building, his not-novel, his discourse. As Oscar del Barco says about *Museo*, “[n]o se trata de negar teóricamente la novela, sino de hacer *real* una ‘novela’ imposible, volviendo así imposible la novela” (106). If Macedonio makes an impossible novel real, thereby making the novel impossible, then what remains is the “being” of the novel. By negating time, identity and space, Macedonio is affirming the very act of negation and this affirmative negation is the space of being, which is also the structure of the project of the eternal novel.

The encounters and dialogues between the “characters” in the chapters of the main novel in *Museo* take place in “La Novela,” the name of an estancia. In the Argentine literary tradition, the estancia is a rather common place, the typical country house surrounded by a valley in a rural setting, away from the city. In many ways, the description of the “estanzuela vieja” (Fernández, *Museo* 150) in the novel is similar to that of the traditional costumbrista novel<sup>49</sup> taking place in a rural scenery. It is significant that Macedonio uses the framework of an archetypical Argentine space to situate his first good novel. The idle setting of the costumbrista novel seems a less than adequate space for revolutionizing the genre. But remember that Macedonio always plays with

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<sup>48</sup> For a reading of the no-space of non-existence in relation to the negation of time and space, see Camblong 459.

<sup>49</sup> For a definition of “Estancia” in terms of the traditional historical costumbrista Argentine novel see Piglia, *Diccionario* 40.

the insertion of an eternal space and time—the Novel—within tradition which, in this case, is the tradition of the realist novel and its stereotypes. In this way, the estancia “La Novela” in *Museo* is far from being a real space. It is, instead, an unstable dream-like settlement: “Todos los habitantes sentían lo soñado de encontrarse allí reunidos, y el inestable asentamiento de ellos ... en aquel suelo pasajero como ellos, que podía serles quitado en un instante” (Fernández, *Museo* 150). It is in this sense of unstable and contingent settlement that the other meaning of “estancia” can be thought: estancia as “estar” or being in the world. As opposed to the stability of the eternal “being,” estancia—the being in the world or existence—is for Macedonio the space of the novel. Macedonio’s attempt is to unground all illusions of identity and not only reveal the ways in which existence is a conventional carcass of nothing, but also to *build* a novel for such a negation of existence. If we remember the previous idea of Macedonio’s desire to build a home or novel for non-existence, then it is possible to affirm that what *Museo* is attempting in terms of the novel is to build a space capable of sheltering the non-estancia, that is to say, the state of not being in the world. The Novel is an estancia also in this precise sense: the Novel is a museum where non-existence dwells. This means that the promised novel is the promise of an eternal home—the home or museum of la Eterna, Macedonio’s muse—where non-existence would dwell. This is precisely Macedonio’s project of building *Museo de la novela de la eterna*, the first good novel or not-novel without a plot.

### **The Narrative Locomotion**

If the plot is the inner weaving of stories or threads and the novel is the project of sheltering the non-existence of these threads, then there is yet another necessary route to complete the trajectory Macedonio is tracing with regards to traditional artistic realism. This

third crucial component is narrative. In a very basic and broad sense, narrative is the use of words to refer to, relate or recount something that is not present in order to reconstruct an absent reality, to link events establishing an order and reconstructing certain relations of causality. The core of this definition of narrative is that there is *distance* between the telling and the events. There is a space where meaning has to travel to count-again, recount, or reconstruct what happened. In relation to this structural gap of narrative Ricardo Piglia proposes that there are only two basic ways of narrating: traveling and investigating. In both of these narratives, a movement from one place to another, distance, is the necessary dislodgment for the narrator to have a basic motive to narrate a story. Of what is of interest here, travel narratives, Piglia says: “No hay viaje sin narración, en un sentido podríamos decir que se viaja para narrar” (*La forma* 49). To this idea we might add that not only is traveling a narrative form but also that narrative itself is a journey—the signifying chain builds series structured so as to produce meaning, language functions not only as a metonymic movement, but also as a metaphor in the sense of it being, literally, a means of transportation. Macedonio also refers to the movement of narrative as traveling when he defines it as “locomoción narrativa” (Fernández, *Museo* 35). This term, “locomoción narrativa” provides us with two initial ideas: narrative movement is locomotion taking us from one place to the other but, as in every trip, there is always the risk of delays or accidents—narrative commotions, delays in the trip. On the one hand, locomotion can be understood as the movement or change of position in space, but also, more radically, as the movement of space itself—*loco moveri*. On the other hand, locomotives—locomotion as an object—are vehicles or means of transportation that, in our present time, mainly stand for a kind of modernity embodied by engines or trains.

In the preface “A los lectores que padecerían si ignorasen lo que la novela cuenta,” Macedonio considers two potentially suffering figures, “el lector salteado” and “el Viajero.” The main feature of these wanderers is to go back and forth, traveling from one page or place to the other. They cannot be ascertained or captured in the prison-house of a hermetic bad novel. In the first case, because he is wandering from one place to the other, the Traveler<sup>50</sup> is a lacking character—not present or found in the novel. But the traveler claiming such position in the Novel, even if absent, has a voice and speaks in a hurry, while moving, “en un relato en marcha: no debo, pues, detenerme, y en esta escena ya demasiado estuve. Que el lector me vea alcanzando el tren o zarpando en todo momento; ha de verme partir tantas veces que no me conozca el estar” (Fernández, *Museo* 33). The reader must not know anything about the Traveler—his “estar” or estancia is too fleeting, too unstable, not permanent. The Traveler carries his estancia in a suitcase and never settles down anywhere. In the midst of a narrative in motion, the Traveler ought to depart and escape the moment when the reader would be capable of stabilizing his image, his identity. To describe this movement as well as the operation performed by the skip-around reader, I want to propose a term: metaphysics of absence. This term can serve as characterization of Macedonio’s universalization of nothingness and absence—non-identity, without time and space. The Traveler’s task is, in this sense, to avoid presence, a hallucination of reality—the threat of realism—in the text. The Traveler functions as an always-moving entity that neither the readers nor the author can ever catch up with. In this metaphysical absence, in eternity the Traveler is always departing or arriving or, most likely, both at the same time.

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<sup>50</sup> In *Diccionario de la novela de Macedonio Fernández*, the Traveler is described as follows: “Personaje masculino destinado a viajar incesantemente por toda la novela, razón por la cual el narrador también lo llama ‘Personaje Faltador’ y ‘Personaje de Fin de Capítulo’. De naturaleza seria, sobre todo muy responsable de su tarea . . . Siempre está para irse, como en el borde” (Piglia *Diccionario* 103-4). Another versión of the figure of the Traveler can be found in Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela*.

As a result, my claim is that, in the traveling distance that narrative implies and entails, what goes back and forth between one place and another is an absence or a lack. Take for example, the traveler who is always departing or arriving in the midst of the narrative locomotion, and thus is never really present. So as to avoid “continuidad de mentira” (Fernández, *Museo* 209) and extricate the novel from the readers of the worst ilk who skip to the end of the text (Fernández, *Museo* 78), Macedonio formulates many narrative devices of interruption, amongst which we find the ideas of accidents and collisions, among others. If narrative is a locomotive and its movement is locomotion, then in *Museo* we find a journey full of incidents, a constantly interrupted trip—the locomotive repeatedly derails. The author of *Museo* describes his novel as a dream-like space where mishaps and adventures take place. These incidents function as theme of the text, but beyond the theme, the novel is also affected in its core by these mishaps. (Fernández, *Museo* 32). An example of these interior and exterior clashes is condensed in the following figure of the signs we can often find in trams: “como vemos ahora en los tranvías que interiormente llevan dibujos-avisos de cómo un transeúnte es atropellado mientras su miriñaque reparte exteriormente choques y sustos” (Fernández, *Museo* 32). In this quote there is a sign warning pedestrians that they can get run over by the tram, but the tram itself, holding the sign, is the vehicle running over pedestrians. So the warning sign functions at many levels, both for the pedestrians, the tram-riders and the readers reading about this sign. With these images and disquisitions on the frequent interruptions, travels and clashes in mind, the author goes on to say: “Yo desde que soy autor con envidia le cuento el público a los choques. A veces sueño que la novela tuvo en ciertos pasajes tal agolpamiento de lectores que obstruían la marcha de la trama con riesgo de que los trances y catástrofes del interior del libro aparecieran en la delantera de él, entre los atropellados” (Fernández, *Museo* 35). Where we might expect to read that the author

recounts the collisions *for* the public, we read that the author counts the public *of* the collisions. Additionally, the quote mentions the throng of readers that might obstruct the movement of the plot, which would cause difficulties and chaos. These difficulties with the annoying readers inside the novel and the disarray they cause with their presence can even manage to surpass the book: the throng of readers better be careful, because there is a risk that the book will run them over! This obstruction of “la marcha de la trama” provoked by the many readers is one of the many instances in which Macedonio makes fiction enter—or override—reality to signal that at those junctures narrative locomotion is stuck and cannot progress or develop. The refusal to move is, as well, precisely what will make the novel go beyond the pages and go out in the streets, running over a myriad of readers.

Finally, in the same preface, “A los lectores que padecerían si ignorasen lo que la novela cuenta,” the narrator talks about narrating and reading about accidents while being part of them, as well as about the verisimilitude of “percances tranviarios:”

haría ese prólogo dignamente . . . con tanto decorado por lo menos de . . . timbres, frenos, guardas, inspectores y el vigilante que viene a leer el accidente frente a la ventanilla de la pasajera que lee mi novela, en fin, con tal suma de homenajes en torno a la inverosimilitud del hecho, que disimularía enteramente, como lo consiguen las “Compañías”, que nunca admiten verosimilitud de los percances tranviarios, una inmovilidad tan luego en la locomoción narrativa. Además, sacaría el brazo por el postigo de mi novela como señal para que no me choquen las novelas que siguen a la mía. (Fernández, *Museo* 35)

As I discussed before, verisimilitude is a device that embraces illusion to make copies seem real. In this case, the narrator interrupts the verisimilitude of narrative locomotion and he does this through prompting accidents and collisions seeking to wake up the reader from his dream of reality. The narrator wants to make a transversal cut to tear apart the many levels of readerly illusion: characters reading about the accident of another character reading this particular novel, the author narrating the events, and us reading these multiple narratives. These intentional cuts and interruptions make it impossible to fall into the charm of the story and get carried away by a seamlessly functioning machine as if on a road without bumps or holes. Macedonio's machine distorts, interrupts, distracts and works with non-verisimilitude. The narrative machine travels between bumps, holes and accidents. And, what is more, the narrator is accusing the "Companies" of never admitting to the verisimilitude of their tram accidents, the impasse in their locomotive narrative. These "Companies," might very well be those companies managed by copyists or by those store clerks that manufacture copies of mirrors and sell them as literature. These deceptive clerks never admit that tram accidents happen so as to not give money back to the readers that had invested, or rather, were invested, in their defective products. Where the companies benefit from dissimulation, *Museo* interrupts their logic by inserting the novel in reality as a stumbling block, as an obstruction of this permanently revolutionizing reproductive logic. In this way, *Museo* works with narrative locomotion as logic of movement and traveling across and through non-existence—always arriving and always departing—capable of running over verisimilitude. The novel walking the streets entails yet another gesture. As the end of the previous quote mentions, the author wants to stick his arm out of the window of his novel as a signal to other novels coming after his, so that they don't crash with it. This signal can be read along the lines of *Museo* being the first good novel onto which future novels should not crash.

The author, then, signals and announces the constant stops in the narrative locomotion and train of thought so that the other novels become aware and take all necessary precautions for them to be able to endure the inevitable and constant accidents and collisions.

The image of narrative locomotion is, as well, inherently related to temporality and history. In traditional realist novels machines in general and locomotives in particular are both a thematic core and the dynamics of narrative through which the plot moves forward (Brooks, *Reading* 47). It is enough, for example, to remember the famous scenes in *Anna Karenina* taking place in trains or railway stations, which signify many things in terms of historical and political development and in terms of the intimacy of narrative. But what is important to note is that locomotives and the locomotive movement are based in progress, whether of the plot or history, and on a temporal dynamism; perhaps this is the reason why realist novels tie their progressive desire and desire of progression to these vehicles. In general, the locomotive is a vehicle of modernity and its ability to bring travelers from distant places closer than ever and the railroad system functions through the principle of interconnectedness.<sup>51</sup> In this sense, the locomotive is also the visible symbol and literal movement of progress, as well as of progression in terms of advancing through a sequence of events or time towards an outcome. In narrative terms, this would be the logic of a traditional novel with characters, plot, a beginning and an end, unity and coherence. With respect to this logic, Alicia Borinsky suggests the following: “Cuando Macedonio decía que quería conmovier la fe en la lógica, en un ordenamiento férreo de los sucesos, pensaba alterar la fe en el tiempo, en el espacio y también la creencia de que unos hechos provocan otros” (*Macedonio* 134). To these rigid set of laws and faith in progress and logic, Macedonio will oppose the “promise of” events, time, plot and the novel itself. This is why

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<sup>51</sup> For a reading of modernity in literature in relationship to technology see Julio Ramos’ chapter “Maquinaciones: literatura y tecnología” in *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina* 153-175.

in *Museo* he defines a kind of futurism, a promise of what will come. Through its idea of “futurism” *Museo* unsettles the teleological set of laws. As we are aware and as I have analyzed, though, the novel is based on the premise that these promises cannot be fulfilled because the very lack of plot, time and identity prevent it.

In relation to futurism and progress, in the twentieth century the locomotive—the train—is also one of the most famous motifs of the futurist avant-garde movement. In the “Manifesto of Futurism,” Marinetti exalted modernity, speed, and violence. In the future, he claimed, everyone will praise and sing to the “deep-chested locomotives,” “adventurous steamers,” “sleek flight of planes, “greedy railway stations,” and other glorious and sublime machines. Against the pensive immobility of literature, the futurists wanted to exalt aggressive action and destroy museums, libraries and academies of any kind (Marinetti). Most likely fully aware of the resonances with Marinetti’s movement, Macedonio uses the same images but in a radically different way when he proposes his version of “futurism.”<sup>52</sup> Playing with the idea of futurism, he writes a prologue to the “never-seen,” “Futurismo: Prólogo a lo nunca visto” (Fernández, *Museo* 46). The author, then, redefines futurism to formulate it in his own terms and in the context of his project: a futurism of the delaying, postponement, and promise of writing. From the beginning, Macedonio is paradoxically placing futurism in a prologue, thus setting in the frame of the past what is yet to come. According to him, the only genuine way to practice futurism is by leaving it for later (Fernández, *Museo* 50). And yet, surprisingly similar images to those of the “Manifesto of

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<sup>52</sup> Julio Prieto mentions that Macedonio met Marinetti during the latter’s visit to Buenos Aires in 1926 when he was greeted by the members of the magazine *Martín Fierro*, who also assembled a dossier about futurism. Prieto traces this event back to a letter from Macedonio to Alberto Hidalgo: “‘Bien puede usted respirar después del éxito de lograr la presencia de Marinetti y tan vasto público’”. Prieto adds: “En dicha ocasión Macedonio pronunció un brindis que sugiere, no sin ironía, la distancia que lo separa de la versión ortodoxa del ‘futurismo’: ‘hay que confesar, insigne futurista, que el pasado no ha muerto, y no le falta un parecido de porvenir’” (149).

Futurism” appear in *Museo*, for instance, the aforementioned locomotive. In Marinetti’s futurism the deep-chested locomotive is the new muse to be praised in its speed and progression. Furthermore, the locomotive is associated with an aggressive and passionate posture claiming that all inherited artistic forms must violently be destroyed. In *Museo*, the locomotive, as we saw, is a narrative dynamic which can also be thought of in terms of the “new” novel. While in the “Manifesto of Futurism” the locomotive gloriously marches towards the future, in *Museo* the locomotive undergoes many accidents and through these shocking interruptions warns the readers against the deceptive continuity, “continuidad de mentira” (Fernández, *Museo* 209). So, instead of a violent destruction of past artistic forms, Macedonio seeks to dislodge the bewitchment of these very same forms.

Even if the images are similar, there are irreconcilable difference between the fascist futurism and its violent upheaval and Macedonio’s intervention—ironically violent—provoking accidents to run over the verisimilitude of the narrative. Instead of a radical destruction of forms, in *Museo* we find non-existing characters trying to find shelter in the *constructive* and exemplary project of the future novel-home. Rather than an iconoclastic posture destroying museums, academies, and libraries, Macedonio wants to insert the novel into reality, that is, insert the museums, libraries and academies into reality so that the forces of fiction become effective. So, in this case, the museum is not a cemetery, as Marinetti claims. Instead, the museum is, above all, a space affirming and materializing nothing, a sewing workshop of malfunctioning plots, the blueprints of a project of building a dwelling space for non-existence. That is how the museum is part of reality and not merely a structure containing dead works of art we must sternly admire. Along the same line, with regards to time, *Museo* and *Adriana* can be said to be non-modern and non-avant gardist texts. They are non-modern because they are neither located in a particular

moment in time, nor in a teleology. Macedonio conceives of the last and first good novels not as an ending and a beginning, but rather as recommencements. Nothing ends and nothing begins in eternity. And yet, there is movement, there is a narrative locomotion that produces a consciousness effect, “efecto concienical” (Fernández, *Museo* 221) in each one of the endless repetitive collisions. As a result of this, I argue that modernity for Macedonio is an illusion of realism and of a certain conception of time and identity, of a story narrated in a certain way, and therefore Macedonio is not an avant-garde writer in the sense that his version of “futurism” does not entail any kind of destruction in order to proclaim a clean slate and a new beginning.

Promising future pleasures, or future art, we might add, is vain. If the claim is that the notion of a future pleasure must operate in the present, then also the notion of the past is at work (Fernández, *Museo* 194). All of the futurists’ machines—the plane, locomotive and steamers—function as symbols of a kind of progressive vein of modernism, claiming that the future will be better if the past is radically eliminated so that the present can get rid of the weight behind/on its back. But Macedonio’s futurism is that of the Traveler: always departing and always arriving. Narrative is a means of transportation relating something that is not present or weaving the threads of non-events through words. And the never-present Traveler is the one that rides the narrative locomotion, in a journey that never arrives and never departs. The Traveler cannot be in the world—he does not yet have an estancia—because the clock in the train station has no hands and in the train full of nothing there is no identity. While this is true, as readers, we must be careful because at any given moment, going beyond the pages of the novel, running into our world, the approaching locomotive will run us over and surpass our immobility.

In the big scheme of the sewing workshop of Macedonio's Novel-Museum, there is an untimely exhibit on the "art of the novel." The three key figures and mechanisms I have proposed, derived from *Museo de la Novela de la Eterna*—suturing together as the construction of the structure or net full of holes of the plot, the house of non-existence as the novel, and locomotion as the dynamic of narrative—cannot be conceived of except in eternity. Eternity is the necessary frame for any interpretation of the work of Macedonio Fernández. The poetics of thought in *Museo* operate by disrupting sequential notions of time and dislocating, through a violent cognitive adjustment, all reassurance we could obtain from an *end* or *ending*, a closure. That is why *Museo* ends as it begins, with a prologue—a final prologue. In this last prologue, the author says he leaves an "open book" for the reader or future writer to correct, mend, delete, plagiarize or use freely. (Macedonio's friends, by the way, took this copy left invitation seriously). Hence, the novel ends where it effectively re-opens its pages. The author, moreover, claims to leave for "whoever wants to write the novel" a perfect theory of the novel which is an imperfect execution thereof, and a perfect plan for its future execution (Fernández, *Museo* 265). The perfect theory of the novel is a theory that does not precede the text but that is rather written in the practice and exercises of prologues, forming what Jitrik calls "poética del pensar," demanding new literary forms and different forms of thought (*La novela* 41). As Piglia says, Macedonio thinks it is possible to express in a novel, as in a philosophical work, complex and abstract thoughts as long as they seem fake ("Notas" 520). In this way, Macedonio's thought, futurism and blueprints for the novel-house of non-existence become effective in a literary project that goes beyond the frame of representation and reproduction. The "Obras Completas del Prologar" (Fernández, *Museo* 125) situate the problem of the *logos* not in the main text or representation, but rather in the section that precedes and introduces it. Except that there is

neither a novel nor logos. The good novel works *without* novel, *without* logos, and is based on nothing. If *Museo de la Novela de la Eterna* is located in an eternal, metaphysical realm, then we can affirm that Macedonio's entire project is the true *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*.

There is no better joke than the twin novels of Macedonio. In them, "nothing" is articulated as a material instance with positive attributes and qualities. And, what is more, this "nothing" creates a complete poetic of thought and of fiction that overrides any paradigm of representation and reproduction and relies, instead, on fictions walking the street and having an effect in our reality, as they already do. Macedonio was perhaps a novelist playing with the idea that if so many fictions operate in our world already, then why can't art also be as authentic and effective as these fictions. This is one of the reasons why Macedonio's jokes on nothing still make me laugh every time. They bring the unexpected to the fore and bring nothing to the prologue. Or perhaps they always make me laugh because they are untimely and sublime anonymous jokes. The prologue ends here.

NUNCA.

#### 4. JOSÉ EMILIO PACHECO

En todas las ficciones, cada vez que un hombre se enfrenta con diversas alternativas, opta por una y elimina las otras; en la del casi inextricable Ts'ui Pên, opta –simultáneamente– por todas. *Crea*, así, diversos porvenires, diversos tiempos, que también proliferan y se bifurcan. De ahí las contradicciones de la novela.

–Jorge Luis Borges, “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan”

Conjecture a. “*Comienzo. Y recomienzo. Y no avanzo*” (Paz 7). The problem of beginning is the beginning of the problem. A beginning takes place. And then, another beginning: there is no movement forward, only the insistence and persistence of what returns again and again, the need to begin again, to recommence. To choose the departing point of a text is to take a stance: raising a voice in the middle of a conversation that has already begun and will continue, albeit modified, after the voice is no more. In fact, it is not a single moment or specific point in time, but rather a line, a repeated trajectory. The line of commencements opens up a path, the path of what was not possible before but was already there to begin with. Beginnings make way along the road, and cannot be traced back to a single point of departure: to begin is to begin again. Beginnings need to be continually reaffirmed as an act, and in this reaffirmation they create their own method since no origin, no explanatory cause, guarantees them. Hence, they are plural, multiple. Here something commences and then recommences. There is no progression; there are only series of points, repeated recommencements that do not come to fill in a fantasy about

origins nor assemble a sequential story. That is why it is only possible to *arrive* at a beginning, which is not given, but must be found and reaffirmed, once again.

### **Recommencing**

Before it began, it had already begun: “Con los dedos anular e índice entreabre la persiana metálica: en el parque donde hay un pozo cubierto por una torre de mampostería, el mismo hombre de ayer está sentado en la misma banca leyendo la misma sección, ‘El aviso oportuno’, del mismo periódico: *El Universal*” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 11). This moment has happened before and the initial description is only the register, at a given instant, of a repeated act: the same man is seated/sitting on the same bench reading the same section of the same newspaper while another person witnesses the same circumstances he had already seen before. The scene replicates possibly an infinite number of scenes where the simple present tense of the onlooker—*entreabre*—interrupts with his gaze the reader’s present continuous—*está sentado, leyendo*. The narration interrupts—cracks open—the continuity of repetition and records in writing this particular moment. And in writing the image, a structure is determined, creating a dimension beyond the book itself: if the same “man from yesterday” had been seated in the same place before, the text does not register its happening until now that its occurrence is repeated. Certainly, the image is narrated in the present, but by marking as repeated its circumstances as well as its happening, the past occurrence of the same act and perhaps the future of this invariable situation are created. Prior to the book’s cover, the telling of this repeated encounter between the observer and the reader creates its background retroactively by projecting the “same” moment onto the past. Thus, the decision to begin here and not in another moment in

time might seem to cut short the remaining potential times converging in the scene. It seems as if the narrator decided to present a still image in the present tense that repeats, at least once, the same conditions of something that had happened before. Nevertheless, what this beginning entails is the simultaneity of description, capable of holding diverging times within a single gesture: a longer time measure—the repeated history of encounters—that is traversed by the gaze's instant.

Initially, the confirmation of this simultaneity can be found immediately after this beginning, when the preceding description continues by trying to guess the different construction dates of the buildings that compose the paralyzed image—some of them erected around 1950, others sixty years earlier, or precisely in 1939. Dates are piled up as if they were layers of bricks, accumulated, building up the image. Diverse times are piled up in an anachronistic juxtaposition and superimposition. Then, the narrator tries to set the date when an enigma haunting the onlooker first began: when was it that he, eme, first smelled vinegar in the park?<sup>53</sup> Was it on an afternoon in 1946 or 1947, or perhaps later during the first months of 1960? But as one can see, the exact moment when the story begins, the origin, is impossible to date; the narrator can only conjecture upon which was the decisive moment for eme or when the buildings were erected, and he is driven to entertain different possibilities at once. It is the simultaneity of these possibilities that makes the text unfold and create diverse futures and intersecting moments in time. This divergent composition, simultaneously entertaining different possibilities, can be read as a rebuttal of narrative's traditional linear structure of cause and effect, where the election of a single cause annuls the rest of the alternatives and predetermines how the whole structure unfolds. This first paragraph is then defined and structured by the uncertainty of what is

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<sup>53</sup> For a reading on how vinegar is a crucial repeated symbolic element that recurs all throughout *Morirás lejos*, see Soto 367.

happening or why it is important to determine an origin and, at the same time, the certainty of multiple times converging and bisecting in the present image's writing.

The initial scene's description seems to exist or operate outside of time; its time is merely that of a gesture—the movement of two fingers opening the blinds. The gesture is located *in* time, but time's movement is brought to a standstill. After creating an opening, *eme sees*, and that gaze orders the world according to his perspective. At the same time, the writer figuratively opens up the scene—with a colon—and maps what *eme* is capable of seeing and guessing, while also establishing within the description a series of oppositions: a material difference between the metallic blinds and the masonwork tower; a difference of actions since a man sees and another man is seen; a time difference between repetition's thrust, circular movement, and the stationary timeless image. Not only are these oppositions the initial mapping of what will follow in the text, but they are also the juxtaposition, within the image, of the disjunctions they imply. That is why the scene had already begun before it began; it is only beginning again, in the descriptive instant, within the literary text.

These opening lines are the beginning of *Morirás lejos* by José Emilio Pacheco, and they signal the contradictions the novel addresses all along its 159 pages. The timeless repetition of destruction, violent encounters that superpose one another and accumulate themselves in timeless instants, but traversed by history as well, in order to conjecture what might be at stake in this very simple opening scene. The conjecture of what is at stake in regards to not only who is the man gazing out his window but also the identity of the other man reading the “timely” classified ads of *El Universal*. It conjectures as well what is the nature of their relationship, or lack thereof, as well as why an omniscient narrator—or “omnividente” as we will later read—is setting up this particular image through an initial repetition. What *Morirás lejos* plots throughout its structure

are a series of images, embedded in different periods of time and geographical circumstances. The main question in Pacheco's text is how to establish a position or sense of identity both at a particular instant and across history. In fact, nothing *happens* in the novel—there is no story or plot. There are only conjectures and images that, through repetition, construct a mosaic-like circular composition. This also implies thinking the ways in which repetition does not allow a linear story and questions the very foundation of narrative structures that still rely on time as a constitutive element of story-telling.

The very simple beginning scene of the novel condenses, through the different hypotheses accumulated all over *Morirás lejos*, the timeless repetition of symptomatic historical moments of destruction. By “symptomatic,” I mean that these moments might refer to something other than themselves. These tragic moments are related to the Jewish history of recurrent tribulations: the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Romans in the first century, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, and the rebellion in the Warsaw ghetto followed by the beginning of the Holocaust during the Second World War. Through the juxtaposition and accumulation of these moments of destruction, these out-of-joint experiences interrupt the fantasy of origin and causality. *Morirás lejos* reaffirms the possibility of inscribing, within fiction, both the dismantlement of modern narrative procedures and an inquiry into the ways in which literature relates to tradition and historical materials. But this does not mean that the novel simply uses a historical period as setting for a story, as does the popular genre of the historical novel in Latin America. The novel is not a quest for origins that seeks an explanation of the present state of affairs, nor is it a historical novel set in the past attempting to recreate the time's spirit and circumstances. *Morirás lejos*, on the contrary, considers the stakes and impact

of narrating, once again, the destruction and cruelty of historical confrontations and what consequence this entails for narrative as technique.

An initial clue is already provided in the aforementioned image: the repeated happening of the scene does not allow us to ascertain an origin and since all there is, is a simple repetitive movement, there cannot be a successive development of a story moving towards an end. But if narrative—understood as the telling of a sequence of events—always implies some kind of temporality and language also entails a syntactic movement, how does Pacheco’s novel get away from temporality structured as cause and effect? Can this timeless repetition of destructive encounters result in a questioning of language’s foundations?<sup>54</sup> And does this repetitive movement and accumulation without end entail the idea that reprises are inevitable? These questions can function as the coordinates of the present inquiry.

The first possible answer to these questions might lie in the novel’s plotless composition. Given that there is no story, no plot, what is left in the novel? In *Morirás lejos* one can find sections or “axes” identified by symbolic titles that are distributed according to neither causality nor succession.<sup>55</sup> The titles serve as trajectories or imaginary lines about which images rotate. One title is upheld all throughout the novel, and together with it, there are four main sections. After this, a series of different “endings” close the novel. The main thread and central—

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<sup>54</sup> Julio Ortega argues something similar in relation to *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo* (1969) by José Emilio Pacheco where, as he says, the poet “revela un cuestionamiento verbal... el lenguaje deberá responder al desencanto de una realidad que se hace progresivamente fugaz porque en este libro la conciencia crítica es un debate de la persona poética” (101-2). Pacheco’s operation questions the limits of language in the sense that Ortega signals in the quote, that is, as the destabilizing of the poet’s “I”. For Pacheco “critical consciousness” implies also un-grounding the poetical “I” and bringing it far from its language and image of the self.

<sup>55</sup> Other critics have called the headings in the novel “series” or “fragments.” (Jitrik, “La escritura” 78 and Broad 251) Each of these headings also has a different “symbol” before them. For an explanation of the symbolic references see Cluff 21 and Jiménez 250.

transversal—axis<sup>56</sup> of *Morirás lejos* where the initial image is located, is called “Salónica.”<sup>57</sup> It cuts through the rest of the sections, dividing the whole text, and it functions as the fictional ground where the blending of times occurs. The other four main axes—“Diáspora,” “Grossaktion,” “Totenbuch” and “Götterdämmerung”—have a common underlying structure that can be inferred: first, the establishment of a paradoxical point of view from where events will be narrated; then, a confrontation between two opposing forces in battle; and, finally, the tragic endings consummated in fire and death. Almost at the end of every account, there is the telling of an omen that had previously signaled the catastrophe and now is proven right, on the brink of destruction. The common underlying structure assembles how repetitions work in *Morirás lejos*, as we began seeing in the novel’s initial lines. The fact that there is a common structure in the different axes tailors how *Morirás lejos* assembles images taken from historical sources. It constructs, little by little, the sensation that images in different historical moments are but echoes of the past and are actually repeating previous images, where the same events already happened and perhaps will unavoidably happen again, even if caused by other reasons. As such, repetition operates as the timeless insistence of the same. That is why Pacheco’s text is fundamentally composed of static images and there is no plot in the sense of organized causal movement towards an end. Instead, the act of plotting is the reader’s labor.<sup>58</sup> Images are not tied together and they must be woven by the reader, who needs to infer the common structure that similar

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<sup>56</sup> *Morirás lejos* has been read as the double casting of two heterogeneous series, a “testimonial” or “historical” series and a “fictional” series (Simpson 275 and Foster 78) In the juxtaposition of these two series Raúl Dorra situates his “ethical” reading of the novel.

<sup>57</sup> The name “Salónica” is a reference to the second largest Greek city that has been bound to Jewish history for housing a major Jewish community, mostly of Sephardic origin, that immigrated to the city after their expulsion from Spain in 1492. It was the only city of this size that retained a Jewish majority during centuries, until the middle of the Second World War, when the greater part of the population was deported and exterminated in the camps.

<sup>58</sup> For a detailed analysis of the reader’s role in *Morirás lejos* see Graniela-Rodríguez (96-113) and Lespada.

events share, in the symptomatic historical moments used in the novel. Only through repetition the text takes shape and unfolds its circular movement, always going back to the beginning.<sup>59</sup>

Following the textual logic and structure of *Morirás lejos*, my inquiry is woven in the same way as the main axes in the novel are traced: it begins with the question of perspective in relation to narrative, followed by the conflict, the battle fought by the text, and the necessary destruction the process entails. The inquiry ends with a retrospective consideration of the (re)created beginnings and the kind of readings they open up. This inquiry will require an analysis at the level of the images within the novel, but also the traversing of many routes. These paths will include an analysis of the intervention of the text in its Latin American context, as well as rethinking and confronting traditional narrative devices to turn them against themselves and redefine their function. This will lead me to reflect on criticism and how it must redefine itself when reading texts such as *Morirás lejos*. Just as in the novel's structure there are alphabetical "conjectures," across this investigation there are brief sections also named "conjecture" and accompanied by a letter. In these conjectures I speculate on the text's composition and images, as well as about two of the symptomatic "knots" not only of *Morirás lejos*, but of José Emilio Pacheco's entire work, namely, the construction or destruction of identity in relation to history and the timeless instant as seized in literary images.

Conjecture b. "Miro sin comprender, busco el sentido/de estos hechos brutales./ De repente/ oigo latir el fondo del espacio,/ la eternidad gastándose" (Pacheco, *Tarde* 38). In order

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<sup>59</sup> Related to this, it is not a coincidence that José Emilio Pacheco translated into Spanish Beckett's *Comment c'est* in 1966. The paragraphs are added up in a cumulative rather than linear sense, and thus are circular: the end is the beginning. In French, *comment c'est*—"how it is"—is pronounced like *commencer*—"to begin"—a wordplay necessarily lost in translation (Beckett 505).

to look for the beginning, for the reason that brought about an image, it is necessary to imagine a gaze. Only by looking can the gaze be crafted, in an instant. A gaze orders the world according to a perspective as it is also bound to a subject. The gaze is always-already inscribed in the perceived object and from that point the gaze returns: a reflexive torsion by means of which the onlooker is also included in the scene he crafted himself. Inside and outside, the object of an inquiry and the inquisitor. And precisely in the blind spot, the gaze meets the eye that beholds it: an image is frozen, traversed by eternity, “spending itself.” Narrative, because of its successive nature, cannot grasp a gaze as traversed by eternity. But a conjecture can infer the displaced identity of a gaze in disjointed images. Conjecture, as method, is the timeless “throwing or casting together” (“conjecture”) of images; perhaps even of the gaze and the subject that bears it. Fiction infers and guesses, conjecturing, shedding light on the contradiction constituting a gaze.

### **Conjecturing the gaze**

Let us go back, once again, to the beginning of the novel where, as we have already seen, the narrator describes a simple static image, establishing a basic relationship between two figures: from his window, opening the blinds with his ring and index fingers, eme *observes* an unknown person—later called “Alguien” or “Someone”—seated on a park bench, reading the classified ads in *El Universal*. Nothing *happens* in the scene, it is frozen in an elongated present. This image will move by means of conjectures in a threefold way: first, trying to pinpoint the identity of the newspaper reader; second, determining the reason why eme is observing Alguien from his window; and third, what might link both figures together. Of course, a first relationship is already established through eme’s gaze. Why does eme observe Alguien? Is eme also the

image's narrator? As with the buildings that compose the scene, we can only conjecture about these—"se aventuran hipótesis, nada pretende ser definitivo" (Pacheco, *Morirás* 99). In alphabetical order, until there are no more letters and the alphabet "no da para más" (71), and later simply alternated with other sections, contradictory and potentially endless inquiries are put forward as immobile images.

*Morirás lejos* is the quest for a way to put images into words without resorting to the plot's weaved intentional meaning, through action. The text does not try to establish a consistent identity as point of departure, but rather departs from a displaced gaze, constantly re-shaping itself in its encounter with the world it perceives. Narrative can no longer function as a thread capable of conveying what is at stake in an image or a moment in time, so Pacheco resorts to *conjectures* as an alternative. In these conjectures, he throws or casts images together for the reader to derive a conclusion, infer or guess something from them.

In *Morirás lejos* there are only images and conjectures upon these images. What has traditionally been the backbone of narrative, the plot, is missing. And without a plot there is no action, no characters and no movement. Instead of a plot, there are conjectures, but due to their non-sequential logic, they can only include relinquished movements, generic characters and diverging times upheld in a single gesture. As such, conjectures function in *Morirás lejos* in two complementary ways: first, as the driving force that fastens together the disjointed hypotheses about the initial image and within it, about *eme* and *Alguien's* identities; and, second, as the crafting of a gaze that is constantly displacing its standpoint in the novel, since there is no movement except that of fictional assumptions, leading nowhere.

Conjecture is the driving force of a text where an enigma must be elucidated or clarified. We can think of this according to the model of a detective novel. After an enigma is presented, the detective usually examines and accumulates pieces of information required to confirm his personal conjectures that might solve the enigma. At least in the beginning of *Morirás lejos*, this is what the narrative voice tries to do, venturing more than a few of his personal conjectures. Intrigue moves by means of “acotaciones conjeturales” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 53) or deductions by an omniscient narrator. These “acotaciones conjeturales” could also be marginal notes or appendices to the initial image or perhaps a script’s stage directions to indicate movements in a performance. The narrator of *Morirás lejos* tends to assume the pertinent language of each of his suppositions to retell the initial situation, transforming the whole scene into the climax of a possible story he conjectures. For example, conjecture “[a]” establishes that Alguien, the man seated on the park, is a skilled worker who has been stripped of his job by industrial automation, and the scene is described with the language of economics and engineering. Thus, the opening of the blinds is reformulated as follows: “Por lo que en forma oblicua alcanza a advertirse en el campo visual creado por dos láminas casi invisiblemente apartadas gracias a la acción de palanca que ejercen los dedos anular e índice, el hombre no es menor de cincuenta años . . . La barrera de los cuarenta. La etapa del despegue económico. La acumulación del capital. La inhumanidad del sistema.” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 13-4) In this way, most of the conjectures allow a different reading of the initial scene, and some of them even postulate the negation of its existence and effects, for example, letter [k]—“El pozo no existe, el parque no existe, la ciudad no existe” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 36). The reader must accept as valid the excluding alternatives the initial scene opens up: Alguien could be, at the same time, a skilled worker without a job, a lover waiting for his other half, a sexual criminal searching for a prey, a father who recently lost his son, etc., but it is

also possible the whole scene does not exist or is produced by a hallucination. “Salónica” is written as a series of conjectures and perhaps, as Raúl Dorra argues, it advances toward its own structural and thematic negation (199). At the same time, its negation and destruction is its opening to endless possibilities that remain to be conjectured. As such, it is important to note that in *Morirás lejos* we find not only an attempt to try to elucidate an enigma as in a detective novel, but more importantly we draw the “map of the fallible and open universe of rationality. We are the detectives but there is no solution... Within its pages [*Morirás lejos*] summarizes any other detective novel and simultaneously denies it” (Stavans 143). That is why in terms of temporality there is no movement, and conjectures simply bring the non-narrative sequences back to the beginning, its departure point. At this moment in time, something always-already happened or nothing has happened yet. It is the moment when the narrator inquires upon the folding and unfolding of what he imagines as possible.

A traditional character, defined as a developed—or developing—fictional unity of being, is impossible in *Morirás lejos*. No character can develop throughout the plot’s movement because nothing *happens*; there is no progressing action, no beginning, climax or ending in the novel; and there can be no unitary beings, since there are only multiple speculative events which might or might not have happened, and thus remain within the horizon of the virtual. A character—as it has been traditionally defined in narrative—is not possible in a timeless conjectural fiction. As said before, in the transversal axis two equally puzzling figures face each other: the onlooker, *eme*, and the person reading a newspaper, seated in the bench—*Alguien*. These could not be more generic names: an alphabet’s letter spelled phonetically and an individual called “Someone.” From what is supposed to be the character’s magnetic pole of attributes, the principle of identity through which a reader can recognize the character’s different

transformations, the name, it is impossible to infer a definitive character trait. These characters, if we can still call them such, do not have a pre-fixed identity: their gender, age, appearance, nationality, lifestyle, etc., are uncertain. Nothing is certain except, perhaps, the actions or roles they play at the initial scene: verbs, implicitly or explicitly, delimit their action. Eme *opens* the blinds and *observes*; Alguien is *seated, reading* the newspaper. And, on an additional level, an omniscient narrator is *describing* the scene, and then *conjectures* upon the possible nature of their relationship or lack of relation. Figures are reduced to their acts, their attributes reduced to a few principal functions. The immobility of these “figures,” as it is more accurate to call them, makes them turn towards the “generic.” As one of the multiple conjectures on eme suggests, his name could be “un nombre iniciático; es decir, personal y genérico: el nombre de un individuo y también de una casta” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 132). The generic is in this case the combination of the particular individual and the broader class to which the individual belongs. But this is not all, because the generic figures are constantly given new and various attributes in the multiple conjectures throughout the course of the text. Their non-proper names cannot function as the possible unification of their “identity”; they have too many attributes. Eme, for example, is said to be a devout reader of Paracelsus—a Renaissance alchemist and physician—and perhaps he “heredó de la alquimia el arte de transfigurarse. Por eso no sabemos quién es” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 111); and Alguien is described as “un espectro a quien el narrador en su patología ha disfrazado de espantapájaros o de ninguno” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 108). In both cases, the transformation and the disguise as no-one signal that the figures cannot be grasped by a unique formula or name, and can only have multiple predicates, none of them permanent. In this kind of texts driven by conjectures upon images, unified characters as such cannot exist, only figures open to infinite transformations and endless hypotheses. If we take this a step further, it is possible to say the

*fixing* of a movement is the moment when hypotheses are cast, the imaginization of movement itself. In *Morirás lejos*, hypotheses, instead of fixing movement as cause-effect, bet on multiple alternatives and times.

Let us now examine the second way in which conjectures operate in *Morirás lejos*, that is, as the crafting of a paradoxical gaze that is both the “object” of the novel and the means by which we are able to perceive and hypothesize. For José Emilio Pacheco to write is, first and foremost, to craft a gaze. But not just any gaze. It must be the gaze of someone involved in a given scene. Only after crafting a particular gaze, writing comes to find its tone to then describe the perceived scene, while it reflects on the fictional and partial conception of this image. And this image is partial and fictional since the gaze that imagined it was in turn artificially crafted. The problem is that the image is what the gaze perceives, but the subject from where the perspective is taken is a constitutive part of the described image. It is, in this sense, a double gaze. The gaze outlines the world according to a particular point of view and is, of course, partial and subjective, since the spectator’s experience, past and current position, function as lens through which he filters outside stimuli. Nevertheless, both in Pacheco’s poetry and narrative, writing does not function merely as lens through which we perceive the fictional world but, more importantly, as the actual creation of a gaze as shaped by the world. This means that the gaze is not merely a mechanism required to grasp an outside, but also an object in the field of fiction, subject to change and displacements.

The “Diáspora” axis begins with a paragraph where a first-century Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, declares: “Yo, Josefo, hebreo de nacimiento . . . forzado después de mi rendición y cautiverio a presenciar cuanto sucedía, me propuse a referir esta historia” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 16). Josephus wrote the only first-hand account of the Jewish revolt against Rome, in

*The Jewish War*. The decision to rely on Josephus's point of view—his uttered “I”—is nonetheless questionable, since he was able to record “the facts” and “everything that happened,” solely because he betrayed and helped fight against the Jewish rebellion, in order to survive and obtain Rome's favor and patronage. *Morirás lejos* relies upon and makes visible the rebuttal of narrative authority and institutionalization of “selected” or “canonized” versions, reinforcing the premise that histories are but a partial way of tracing events when there are wars or conflicts involved. Josephus might very well be “un traidor, un colaboracionista que al ser derrotado se pasó al bando de los opresores... escribió en Roma, vigilado por Tito, para enaltecer las atrocidades imperiales contra su propio pueblo” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 66). Or, perhaps, he submissively accepted “la ignominia con objeto de sobrevivir para dejar un testimonio que de otro modo se hubiera perdido irreparablemente” (67). In any case, “[s]ólo se dispone... de referencias inconexas y aun contradictorias” (66), says the narrator when questioned about his use of Josephus' version of the events. Furthermore, the text not only determines that every interpretation is partial and depends on the contingent position the narrator occupies, but also accepts this contingency and the need to work through this position as the only way through which it is possible to grasp history and interpret it. Josephus' gaze perceives and voices the Jewish rebellion against Rome, but his perspective is compromised, since he is as well part of the story. Only through this contradiction, the narrative displaces authority and history to rely on versions and actors immersed in a given story.

The gaze in Pacheco's work arises from a confrontational encounter with either nature or history, and thrives in a contradictory movement.<sup>60</sup> In Pacheco's poetry and short stories, the reader can frequently find philosophical or poetical meditations on the contradictory nature of

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<sup>60</sup> Jorge Fernández Granados (7-14) broadly suggests this in the preface to a collection of poems by Pacheco.

things, which in turn question, through the gaze and its implied inclusion in any description, the subject's place in the world. "Si se extiende la luz/ toma la forma/ de lo que está inventando la mirada" (Pacheco, *Tarde* 46) conjectures a poem from *El reposo del fuego*.<sup>61</sup> Physically, in order to come into being, a gaze requires light, or at least the reflection of light from an object. But instead of a gaze only capable of perceiving light, colors and object shapes, here we find a gaze continually shedding light and re-shaping the world. The light is the conditional line that links together both the gaze and what it is creating and re-creating. In fact, we might even say that Pacheco conceives the gaze as always absent from its place or displacing itself constantly, due to its encounter and inclusion into the contradictory movement of history or nature. For Pacheco, then, to write is to truly "illuminate" the already existing contradictions in nature and history by shaping them from a different point of view. This "illumination" produces a shift in perspective—towards a vision able to grasp what another perspective occludes—and creates another version, brightening the understanding of the site of our gaze. As Pacheco envisions in another poem: "Aquí me miro ajeno, me desdoble/ para mirarme como observo al otro./ Y veo con otros ojos la mirada/ que se traduce en líneas y en espacios . . . Me miro, me dibujo, me convierto/ en teatro de un combate interminable" (*Tarde* 123). In such a way, the gaze is both the means by which readers or spectators conjecture and infer what happens in a scene—one that perhaps depicts an endless struggle—and also the object of writing, the folding and unfolding of the "I."

Both the conjectural nature of the novel and the crafting of a displaced gaze are constitutive of non-narrative sequences. In order to trace images rotating on an imaginary axis, a conjecture is needed. But this conjecture is also drawn from a very precise point of view, a gaze.

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<sup>61</sup> *El reposo del fuego* was written in 1966 and, for some critics is the "germinal anticipation of *Morirás lejos*" in its construction, symbolism and themes (Aguilar and Gladstein 59-69).

The inclusion of the gaze in conjectures throughout *Morirás lejos* is the initial and necessary step to build an image. The built image depicts contradictions but, at the same time, the contradictions or confrontations in the images do not indicate that something does not function in them or that they are invalid, but rather that it is the nature of the image—at least in *Morirás lejos*—to hold together different times, paradoxical gazes, historical moments, and generic figures. Images become diagrams charting precisely what is impossible in a linear account of time and defies as well the linear nature of language's syntax that moves by way of meaning, toward a pre-determined end.

Conjecture c. “The real task is not some simple *projection into the past*, but rather that of understanding the historical *actuality* of an event, of determining its role in that development of historical energy which, in its very essence permanent, neither emerges nor disappears and for that very reason operates beyond time. A fact historically understood is one which has been withdrawn from time” (Eichenbaum qtd. in Jameson 97). In order to arrive at a beginning, it is necessary to determine a position within—or instead negating—history, bearing in mind the line on which a work begins, the genealogy it constructs retroactively and the possibilities it opens up towards the future. This also means the work anchors the site of its enunciation, the place from where it reads its context and tradition. The ship of history drops anchor or runs aground if a position is taken, securing the ground for a site where it all begins again. The opposite action also defines a position: the ship finally lifts anchor and history sets sail, once again. But here, both are possible at the same time: dropping the anchor is the necessary act to set sail. Only then can tradition be read outside the anxiety of influence, as a retroactive re-adjustment of the whole order, the unfolding of a beginning that unearths its predecessors.

### **Confronting tradition through continuity**

*Morirás lejos* is defined by confrontation and is itself a confrontation of traditional narrative forms. The novel has at least two different levels where there are confrontational encounters. First, within the text's images where a series of oppositions are drawn, primarily contradictions between timeless instants and the retold historical events. Second, in its context in Latin America and Mexico, *Morirás lejos* is an uncommon text, for its interest does not lie in the quest for a national identity nor in a mere experimental rearrangement of narrative schemes. Instead, it confronts narrative techniques and the idea of tradition as mere heritage that it would be possible to simply "acquire" or rebel against.

Within the novel, images confront other images and are assembled in oppositions. As we saw in the initial scene, there is a tacit confrontation between *eme* and *Alguien*, as well as between the modern blinds and the more artisanal material of the tower in the park, and, structurally, between the returning movement of repetition and the frozen image. In the same way, the novel retells, all along its pages, a series of historical confrontations: the Romans against the Jewish rebels in Jerusalem, the Spanish Catholic Kingdom against Jews and converted Jews at the end of the Middle Ages, and the Nazi Party against the Jewish population in Europe. It is possible to say that the text assembles a line where confrontations are continuous and repetitive; we grapple with a continuity of—perhaps inevitably—confrontational encounters. There is precisely a paradoxical encounter, in an instant, of a history of repetitive encounters.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Topletz argues that in Pacheco's poetry, especially that of *Elementos de la noche*, "time's perpetual creation and destruction of reality is expressed through cyclical images . . . and through . . . classic cycles of the elements... Thematically, these early poems emphasize the destructive nature of time" (16). For a detailed analysis of how time

Pacheco traces a line where all there was before were repeated instants of “the same.” This link between disastrous moments and broader historical repetitions constitutes the map of confrontations Pacheco will outline and chart.

Towards the end of *Morirás lejos*, where “Totenbuch” intersects with “Salónica,” there is a key image of temporal and timeless figures set against each other but also superposed, which might help explain this paradoxical—at the same time temporal and a-temporal—formation. An objecting voice constantly disagrees with *everything* the narrator of the novel depicts. In the mentioned intersection, the voice asks the narrator a series of questions, because he seems to be trying to locate the place from where *eme* is looking out the window and what can be seen on the walls that surround him. The narrator—privileged with *omnividencia*—replies with a list of what he envisages on the wall: “Manchas de humedad, grietas, salitre, una reproducción de *La Torre de Babel* de Pieter Bruegel, lamina corriente desprendida de una revista y que empieza a amarillear...” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 119). This is a list of ruined objects, vestiges, or perhaps a list of time’s effects, slowly ruining objects and the wall, which functions as their placeholder. The salt residue and the damp patch on the wall signal the passing of time and its effects on matter, and *The Tower of Babel*’s print is beginning to turn yellow. Once again, there is a conjunction of times in the list the narrator assembles: Bruegel’s painting from 1563 is shown in a modern reproduction from a magazine on a ruined wall—of a house erected on 1939—where *eme* is standing, looking towards the park, where Alguien is reading the daily newspaper. This scene is composed of details and each of these details, withdrawn from its context, wears the traces of its history. They are not just dismembered or displaced fragments composing a collage, but a collection of elements carrying their trajectories, and arranging a new image. The narrator—and

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as perpetual change relates to things as images of vestiges, ruins or traces of physical objects and animals, see Topletz’s analysis of *El reposo del fuego* (48-58).

perhaps eme—is both an observer and a participant in the process of disintegration; he observes the continual erosion of the material world and perceives the same process at work in his own temporally bound gaze. To this list, the inquisitorial voice objects: “*No, la mente de eme no tiene capacidad de asociación metafórica*” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 119). The objection is surprising, since the list in itself does not imply a metaphor although it is indeed, at the same time, setting the common ground for the metaphorical association that will follow. After this objection, the narrator describes Bruegel’s reproduction, and its relationship to the “Salónica” axis, for as in both the painting and outside it “prevalece la irrealidad.” Thus the metaphorical association arises from the narrator’s choice of objects to include in his list, trying indirectly to entrench eme in an identity. And he goes even further by saying the list is neither an accident nor an optical illusion, as the objecting voice argues, but rather a premeditated association (Pacheco, *Morirás* 119).

After the declaration that the list is in fact a premeditated association, we read an ekphrasis of Bruegel’s *The Tower of Babel* on top of which the narrator adds his own judgment, commenting on the reason the painting is depicted the way it is: “En la espiral de la torre babilónica, en el zigurat que anacrónicamente descansa sobre arcos romanos, en la incierta impresión—voluntaria sin duda para el artista—de que laboriosamente se construye una ruina para ser ruina y su propia locura condena tanta ambición a la derrota y el fracaso...” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 120). Several epochs are, once again, part of the painting and, what is even more, here we find not only divergent past constructions—the spiral Babylonian tower, the ziggurat, the Roman arches, etc.—but also future ruins and failures already envisioned and announced in the image’s imprint where “all destructions are concentrated in one” (Torres 75). If we know that Babel’s tower will eventually be destroyed by God as punishment for men’s ambition, this gives

the painting a sense of fatality, incompleteness, and places in its grand construction an already presupposed fall. The Biblical image was painted after the destruction had already befallen and when men were already speaking in unfamiliar tongues with each other. Nevertheless, the Biblical image located in a mythical realm—even if within time—functions as a warning. As the painting furthermore includes emblematic architectural constructions of different empires, it becomes a signal of the fall of empires themselves. In a sense, only a single drama is ever staged in the painting: the endlessly repeated play of dominations. That is why in Bruegel’s vision of Babel, the tower’s construction in process, already entails its future crumbling, the counter-image of its grandiosity. As well, the painting’s own size, which is inordinately large, is contrasted by the detailed miniature figures, beckoning men’s impotence as they face the grand structure in which they are but another cog in the complex machinery. The inquisitive voice replies by using the narrator’s hypothesis and taking it further, comparing Bruegel’s Babel scene to the Nazi Reichstag ruins and the Roman Coliseum vestiges, which he interprets to be an *“aparatoso advertencia sobre la imposibilidad del imperio, un túmulo sepulcral para todos los tiranos del mundo. Resultado inconcluso del esfuerzo de varias generaciones, empleó todas las experiencias anteriores, se hizo con el trabajo esclavo y se alzó para no perdurar”* (Pacheco, *Morirás* 120). What was edified with so much labor fell. What this gloss adds to the painting is the warning that an empire’s fulfillment and eternal glory is impossible and inevitably must be destroyed and, even more, the fact that this destruction had been signaled beforehand is what this comment affixes to the painting. One must not forget Bruegel’s work is often political, a testimony against Flanders’ Inquisition, the narrator replies. But also that the painting is hung on eme’s wall because it bears a resemblance to his life where—another metaphorical association—*“está paralizada una inminencia.”* In the painting, as in the novel’s initial scene, *“las seiscientas u*

ochocientas figuras pueden permanecer para siempre fijas e inertes en su inmovilidad—o pueden echarse a andar en cualquier momento” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 121). The immobility of the image is cut by the potentiality of movement, the final stroke where the painter’s hand movement once concluded. The painter attempts to capture the movement of things. However, he becomes aware of being himself caught up in a struggle against time. The future is paralyzed, the machinery could move at any given instant, but it refuses to do so: in the image, movement is frozen, therefore, it is only possible to conjecture about it. The image cannot be narrated in a movement of causality either, since it is a final stroke of movement itself, and not just an instant. The dialogue continues as follows:

Además en *La torre de Babel* no hay personajes: hay siluetas. Hay una multitud de siluetas bajo la ominosa placidez otoñal constelada de augurios del desastre. En esos planos descansan uno sobre otro sin oponerse ni contradecirse jamás, en esa muchedumbre sin edad ni rostro que parece habitar una aldea de la costa flamenca imposiblemente levantada junto a Babel—como si alguna de las dos no existiera—se desliza un comentario mudo pero evidente sobre la inutilidad de las fatigas y ambiciones humanas. (Pacheco, *Morirás* 121)

The image is set in a timeless present, without face or age—without identity—in an impossible place that condenses both the multidimensional Babel and a particular but generic Flemish village. Furthermore, as the paragraph says, from this image one can derive a conjecture, in this case, about human ambition and the inutility and necessary crumbling of empires. The affirmation of the narrative that there are no characters, only silhouettes, also takes us back to what I had called “generic figures” as impossible signifiers of an endless number of attributed conjectures. In short, this scene within the novel is confronting narrative as technique, time as

linear succession, and identity as a clear-cut—even if metaphorical—equivalence between elements. This last paragraph condenses the structure of the different axes and how *Morirás lejos* is built. There are superposed levels, neither opposing nor contradicting one another. Instead, the superposed levels work *through* these contradictions and overlaps.

Bruegel's painting as described in the novel is also how Pacheco conceives tradition. First of all, there is a distinction to be made between the concept of tradition and the concept of history. Tradition lends itself to orality, versions, possibilities and conjectures; whereas history wants to impose itself as the collection of *all* versions or a "superior version" whose ultimate purpose is the rationalization of events. Tradition in *Morirás lejos* is the way Pacheco relates to history, that is, as the re-telling of history through conjectures. For Pacheco tradition is a necessary inheritance whose network enables his own work to exist, but in this network his work can also retroactively modify how history is read. That is why the historically impossible image of Babel's tower erected in a Flemish village, for example, could very well be the fictional movement that allows us to tie together divergent times within a single image and read it in new ways, not only as the political critique of the Inquisition in Flanders but as a history that can be modified from the present. As such, for Pacheco the specificity of literature cannot be conceived either as chronicle or as an instrumental reflection of history, but as the ruins of history's rationality, the remnants of a common tradition in its different versions, told and retold. If in Babel's image we see the "*resultado inconcluso del esfuerzo de varias generaciones*" making use of all previous experiences (*Morirás* 120), in Pacheco's work there is an active use of this tradition. And this use implies a readjustment of how the past is read, opening up a path towards the future.

Just after Babel's tower scene, the "Totenbuch" axis concludes with the following line: "Años atrás, en Leipzig, una mujer leyó las líneas de su mano y mirando a sus ojos sentenció: —Morirás lejos" (Pacheco, *Morirás* 121). The title's inclusion signals beforehand—as in Babel's scene the "ominosa placidez otoñal constelada de augurios del desastre"—the already predetermined tragic destiny. In *Morirás lejos* past events are the inevitable repetition of several scenes, but what is foretold—the imminent destruction of Babel's tower—can also be read as the signal of an imminent future, always desired, that literature postulates.

*Morirás lejos* reads its own place in tradition as the possibility of modifying our reading of tradition itself, or at least the way in which we relate to tradition. "Tradition", says T.S. Eliot, "cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour" (14). To work within tradition, the artist must develop what Eliot defines as "historical sense," that is, a perception "not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence . . . a sense of the timeless and of the temporal together" (14). Accordingly, tradition is bound up with an historical sense: the conjunction, the "knot" of the present and the past and, even more, of the timeless and the temporal. With this in mind, tradition is not a line of succession and inheritance by means of a blood line, but rather the working through of a shifting order. That is why Eliot argues that if the field of literature is a whole, indivisible order, then, when a new work of art is produced, its inclusion in this totality retroactively modifies the order and brings about a readjustment of the previous relationships taking place in the whole field, so the past can be "altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (14). This is important because here we find the paradoxical link between the past as a complete whole, and a work of art's ability to modify it retroactively. Precisely because tradition is complete, each new work resettles its entire equilibrium. It is the same way in which Borges argues that Kafka retroactively creates his

precursors, since his work makes visible what was already there, a genealogy whose track could not yet be seen before his work.

Not surprisingly, José Emilio Pacheco conceives of tradition in a similar way. In fact, Pacheco translated T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* or, as he said, he gave us his "version" of Eliot's poem. Thus, too, he says in an interview: "yo no quiero seguir los pasos de Alfonso Reyes ni los de nadie, ni menos constituir una actitud ejemplar . . . No entiendo la tradición como estatismo o rigidez museográfica: la veo en su sentido de cambio constante, enriquecimiento, puntos de vista siempre variables, diversificación, en una palabra: continuidad" (*Los narradores* 278). Like Eliot, Pacheco assumes tradition as having to work through a shifting order, an election of previous works determining his conception of literature. The Mexican writer defines tradition's continuity over and against exemplarity. For him, exemplarity is a burden and does not allow the necessary disruption of the static ordering of literature's museum. Pacheco even wrote a poem entitled "Against Harold Bloom" in which he regrets to say "que repudio lo que él llamó 'la ansiedad de las influencias'" (*Tarde* 602). Instead of the fearful struggle a young poet must endure to find his original voice against the influence of his great precursors or even more so against what Marx thought of as "the tradition of all dead generations [that] weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living" (32), Pacheco assumes the past as enrichment of his poetic experience. In other words, tradition is the laborious writing and rewriting of the retroactive path a work creates with its intervention in the field.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Pacheco was very well known for revising his books in any new edition, sometimes completely rewriting his texts. As he said in the prologue to the first edition of *Tarde o temprano*: "Escribir es el cuento de nunca acabar y la tarea de Sísifo. Paul Valéry acertó: No hay obras acabadas, sólo obras abandonadas. Reescribir es negarse a capitular ante la avasalladora imperfección" (10). *Morirás lejos* was also significantly modified in its 1977 version. For a detailed analysis of the differences between the novel's 1967 and 1977 versions, see Hancock. Raúl Dorra argues that the later edition bets on a simplification of the statements and a politicization of the text (215).

This is the reason why Pacheco adopts what he calls “the wise Chinese resignation”:  
“comentar y reescribir incansablemente a nuestros ancestros, intentar variaciones y agregados a la ineludible repetición” (*Los narradores* 280). This begins to signal what Eliot does not account for when he formulates the knot that the timeless and temporal fabricate within tradition, that is, repetition. Tradition can indeed be modified and enriched, Pacheco says, but not without the *inevitable* repetition it entails. This takes us back to both the initial scene and the ekphrasis of *The Tower of Babel*: repetition seems to permeate the fatal recurrence of events in Pacheco’s work. In this juncture, tradition must be read as the simultaneity of the present and the past, the timeless and the temporal, but must also deal with the inevitable repetition. In *Morirás lejos* repetition is a mechanism to displace time and space from its usual “representation.” Texts such as Pacheco’s novel are repetitive; they confront the fantasy of filling gaps and avoid turning language’s constitutive non-correspondence—between gaze and object, or scene and sight—into a linear story. As such, for Pacheco tradition is the timeless happening within the temporal that confronts any pre-determined identity and disrupts the linear temporal enchainment. What is repeated is not some content or a story, but rather the gap, the displacement itself.

The spatial and temporal displacements in *Morirás lejos* suggest how Pacheco reads the relationship of time and identity as conceived from a displaced site. Those displaced times appear to be lying one level on top of the other without ever resisting or contradicting one another (*Morirás* 121), just as the different levels in Bruegel’s painting. *Morirás lejos* is an uncommon novel in its context precisely because it relies on displacing time from a context, a tradition. In its context, Mexico at the end of the decade of the sixties, Pacheco’s novel goes

beyond the predetermined schemes of its time even if it could be read both as a social critique<sup>64</sup> and as a rearrangement of the novelistic and linguistic forms.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, the text is neither a mere technical experiment nor a “total” novel displaying a global vision of a historical phenomenon, nor finally a text digging into the origin of Mexican culture.<sup>66</sup> The structure of *Morirás lejos* openly confronts all of these ideas. Far from partaking in what a popular Latin American author in the 60’s would write, *Morirás lejos* distances itself from these trends.<sup>67</sup> Being concerned with “foreign” affairs—not even actual but past—the text is able to subtract itself from the dominant traditions in order to think its place as the displaced site of an inquiry. This means the novel demands a certain distance with respect to the tradition under which it was conceived, as well as a confrontation with the use and appropriation of “other” traditions or contexts. In this sense, it is important to ask if the text returns and reads its context once more, and how. This is precisely what readers within the novel, or perhaps the same objecting voice we encountered in Babel’s scene, ask and demand from the writer:

–Esto ya no interesa –Lo hemos leído un millón de veces –Ya ni quién se acuerde de la segunda guerra mundial –Ahora hay problemas mucho más importantes –Está muy visto –Está muy dicho. –Usted lo único que hizo fue resumir unos cuantos libros –Su enfoque no es nada objetivo . . . –Si existen tantos conflictos no resueltos en México

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<sup>64</sup> Margo Glantz’s analysis argues that the text is about a literature of the “incision” where the endless hypotheses lead to an indefinite and open allegory of the technified society (“*Morirás*” 194).

<sup>65</sup> For a reading of the novel that focuses on this aspect see Meléndez.

<sup>66</sup> Around 1967, when *Morirás lejos* was published, the Latin American “Boom” narrative was the main trend. In Mexico the second half of the 60’s decade was shaped by the “literatura de la Onda” and a more experimental vein that questioned narrative forms under the name “escritura” (Glantz, *Onda* 21 and 31). Clark D’ Lugo argues that *Morirás lejos* can be read under the rubric of “escritura,” the experimental writers’ group (123-5 and 148-62).

<sup>67</sup> Carlos Fuentes briefly suggests that the novel relies on “distancing” as narrative technique to link together the diachronic and the synchronic temporal cuts: “El distanciamiento impersonal, sincrónico . . . y la impersonalidad de una lengua que, aún cuando relata hechos históricos, les da rango de estructura impermeable a las modalidades rebeldes de la actualidad . . . revierte las estructuras al mundo del cambio” (34).

no podemos dedicar espacio a lo que sucedió en Europa hace ya muchos años . . . –  
Por qué no escribe sobre los indios de México. (Pacheco, *Morirás* 65)

These metaliterary complaints respond to a particular vision of literature: it must be *useful* for something—politically, historically, as entertainment, or as a sociological account, among other things. Instead of tamely subduing literature to these objections, as do most of its coetaneous novels, *Morirás lejos* denies the idea that literature has a utilitarian purpose. The narrator even goes so far as to say the novel is “inepta desde un punto de vista testimonial y literariamente inválida porque no hay personajes y los que pudiera haber son juzgados por una voz fuera de cuadro, no viven ante nosotros, no son reales” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 105). Instead of writing a social critique about the Mexican indigenous population or about the “far more important problems” of national everyday life, the novel reads its ineptness as testimony or veracious representation as the way in which literature works—particularly in this non-narrative form.<sup>68</sup> What is told in *Morirás lejos* has already been said, and it might very well be a biased summary of a few books. But by displacing the use of these few books and fictionalizing the stories, as well as including conjectures upon literature’s place in its context and time, the novel unsettles the idea of representation understood as an imaginary correspondence between reality and a work of art. It never was about a mirror reflecting reality—not even in a reverse image. What otherwise worked at the level of the imaginary—understood as identification, the realm of surface, deceptive appearances—or even at the level of the symbolic structuring of language, now turns to displace these historically constructed representations, through the repetition of timeless instances, as grounded in symptomatic historical moments.

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<sup>68</sup> *Morirás lejos*, however, has been frequently read as “testimonio.” For this readings see Peña and Clark.

Conjecture d. Heritage is not a possession one can acquire. It is the unsteady assemblage of flaws, fissures and heterogeneous layers that threaten the inheritor from within or from underneath (Foucault, “Nietzsche” 374). The inheritor must actively and continuously deal with the unstable nature of the always defying heritage. It is perhaps a heritage made up of holes, silences, omissions, ruined images. Holes are where order breaks down.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, there is still a relational grid structuring these cracks. Literature is the art of weaving together in a net these inherited holes and therein lies its specificity. In the holes, there is no time and no identity. Identity as the continuous sameness of an entity, the combination of particles throughout time, is impossible if there is no succession, no narrative. Here, continuity is only possible if one inherits the impossibility of identity, timeless holes. Literature encounters its most productive drive in its refusal of identity, its refusal to move, to “make sense” of what it represents. Achilles can never catch up with the turtle’s slow but steady movement; literature is not a weapon to fight a war, but rather the refusal to make sense outside of itself, to be something other than what it is. Only in its refusal to make sense, to conclude, to end, does language attain its literary density.

### **Refusing to make sense**

“Es toda nuestra herencia una red de agujeros” (*Tarde* 68), is Pacheco’s version of a line from a Nahuatl poem collected in *Cantares mexicanos*,<sup>70</sup> which he rewrote in the aftermath of Tlatelolco’s massacre in Mexico, at the end of 1968. Pacheco reduces two historical contexts, separated by more than a thousand years, to an equally suitable line for both ill-fated moments

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<sup>69</sup> For an interesting argument on the difference between “hole” and “lack” as understood in psychoanalysis, see Miller qtd. in Žižek, *Less* 496.

<sup>70</sup> The line is from *La visión de los vencidos*, edited by León-Portilla and Garibay and it reads as follows: “Dardos rotos, red hecha de agujeros, ¿fue todo un sueño?... La significación de esto puede parecer nueva, pero si se presta atención a las palabras, podrá percibirse en ellas la antigua sabiduría de los abuelos nahuas” (190).

where “[m]eaning is somehow suspended between two dates” (Friis 95). However, the poem’s line is more than mere paraphrasing; it takes us to the heart of how Pacheco understands tradition and identity *in time* as devised in literature. *Morirás lejos*, as the poem, is not about the “indigenous contributions” to Mexican national identity, but rather about the suspension of meaning in a historically a-temporal gesture: our entire heritage is but a net full of holes.<sup>71</sup>

As we have seen, for Pacheco tradition is how a work reorders the past according to an adapted version from the present, derived from a punctual gaze. Beyond this rebalancing act, literature continues a tradition as constituted by repeated confrontations: the timeless within the temporal confronting identity. In this juncture in particular, the objecting voice we encountered before in *Morirás lejos* demands an ending. For the voice, it is crucial for the repeated history of confrontations to come to an end. This ending, one way or another, would give meaning and ground the repetitive destructive instances, refused by the text’s non-narrative composition. That is the reason why announcements of an imminent downfall are everywhere in the text and become more urgent after the second half of the novel: “Es necesario continuar. El momento se acerca” (83); “Y ahora continúe, es necesario terminar” (122); “Puede guardarse las conclusiones. No filosofe. Continúe. Díganos de una vez por todas quién es eme” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 147) This demand to continue and conclude, to determine and pinpoint an identity—even if retroactively—is what *Morirás lejos* refuses. In the same way, the novel refuses to circumscribe tradition as an end-driven teleological network: there is no beginning, only impure recommencements and there is no ending, only the imminence of an ending—stubbornly demanding to be set as a horizon of sense—yet to come, but that never comes. This negation

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<sup>71</sup> Sandra Messinger suggests that the famous poem from 1968 *is* about the valuable indigenous contributions to Mexican national identity (169). However, this does not acknowledge Pacheco’s *use* of tradition, but only the “original” source of the verse.

disturbs the balance of change, throwing it out of joint: time is “stuck” and the text refuses to come to an end. *Morirás lejos* refuses movement and offers in its stead images and conjectures.

In the novel’s appendix there is a section entitled “otros de los posibles desenlaces.” It comprises six potential “endings” for the initial scene, none of which, of course, leads to closure. The first ending, one of the few passages in the novel narrated in first person, conjectures the following:

Porque al desaparecer el olor a vinagre pierdo la referencia, extravió mi identidad, ignoro quién soy entre todos los personajes que he representado bajo el chopo ahíto de inscripciones y ante la persiana entreabierta. Soy un obrero sin trabajo, un delincuente sexual, un padre que ha perdido a su hijo, el amante de una mujer que cruzará el parque, un nostálgico que viene a cerciorarse de que estamos por última vez en todas partes y nadie vuelve a ningún lado jamás, un detective, un aspirante a escritor, una víctima a punto de consumir la venganza.

O no soy nadie.

Tal vez no hay nadie en la banca del parque.

O quizá hay seis millones de fantasma sin rostro. (153)

Identity, as narrative, demands continuity. Identity’s condition of possibility is the existence of an immutable being—a self—throughout time. Identity is essentially narrative, it needs to be plotted and it “depends on a psychobiography in narrative form” (Brooks, *Enigmas* 16). When reference frames upon which time can be measured disappear, as in *Morirás lejos*, and all we have is an image frozen in time, identity is lost and no knowledge of the self is possible,

reflexivity is lost. As the quote states, among the multiple conjectures, the generic form is unable to represent a single role; it encompasses, in the described instant, *all* that has been conjectured about him. If there is something certain in the quote, it seems to be the realization that identity, self-reflection, the telling of a story by a constant entity, will always run up against an unsolvable problem: if there is no time, identity is impossible. Without succession, there is no possible identity; in this moment—conjunction of all other moments—there is no identity or time: “estamos por última vez en todas partes y nadie vuelve a ningún lado jamás” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 153). If narrative goes nowhere—never becomes a complete story—there is no definitive enchainment of “selves” and no identity can be inferred. Where narrative units cease to be functional, a road (re)commences, one up to the task of bearing repetition and continuity in a single instant, away from representation.

By the last pages of the novel, language seems to be visibly dislocated, lingering on a more poetical present tense. Words follow one another, overlapping, without punctuation or breathing space. The text refuses to end and re-imagines the initial scene for the *n*th time:

Última luz crepuscular y todo se desgarrar y todo está en el fuego las imágenes no  
ajustan las correspondencias se desvanecen y eme sólo advierte elementos  
inconexos de un pro y contra sin sentido de una indescifrable composición de  
lugar en que por un lado hay un parque pinos chopo banca pozo en forma de torre  
y por otro un hombre con periódico en las manos persianas entreabiertas casa  
1939 a lo lejos montañas tenebrosas a lo lejos (Pacheco, *Morirás* 142)

What insists and persists in *Morirás lejos* are these petrified images, repeating one another. Past events we imagine as unique and individual due to their exact positioning in time and space, here

become reiterative: “constelaciones, Astros muertos, luz petrificada de una antigua catástrofe que en este instante ocurre hace mil años” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 85). The twilight is about to surrender itself to the night, and language is eroded. Fire’s contradictory movement, its trampling of time and the destruction it entails, is also a renovation.<sup>72</sup> And yet, something persists, on the brink of past, present and future disasters, in the inevitable repetition. “A lo lejos,” far away, something lingers on, refuses to break, to end. Images, as language, do not correspond to reality and the traced metaphorical associations crumble. The composition becomes once again, or perhaps it always was, an unfathomable image where history’s repetition encounters the instant of the gaze. One more time, the gesture refusing to make sense permeates the entire poetical disjointed language.

“¿[C]on qué objeto trazar esta escritura llena de recovecos y digresiones en vez de ir directamente al asunto: comienzo y fin de una historia ya mil veces narrada?” (105), asks the narrator in *Morirás lejos*. Precisely, literature circles around “holes”—our entire heritage that is but a net full of holes—where any pre-established order breaks down. *Morirás lejos* destroys the order of beginnings and endings by refusing to move, refusing to begin and end a story as has been told countless times. The novel’s ins and outs, its digressions, circle around the “holes,” weaving the net that holds them together. “El arte,” Borges says, “entreteje naderías” (143). And perhaps these *naderías* woven together constitute literature’s specificity. Neither history, or sociology, nor politics, nor philosophy can weave holes in their structure; the mere existence of holes in their discourses would break down their steady theoretical formations. Only here, in the active gesture refusing to “make sense”, texts such as Pacheco’s force literature to become, in and of itself, productive once again.

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<sup>72</sup> For a discussion on “fire” in Pacheco’s poetry see Oviedo 27.

Aesthetically the avant-garde projects at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were driven by the need to proclaim a clean slate with respect to tradition and the later artistic developments of the century decreed the end of grand narratives and teleological accounts. Between both—the self-proclaimed beginning as rupture from tradition and the end as the “postmodern” fragmentation of totalities—*Morirás lejos* binds together both contradictory positions.<sup>73</sup> Pacheco’s novel affirms, with the avant-garde projects, the need to destroy in literature any kind of pre-determined identity as enforced by tradition and the firmly entrenched institutions upon which art depends. It is necessary to repeat that in the novel there is no plot, no characters, and no narrative time; instead, there are images, generic figures, and conjectures about timeless instants, disjointed from continuity. And at the same time, Pacheco’s text takes into account the continuity of tradition, since what he is portraying are historical images, even if fictionalized. For Pacheco, there is a heritage, even if what we inherit are silences, holes or *naderías*, instead of an always-already constituted complete identity. *Morirás lejos*, in this sense, shows that any true measurement of time within tradition implies a presentation of the a-temporal, the imagining of the conjunction of the instant and eternity. As such, Pacheco’s work runs counter to its time, constructing its own paradoxical time conjunction.

What other writers of the twentieth century in Latin America take for granted, Pacheco questions: the use of language and time specific to literature. His reflection upon language goes back to how holes, or silences, only exist through the manipulation of language, beyond the portraying or framing of a story. The way in which images and conjectures displace narrative and time’s causal movement denies identity, both as “self” and as cultural account of historically pre-determined uses of discourse. In *Morirás lejos*, literature encounters its specificity and rejects

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<sup>73</sup> This is also relevant if we consider that José Emilio Pacheco is frequently classified under the banner of the “Generación medio siglo.”

any pre-existing sense imposed by history or other discourses. This kind of literature traverses and continues a timeless tradition, a literary imagination not attached to the current episteme, a drive's compulsion to begin again and to move onward. Literature anticipates, changes, projects alternative possibilities to those already in place. And *Morirás lejos* brings literature back, once more, into the fictional, where no meaning lies behind, there is no grand truth—more relevant, more important—waiting behind the curtain for us to unveil, feeding our desire.<sup>74</sup> Instead, there is only a minimal displacement. Language refuses to make sense of “wholes” and yet departs from holes, weaving them together in a relational net. Literary texts, such as Pacheco's, allow us to read the continuity of tradition in its stalling, divergent images. In its refusal to make sense, literature shapes our gaze as it displaces it. This minimal but necessary operation is how we can shape our time through language and fiction or, even more, how language and fiction shape our time. The same man from yesterday is on the same park bench, reading the same section of the same newspaper when, with his ring and middle fingers, a man opens the blinds.

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<sup>74</sup> Against any kind of reading based on intertextuality, and its detectivesque desire to “uncover” an origin or source, *Morirás lejos* says in one of its conjectures: “Todo esto, todo esto es un ejercicio tan lleno de referencias a otros libros que seguir su desarrollo es tiempo perdido” (Pacheco, *Morirás* 44). There are, however, detailed accounts of the novel's intertextual references (Jiménez 173-299; Glantz, “Morirás” 183).

## 5. SALVADOR ELIZONDO

As one with a long experience of the difficulties of logic and of the deceptiveness of theories which seem irrefutable, I find myself unable to be sure of the rightness of a theory, merely on the ground that I cannot see any point on which it is wrong. But to have constructed a theory of logic which is not at any point obviously wrong is to have achieved a work of extraordinary difficulty and importance.

—Bertrand Russel on Wittgenstein

The force of paradoxes is that they are not contradictory; they rather allow us to be present at the genesis of the contradiction.

—Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*

For centuries, mathematicians, logicians, and philosophers were unable to solve Zeno's paradoxes—Achilles never reaching the tortoise; the motionless flying arrow; moving rows of the stadium; the soundless grain of millet. Philosophers after Plato accused Zeno of being an ingenious con-artist—citing his arguments as rather strategic sophisms. Meanwhile, mathematicians, physicians and logicians, have sustained throughout the centuries that these paradoxes merit further investigation, particularly his conceptualization of infinity. Bertrand Russell claimed, as late as the twentieth century, that, “Zeno's arguments, in some form, have afforded grounds for almost all theories of space and time and infinity which have been constructed from his time to our own” (Salmon 5). The double bind of Zeno's paradoxes lies in, that, although they may appear as mere illusory artifices, for many, the questions posed by these paradoxes underscore the very foundations of modern mathematics.

I propose that the enigmatic, contemporary Mexican writer Salvador Elizondo is comparable to Zeno as a kindred “persuasive sophist.”<sup>75</sup> This tendency manifests itself though the literary experiments Elizondo devises at the level of language, though often absurd linguistic games. While Zeno’s work has been scrutinized in the fields of mathematics as a conceptually seminal work, in a similar thread, Elizondo’s work, I suggest, can be imagined as the basis upon which literary theory and a number of axiomatic propositions can be understood.

Elizondo’s short experimental writings present unsolvable paradoxes where two main elements converge and diverge: images and time. Elizondo’s unsolvable paradoxes, as those of Zeno, deal with the impossible encounter or articulation of images and different logics of the temporal. Let me say here that my use of Zeno to present Elizondo is a conceptual move and in no way means that the Mexican writer is following the Greek sophist or his paradoxes in his work. Regarding time, the past, the present, and the future function as a teleological sequence without ever reaching a point in which these three instances come together—they just become one because they are, in fact, the same and indistinguishable, which is also how an image works as a condensation. In Elizondo’s paradoxes, as we will see, a character named Nevermore is an iteration of Achilles, and its antagonist, mister Rightnow, of the turtle. An ungraspable event suspended in an infinite present is like the motionless flying arrow. And the conjecture of a time machine constructed on a bicycle is similar to Zeno’s moving rows of the stadium.

Elizondo’s method might very well be deemed an ancient deconstructive or inoperative sophistic technique, but let us propose instead that the possibility of the encounters between

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<sup>75</sup> The term “sophist” and “sophistics” are used throughout this chapter in the sense of how Barbara Cassin defines them. Sophist as “the negative alter ego of the philosopher . . . in pursuit of . . . opinion, seeming coherence, persuasion, and victory in the oratorical joust” (29-30). And sophistics as “a discourse that is primarily and above all performative” (2), “an artificial creation, a by-product of philosophy . . . an effect . . . a fiction of philosophy, reverses the direction of things and shocks philosophy, never ceasing to have an effect on it” (31).

images and time is what Elizondo narrates, asserts and affirms in hypothetical scenes. On the one hand, Elizondo's prose is the sum of grains of millet whose function is to signal the ineffectiveness of language to articulate images in a temporal logic; therefore, nothing is false in principle, but rather nonsensical. On the other hand, however, his sophisms as motionless flying arrows constitute a certain kind of *order* ruling literary constructions and axiomatic truths—even if their ground and principles are indemonstrable, there *is* a theoretical system of conjectures and propositions. And through these propositions we can formulate not only Elizondo's peculiar intervention in the field of Latin American literature, but also a broader intervention in literary theory. Through Elizondo's intervention, I consider literary theory as an operation capable of traversing series of dichotomies usually thought of as mutually exclusive: linguistic games and systems of thought; literature and theory; structure and anecdotes, among others. The following chapter follows my conjectures, aiming to traverse these paradoxes with the purpose of articulating in affirmative verbs the movement of what I have been calling transliterature.

### **Parallels and Paradoxes**

It is easy to get lost within Salvador Elizondo's paradoxes. To be elucidated and grasped, his repetitive self-contradictory statements would require thousands of refutations and critical analyses, probably without ever reaching any kind of solution. Elizondo's entire work can be characterized as a labyrinth without an exit. At times, his literature seems to provide us with the illusion that there is a thread to escape the maze-like construction of his prose, but over and over again we hit the same wall. Other times, Elizondo presents us with a mystery that must be solved and, as readers, we become detectives within a plot. Even though all the necessary clues are

provided in the text and we eventually discover who the murderer is, it makes no difference or sense at all, neither for the plot nor for the disoriented reader. Elizondo's prose is like navigating a house of mirrors, reflections on reflections ad infinitum are yet another trick in the writer's arsenal. Mirrors, says Elizondo, are the ultimate human invention, because they are also the invention of metaphysics. In a mirror, we (and our image) are lost forever in the impossibility to define ourselves either as real or as solipsistic beings and this whim drives us to madness: every work of art is the origin of a delirium and if it is not, it has failed (Elizondo, *Cuaderno 76*).

Another instance of delirium is the dream. The dream and the materials it displaces and condenses is an additional device of deception used by Elizondo to mislead us. All of a sudden, we find ourselves in the realm of uncertainty and reality is displaced, appearing slightly out of focus. We wonder if we are the dreamer, the dreamed or the dream itself but, either way, if there is no "outside," we are always already in a realm whose rules make it impossible for us to escape. The theater is yet another stage for Elizondo's sophistry. In theatrical performances, the masking, veiling, and unveiling give way to a perpetual estrangement effect—we *know* that the theatrical representation is fiction, and yet, we are willing to be part of the spectacle of the absurd—or the absurd spectacle. There would seem to be a formula that could potentially solve all of these paradoxes and that could break away from these feeble sceneries. But we are, however, incapable of finding the solution... or the answer is forever lost. This chapter will work precisely with conjectures derived from these lost and impossible formulas so as to dislodge the temporal and imaginary logics of these kinds of narrative paradoxes—dreams, theater, mirrors, labyrinths.

The same kind of contradictions are at play in the relationship between the author, the narrator, the characters, and the reader. As a sophist, Salvador Elizondo frames and reframes his

own position in relation to his various language games. In relation to his texts, the position Elizondo occupies is sometimes that of the author, and others a great variety of figures of authority, for example, a con-artist, a thaumaturge, a puppeteer, a mastermind, an analyst, the ultimate plotter, a stage director, a wizard, a clairvoyant or, in the last instance, a god. Elizondo, however, does not think of himself as an author or creator outside of the text, pulling the strings of textual devices as if from above. Instead, the author often cites that he himself is part of the text he is creating, he is both inside and outside of the writing structure. His authority guarantees that the text is true and certifiable and his existence is the very proof of authenticity of what he is writing. By including himself in the texts, Elizondo, as an author, takes the first step in constructing an immanent prose. This means, again, that he is the inner warrantor of the text's consistency because he is also contained in the inner weave of his writing. Elizondo's discourse, in this sense, is self-sufficient and self-reliant; for the artist, there can be no outside. There are, in Elizondo's case, only reduplicated images, abstract metafiction. "¿No es la obra misma el resultado de la actividad crítica que el escritor realiza al crearla? ¿Es la obra otra cosa que lo que somos nosotros?" (Elizondo, *Teoría* 194). These are some of the possible questions that result from the idea of a self-sufficient discourse, an immanent or "pure" literary discourse. The author is no different from his discourse in the sense that he is contained within the unescapable paradoxes devised as his stage and creations. Therein lies, for example, the paradox that the very famous text, "El grafógrafo," poses: "Escribo. Escribo que escribe. Mentalmente me veo escribir que escribo y también puedo verme ver que escribo" (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 9). Here, Elizondo is part of the text—"I write. I write that he writes"—and it would seem that it becomes an endless meta (or intra) writing. However, the sentences are tautological and their solipsism establishes the immanence of the text.<sup>76</sup> Contradictory as it may seem, the paradoxes Elizondo

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<sup>76</sup> There are many instances where Elizondo deals with the same notions, for example in "La autocrítica literaria" he

formulates function through immanence, even though they seem to be hyper-reflexive metafictional texts. Elizondo constructs a somewhat “pure” idea of a literature that would be self-sufficient with no other guarantee than its very enunciation. That is why he claims to want to combine the matheme and the poem in one synthetic figure when he says “[q]uisiera poder hacer poesía con números y con ecuaciones. En el fondo las ecuaciones no son otra cosa que poesía abstracta—pura—hermética—incontaminada” (Elizondo, *Diarios* 51). In a way, the author authorizes himself as the ultimate plotter, rendering his discourse as an internally consistent set of sentences where even his own “extimate”—the exterior present in the interior, the most intimate, which is the exterior—place is counted. And so the literary discourse is hermetic, non-contaminated by philosophy or theory because it already is its own philosophy.

There are at least two opposite pair of *effects* these paradoxes authored by Elizondo can have in the reader. The first one, pleasure and intrigue, and the second one, anxiety and frustration. In the first case, the reader might be captivated by the forms and manners through which the paradoxes are told, the amusing ways the author finds to assemble them as pretense, imitation, semblance. The reader finds pleasure in how the texts unfold so as to produce, at the same time, an “effect”—which is also an affective response—of seduction and deception. At the point in which a representation appears as something other than what it had previously seemed, there is an effect of either charm or suspense. Take, for example, one of the paradoxes we will discuss, where a “past” character is waiting for his “future” nemesis. At the end of the scene, in the moment in which the past meets the future in the “present” of the representation, his rival turns out to be himself. The reader might be intrigued by the actor waiting for his rival and is

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says: “En esa confusión o conjugación de personalidades la barrera que separa lo subjetivo de lo objetivo cae por tierra, y tal vez también caería por tierra esa barrera que separa al significado del significante, con lo que se precisaría, si no el método, sí, cuando menos, la posibilidad de un lenguaje que estuviera al mismo nivel que el de las fuentes de donde nace sólo como forma” (Elizondo, *Teoría* 202-3).

suddenly surprised by an ending that collapses both figures into one, two tenses—the past and the future—into one, the ungraspable “right now.” The reader may also become a critic, striving to formulate theories that would reveal the “true” meaning of the mysterious paradoxes. This “critic,” attempts then to illuminate the cryptic textual codes, interpreting them in one of the thousand ways in which they can be read. So, the critic thinks of himself as the true hero-detective who finally solves the unsolvable crime in the text, or perhaps, even the crime of the text. We could say that this is the temptation of the mathematician struggling to find the precise formula, or even a “theory of everything.” As Elizondo says, perhaps thinking about his own paradoxes, some texts produce “una sensación o un efecto mental de que subyace a eso que la crítica califica de Gran Arte una idea o un proyecto matemático, es decir, puramente mental, una emoción intelectual en fin” (*Estanquillo* 27). Criticism unveils the procedures of the Great Art and its secret mathematical project. It is the “baring of the device,” an un-concealment which has as its effect an intellectual pleasure or “efecto mental.” In *Teoría del infierno*, Elizondo also mentions that it is as if criticism were more determined by desire than by an analytical endeavor (193).

The second pair of possible effects is anxiety and frustration. When faced with the endless forms and metamorphoses that the same underlying paradoxes suffer throughout Elizondo’s books, the reader is left with nothing but frustration, as she is unable to satisfactorily solve the mystery. It is a dead end or someone is dead in the end. There is, however, one distinction to be made: the reader is frustrated, not with the closed structure of the unsolvable paradox, but, rather, with the lack of structure or ways to get a hold of the paradox. This lack of structure contaminates the very foundation of the reader’s previous assumptions about a symbolic “reality” that is pure, hermetic and consistent. Therefore, the paradox becomes

overwhelming. While everything makes complete sense within the logic of the paradox and its language, the problem arises when we remember we are within a paradox that is supposedly non-sense according to philosophers and men of reason. Here, then, all sense is null and exposed as a mere contingent construction. There is an over-realization of the paradoxical mechanism, and it is precisely at this point where anxiety escalates. The reader is painfully aware of the fact that the paradox is a game. Yet, at the mere recognition of such an artifact or narrative move—one that appears to defy order and logic yet somehow the reader still follows, unsettles his unshakeable reality. See, for example, the following recognition of this reversal that goes as far as posing a sophism as an ontological claim:

Me planto ante este espejo, consciente de mi disolución. A lo largo de los siglos me he convertido en un bufón idiota. He conseguido apresar la justa medida de lo que soy. . . y de lo que tú eres, hipócrita lector, hermano mío. Es entonces cuando pienso que es preciso admitir que existimos en un mundo en el que la realidad encubre una mentira...Ése es un mundo en el que el ser es una forma ficticia (o falaz) del no-ser. (Elizondo, *Cuaderno 77*)

While these two pair of effects—pleasure and intrigue, and anxiety and frustration—appear to oppose one another, they are in fact extremely close, divided by a thin line. This thin line or, rather, gap, is what I propose is the third possible effect: laughter. In this case, laughter is the “empty” point of a double articulation of the above mentioned dichotomies: first, of the effects of pleasure and anxiety; and second, of sophisms and systematic set of axioms. Laughter, however, should not be as a dismissive move to declare that all pleasurable or frustrating interpretations lead to madness or delirium. The reader does not laugh at the paradoxes, thereby dismissing and decrying that they are inoperative, but, rather, at their uncanny resemblance to

reality. Elizondo's paradoxes—elicit laughter as they bring to the fore the structure of our symbolic dimension constructed through speech is paradoxical, nonlinear, and illogic. The moment when readers erupt in laughter, the impasse, is when the fundamental non-sense of all senses and of sense is questioned. This means that, in as much as sense is based on a symbolic dimension of language, it is possible, at any moment, to bring into question *all* sense. We laugh at the “miraculous” manifestation of the surplus of sense produced by the very failure of non-sense—when something materializes out of nothing but words or sophisms. Elizondo's paradoxes manifest in their construction the very non-sense through which the symbolic world is structured by means of language and, often times, by mere sophistry. Our insecurities and pleasures manifest themselves in the impasse of these paradoxes, and thus the very foundation of our certainties is shaken. In short, while the effect of finding the nonsensical in sense and sense in the nonsensical might result in either anxiety or pleasure, the clash of these two effects produces a third one, namely, laughter. Laughter is the impasse in which non-sense makes perfect sense and, vice-versa, sense is non-sense.

Let us take a look at the next double articulation: Elizondo's sophisms and the construction of axioms, “paradoxically” built upon these linguistic games. As explained before, the sum of grains of millet Elizondo puts forward in the short works of *El grafógrafo*, signal how language is unable to articulate images in a temporal logic. These “grains,” I argue, are also the basis upon which a literary theory can be imagined and built. If laughter is understood in the abovementioned structural sense—as the impasse of the structure of sense and non-sense or of the symbolic and the real—then, beyond pleasure and anxiety, Elizondo's paradoxes can also be read in terms of their formal impasse. In order to do this, it is crucial to state the obvious which is that all of the paradoxes in his work are located within the realm of representation. Consider *El*

*grafógrafo* and *Cuaderno de escritura*—the two books I will analyze in this chapter—the paradoxes are laid out in highly recognizable literary and philosophical forms. These forms function as a vehicle for the abstract notions Elizondo is refuting, for example, the infinite within time, the nature of an image, or language and its self-referential movement, to name but a few. Some of the recognizable literary and/or philosophical forms in the abovementioned books are: the staging of a dramatic monologue, a series of conjectures in numerals, a *tractatus*, an essay for a magazine, aphorisms, short stories, dialogues, a log of descriptive scientific observations, etc. The fact that both the verbal artifices and the axioms are within the realm of representation already points to a first possible articulation of these two instances of linguistic games and their theoretical elaboration. Since they are both representations and they are located within the discourse of literature, they share a common frame. As we will see, this component is one of the main features of sophisms in their initial Greek form that Elizondo’s narrative will elaborate and question.

“Una duda te turba,” Elizondo sneakily mentions in *Farabeuf*, and he continues: “Has caído en la trampa que te tendió el taumaturgo. Se ha formado en tu mente la imagen” (143). It is all a trap. The paradoxical art of the paradox leads nowhere. And yet, why are Elizondo’s paradoxes relevant for re-imagining how narrative can also be defined by its lack of causality and its dislocation of identity in the atemporal, its “nunca”? The first trap is to stay *within* the paradoxes in an endless rebuttal of causality and of how images are arranged in time or outside of time. And the second trap is to stay *outside* of the paradoxes on a sort of metaphysical level where the texts might seem to be merely a comment upon a comment of the text and then nothing is certain except, perhaps, the bottomless structure of the *mise en abyme*. Both of these readings lead to a dead end. It is necessary, then, to avoid falling into the twin traps of

deactivating Elizondo's project as either "pure" artifices or as theoretical meta-artifacts. He lures us with the marvelous functioning of his short prose, but one must never lose sight of the fact that narrative is but a system at fault.

Therefore, my reading of the pieces composed by Elizondo will pave the way for a reading of literary paradoxes in terms of alternative conceptual knots so as to traverse some of the binary logics of narrative—among others, the origin and teleology, the historical and the event, the synchronic and the diachronic, necessity and contingency, etc. Just as Zeno's paradoxes are unsolvable in their own terms, Salvador Elizondo's paradoxes cannot be "solved" in the same terms of their contradictory nature. But they can and must be situated in terms of a double articulation of structure and history, and also in the language of criticism functioning as leverage to crack open their impasses, making them productive. These critical terms, furthermore, are not alien terms to be used instrumentally to read literature, but rather conceptual movements derived from Elizondo's own language. As the second epigraph to this chapter suggests, the most productive force of a paradox resides in conceptualizing the way in which they are not necessarily contradictory but are rather an archeological movement allowing us to "be present at the genesis of the contradiction" (Deleuze, *The Logic* 74). This is the genesis of contradictions capable of conjecturing a literary theory, traversing unsolvable paradoxes.

In short, the necessary critical move here lies in neither unraveling the nature of the author's prose nor his individual conception of time *within* or *outside* of his texts. Quite to the contrary, my analysis will symptomatically pick up on three verbs—*desoriginar*, *acontecer* and *conjeturar*—that need to be articulated with one another, at the point where they *do* function and are not only paradoxically absent and present, or present in their absence. While in Elizondo's case it is easy to read contradictions as meta-reflections, I intend to read him against the grain.

Instead I am creating a framework that ties together the abovementioned verbs and this will not only allow me to read his work in affirmative terms—as a necessary act and not as a contingent act—but also as a framework to reformulate the logic of certain categories of modern narrative. Neither distancing via pleasure and anxiety nor distancing on the meta-level of reflection. In both cases, criticism falls into the realm of either an ideological identification or of distancing. It is through laughter that I believe it becomes possible to articulate the short circuit that Elizondo’s literature insists on revealing time after time. If the pleasure and anxiety of criticism is usually only conceivable by distancing criticism from the object of analysis, then my intent is to create new critical images—or verbs, in this case—to follow the opposite route. What I am proposing is a transversal maneuver where literary criticism would cease being a parasitic discourse focusing on destroying, deconstructing or theorizing literature from the philosophical realm. Rather, this transversal exercise is a kind of criticism capable of wielding a discourse in terms of a literary affirmation and positivity.

### **Three verbs, three logics**

First, from within the texts, it is of the essence to understand their complexity—without being part of their game—and then trying to identify at which point these experimental pieces *do* function and operate in affirmative terms. For this purpose, I propose three logics articulated in three verbs: “desoriginar,” “acontecer,” and “conjeturar.” It is, first of all, important to note that these are neither nouns nor adjectives, but verbs—verbs traversing and cutting through many layers of narrative categories such as character, plot, and temporal causality. The verbs do not form stable categories or concepts but rather actions and movements. So, through these verbs, it

is possible to conceive of different categories, nouns, and adjectives to think narrative more critically, in a new light. In many ways, these verbs—“desoriginar,” “acontecer,” and “conjeturar”—form the backbone of what I have defined as “transliterature” in my project. That is to say, a triple subtraction from the above mentioned categories of modern narrative. First, the notion of character which must be *de-originated* from its imaginary identity and used instead in terms of a subject constructed *through* writing. Second, the *ocurrence* or *happening*, which interrupts the narrative dynamic of the plot, and works through postponing, delaying, and circling around the unattainable novel. Thus, I propose the “empty” or “first good novel” as objects or realms—“estancias,” Macedonio would specify—to which it is not possible to arrive, since they are frozen in a museum of eternity. And, third, *conjecturing* as an atemporal instance, located within the historical, which re-arranges, voids or reframes tradition and identity by forcing them to be simultaneously histories and lack of history.

In this chapter I will focus mainly on four brief texts from *El grafógrafo* (1972)—“Novela conjetural,” “Futuro imperfecto,” “Presente de infinitivo,” and “Pasado anterior”<sup>77</sup>—as well as a broader theoretical reflection—“Teoría mínima del libro”—in *Cuaderno de escritura* (1969). Within Elizondo’s works, *El grafógrafo* and *Cuaderno de escritura* are part of his progression to concise prose and essays. After publishing his first “novels,” *Farabeuf o la crónica de un instante* in 1965, then *Narda o el verano* and *El hipogeo secreto* over the next three years, Elizondo’s work developed towards what the critic Brian Price calls “pure metafictional abstraction” (182). His work moved from the widely received *Farabeuf*, a prism-like novel which revolved around the contemplation of a single image accompanied by a series

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<sup>77</sup> For a close-reading and summary of the three texts—as well as the most complete study on the work of Elizondo—see Curley 268-71.

of short ironic pieces.<sup>78</sup> Elizondo's writings as published in *Snob*, the magazine he founded and edited, also tended towards forms of brief hyper-reflexive texts which meditated on "pure art" and the inner mechanisms of literature.

In an interview, Elizondo reflects upon his writing's trajectory leading up to the release of *El grafógrafo*. Jokingly, he mentions that, of all of the texts he has written, this book is, if not the most important one, then "uno de los terminales por esa indefinición que es la que ahora me preocupa bastante" (Rufinelli 42). *El grafógrafo*, for Elizondo, was both the high point of his work but also a dead end, the terminal disease of his prose. With this high/dead end in mind, he also describes his prior works and the possible future solution to his then present asphyxiating conundrum. Beginning with poetry and then through prose poems, Elizondo's work evolved to include long-form pieces, like novels. And then, seemingly, as his prose refined itself once more to a point of absolute economy, as in *El grafógrafo*. Perhaps the solution to this extremely rarefied prose—writing that writes itself—says Elizondo, is to go back to poetry (Rufinelli 36). However, as cited before, after writing *El grafógrafo* he says to have come to a dead end, the limit of a game to which he has not yet found a way out. He repeats many times that he has reached an impasse: "Estoy ante una pared. La derivación, posiblemente, sería la no-escritura" (Rufinelli 43); "ya no puedo perder tanto tiempo haciendo ese tipo de cosas, sobre todo porque ya llegué, después de diez años, a un punto en que tengo que buscar otra salida que no sea mediante uno de esos retruécanos mentales o como les quieras llamar" (Rufinelli 40). Elizondo describes the very problem of his writing both regarding *El grafógrafo* and *Cuaderno de escritura*, which are the proliferation of unsolvable paradoxes, sophisms, mental puns, etc. This

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<sup>78</sup> Elizondo often complains about the lack of sense of humor in his generation: "Una cosa de la que yo siempre me quejaré y lloraré amargamente es la desaparición en toda mi generación del sentido del humor, y yo creo que si algún crítico como Castañón ve el futuro del panorama de mi generación, le llamará la atención esta falta total de sentido del humor" (Jalife 84).

dead end, however, is what I will try to untangle from the point of view of criticism, the aforementioned three verbs and the kind of logics they elicit. Mainly, because these sophisms, I believe, should not be dismissed, but rather thought of as the grid of intelligibility for a transversal reading of modern narrative.

“Desoriginar,” “acontecer,” and “conjeturar” are verbs and logics that are neither independent nor dependent of one another, but rather interdependent. These three verbs, insofar as they articulate logics, are tied, as if in a knot. Even though the three terms are separate, they are also part of an interdependent structure that only functions as a simultaneous articulation of these components. This means that, when eliminating one of the terms, the structure falls apart. There are many ways to think the interdependence of these three verbs. For example, the way in which in order to de-originate an identity from its imaginary grid it is necessary to think how such an event—the de-origination—occurs, to then derive certain conjectures from this undertaking. Choosing three verbs is a rather arbitrary decision. But we must note that “three” is the number of terms needed to go beyond “the one”—unity—and “the two”—duality; it is the basis of multiplicity. If we want to unleash the explosive potential of these three verbs, then, we must think the triple knot they constitute. For the purpose of this chapter, however, I will describe these verbs as separate in the experiments of Salvador Elizondo. Bear in mind that each one of them already implies the presence of the other two—they are always working simultaneously.

### **Desoriginar**

When asked about the genesis of *Farabeuf*, Elizondo said it was only a matter of assembling a handful of images in a montage. The model of composition for the novel, as he

defined it, was a dialectic principle in which the clash of two things produced a third one (Elizondo, *Farabeuf* 9). But, more than this rudimentary form of a dialectic principle, what mattered to him was “esa conjunción de imágenes que producen una tercera imagen . . . el efecto, el efecto poético” (Elizondo, *Farabeuf* 14). For Elizondo, the real power of his method resides in the production of this poetic effect, rather than in the images or the content of the images themselves. One of Elizondo’s favorite texts, “The Philosophy of Composition” by Edgar Allan Poe, uses the very same vocabulary. After dismissing at least two of the traditional mechanisms of constructing a story, he claims that “[e]ither history affords a thesis—or one is suggested by an incident of the day—or, at best, the author sets himself to work on the combination of striking events to form merely the basis of his narrative—designing, generally, to fill in with description, dialogue or authorial comment, whatever crevices of fact, or action, may, from page to page, render themselves apparent” (Poe [page](#)). In these two methods, there is, in his words, a “radical error.” Instead, he insists, the writer must focus on the “consideration of the *effect*” (Poe). Narrative incidents or the tone do not matter if they are not arranged so as to construct a particular effect—in Elizondo’s model, what he calls a “poetic effect.” The poetic effect, here, does not refer to poetry but rather to a linguistic effect in which language—specifically a literary use of language—has an effect on the reader, it affects him. In this case, the result, the intangible effect, is the most important part of the dialectic principle of dynamics and so is the poetic impact derived from the conflictive literary juxtaposition of images. The dialectic principle is the dynamic of narrative, the images its components and fuel, and the effect the goal or end-movement. But, going back to the beginning, it is important to repeat that the poetic effect Elizondo wants to produce is actually the “genesis” of his work. Thus, the origin of his literature is not located in the very clash of two elements or images, but rather in the effect of this cross-

cutting. This means, in a few words, that the origin and genesis of a literary work is not the conjunction of a series of images, but rather the effect of a montage that produces *another* image. As we will see, this resulting image, however, is not relevant in and of itself or in the conjunction or disjunction it demonstrates. The image, instead, is only significant because it is instrumental in the production of a poetic *effect*.

In the same way, this idea can be extended and understood in a broader sense where the origin—of the symbolic, of discourse—is nothing but a series of contradicting images, a montage. Nevertheless, taken a step further, this idea can be read in the opposite direction, at least in the work of Salvador Elizondo: if narrative is to have a poetic effect, derived from a dialectical clash, then its true task is to unravel, separate, and render visible the dialectic mechanism with the intention of uncovering the fact that there is nothing original or originary in the images themselves. This dynamic is the dialectic reversal with which Elizondo experiments in his work. The mechanism of dialectic shown in its *effect*—nowhere to be found in the “original” images—must be undone to reveal the “secret” of the origin. My proposition is that this reversal can be formulated in a single verb coined by Elizondo: “desoriginar.” The task consists in de-suturing the contradictory genesis of narrative as well as its poetic effect.

In the first section of *Cuaderno de escritura*, “La forma del secreto,” Elizondo includes a series of theories about his method of composition. Here, first of all, it is necessary to notice the title of the book which already presupposes a material support for the texts. It is a note-book<sup>79</sup> or a book of notes and not a finished and “polished” book—as we will see, however, this is in fact not true because Elizondo’s “notes” are impeccably composed. “Teoría mínima del libro” is the first text found in the book’s beginning section “La forma del secreto.” This “minimal” book

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<sup>79</sup> Another one of Elizondo’s books, *Elsinore: un cuaderno*, also conveys this same idea.

theory begins with the following: “Un encuentro inesperado con ese cúmulo misterioso de los materiales, de datos, recogidos al azar, a lo largo de los años que siempre nos van encaminando hacia ese ámbito, hacia ese meollo en el que nos desoriginamos, como una aparición equívoca. La tarea del escritor se propone brutalmente” (Elizondo, *Cuaderno* 9). From the beginning, the theory of the book proclaims the impossibility of a true origin or essence of writing. There is, at first, a mysterious cluster of materials and documents that were collected randomly for many years: “anotaciones acerca, casi siempre, del carácter recurrente de todas las cosas que acontecen en el mundo; los proyectos mínimos que el destino casi siempre frustra” (Elizondo, *Cuaderno*10). These materials are an undifferentiated pile of elements that have not been gathered or archived, and the very first line is an unforeseen encounter with this pile of materials, apparently preceding the book. Notes, documents, experiences, ideas, conversations, letters, among other elements, can be the “origin” of the book, what comes before the book and what it necessitates. The haphazard encounter with these elements is ostensibly the genesis of the book. But then the narrator introduces the idea that the encounter with these materials always leads us to a core dimension in which the origin, or rather, *our* origin, is undone. The “original” materials and documents can only be conjectured after the haphazard encounter and, in any case, we cannot determine the content—the only thing that it is possible for us to know about these materials is their *effects*, namely, the book. The question, then, is how “the book” or literary work can emerge as a result of this mysterious cluster of materials whose content we ignore. I read Elizondo in this precise way: the book can only exist after the conjecture—as a subtractive operation and not as an origin.

Collected throughout the years, as the previous quote suggests, the cluster of materials flow into a gulf in which origin is undone. This sphere, the author claims, is the book itself. If the

origin is actively undone, located in an undifferentiated pile of materials and documents, then it is only conceivable through an inference or theory, and not as the consistent beginning of time and identity. Only through conjectures can an origin be stated in retrospect. Perhaps this is the reason why the text has yet another level if envisaged from its title and location in *Cuaderno de escritura*. The brief or minimal theory of the book is included in a section which interrogates the nature of the form of the secret or of the secret form. “Teoría mínima del libro” is a discussion on how the book de-originates its origin—and our origin—through a “theory” or a series of conjectures. This theory challenges the ontologization both of the discourse of fiction and of the literary devices which, for Elizondo, are only contingent—a haphazard encounter with conjectures and mysterious materials. The book is an undone origin that destabilizes and alienates its “identity,” rejecting the idea of a return to a necessarily imaginary and originary totality. The theory is therefore the following: literature is the sphere in which we actively de-originate and both identity and imaginary guarantees are shattered. At this point, the task of the writer, as the narrator says, is brutally imposed. For Elizondo the writer has to decipher the code of a potential literary universe in this mysterious—even mythic—cluster of materials. If, for example, the writer picks up a phrase from a stranger and finds he can construct a text around it, then he might have found such a code or formula. And, in order to de-originate the imaginary identity of that “universe,” the next step for the writer is to reach the ultimate source of the mysterious cluster of materials with which he will be able to construct his texts. The potential of the literary universe can only come to an end when the writer unearths its essence, which is language: “un universo que sólo puede agotarse cuando ha llegado a las fuentes últimas de ésa que es la más clara condición del ser que es el lenguaje. Porque el lenguaje es la actualización de todas las potencias del mundo” (Elizondo, *Cuaderno* 10). It is in this precise sense that the task

of the writer is to find and expose “the essence of the universe” which, for Elizondo, is language. “Desoriginar” in the context of literary discourse means, in Elizondo’s work, deciphering and arriving at the core of “being” which is language, the raw material of a potential literary universe.

In “Pasado anterior,”<sup>80</sup> another text from *El grafógrafo*, Elizondo formulates a paradox not unlike the other paradoxes he articulated before or will eventually articulate in the rest of his work: time is always out of joint and is incapable of formulating an identity. In as much as identity and time, in a single moment, do not coincide with each other or with themselves, there is no identity. And, when they do overlap, any kind of movement is impossible. The past—that which is no more—never quite reaches the “right now,” and, simultaneously, the temporal movement cannot be conceived of except as continuum and succession. It follows from here that the past, the present, and the future function as a teleological sequence without ever reaching a point in which these three subdivisions could converge—they just become one because they are, in fact, the same and indistinguishable. The question is, then, if it is possible to represent or narrate this impossible encounter with or *within* the logic of a story—a temporal sequence—as well as in that flickering instant of the atemporal that articulates the verbal tenses as one and the same. Beyond the paradox, I propose that there *is* a moment in which identity and time meet—they meet in an “origin.” This origin, however, must be undone and such an undoing is the very operation needed to counter the teleology that rules narrative, even if this temporality is shattered or reversed. Far from claiming that an identity and origin are impossible,<sup>81</sup> I want to affirm these instances as a theory, to then *construct* its undoing. Insofar as there is a story, there is a linguistic

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<sup>80</sup> This text should not be confused with one of Elizondo’s books, a collection of newspaper notes published in 2007, whose title is also *Pasado anterior*.

<sup>81</sup> For a reading of “Pasado anterior,” “Futuro imperfecto” and “Presente de infinitivo” in terms of the impossibility of recovering time and the always unbreachable difference in *El grafógrafo* as a “graphocentric” text, see Agüera.

*construction*. And Elizondo visibly and actively de-originates the imaginary of identity through this construction. In order to dislodge the traditional narrative logic based on the construction of identity throughout time, this de-origination is represented in experimental literary terms.

In order to articulate the aforementioned abstract paradox about time and the image of identity, Elizondo stages an ironic literary game in the form of a text for the staging of a dramatic monologue. The scene is very simple: in an elegant old-fashioned restaurant, a man whose name is Nevermore J. Vorbei is waiting for his enemy, mister Rightnow, who is, as usual, late for their encounter.<sup>82</sup> The “prelude” to their upcoming encounter is represented on stage, where Nevermore complains in a soliloquy about his tragic temporal condition, while drinking a glass of champagne and savoring lychee fruits. In the very beginning of the text, there are stage directions describing what the scene “represents”—“el gabinete privado de un restaurant de lujo decorado en el estilo de 1900” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 95). The space is set and then Nevermore comes into the scene/on stage, guided by a maître. The stage directions denote the luxurious display is mounted in *the style of* the turn of the century, which does not quite mean that the play is set precisely *in* 1900. The score is a rousing waltz, Nevermore is wearing a tailcoat, a cape, kidskin gloves, a top hat and a cane, and he is smoking a cigarette without filter. A nineteenth century aesthetics is overly-codified through the piece’s staging, costuming, and score; all of which functions as cues to *date* the scene in a particular century and historical moment. However, as the previous quote states, the representation merely draws on the “style of” an undefined “pasado anterior.” In sum, the prose is not dated at a particular moment in time,

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<sup>82</sup> The names of the characters already contain the temporal paradox in a nutshell. “Nevermore,” Edgar Allan Poe’s raven’s repetitive answer, locates the paradox both in that which is no more or no longer exists and that which will never again, at no future time, not ever, will be. “Vorbei” is a German word whose chief meaning is: over, past, bygone, passing—also, the passing of time and passing “in front of.” “Rightnow” is the conjunction of the present instant, and being true in this “now.”

but it is rather set and written in the mere style of the past before the past, perhaps the undefined and unidentifiable moment of the origin which, nevertheless, must be imagined for this fiction of theater to operate.

Resuming our reading of the play, Mister Rightnow is late, as usual, “por razones de un protocolo transcendental,” for his encounter with Nevermore (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 96).<sup>83</sup> As a way to entertain himself while waiting for his antagonist, “en espera de la llegada de Rightnow; una manera de pasar el tiempo” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 99), Nevermore J. Vorbei decides to share with the audience his thoughts, feelings and meditations on the tragedy of his perpetual precedence and posteriority in relation to everyone and everything. That in-between moment “en espera de” is extended as a somewhat fictive mechanism to separate the temporal instances—the “nevermore” and the “rightnow”—that would otherwise just be articulated in a temporal continuum. The theater functions as the device to stage these seemingly separated moments in time. What is more, these paradoxical temporal conjunctions, the past before the past and the never rightly present moment, are portrayed by two characters or, rather, as we find out in the end-beginning, a single character waiting for another absent character, himself. Thus, “the transcendental protocol” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 96) delaying the arrival of mister Rightnow is the theatrical artifice, the teleological logic of time which is de-originated by being broken up in a beginning and an end which never coincide or intersect. These delays and pathetic figures might also make us laugh—there is something both tragic and funny about the scene. The scene is certainly absurd, but it is also questioning our conception of time as we experience and represent it; it questions the illusion of there being a perfectly strung together temporal movement.

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<sup>83</sup> The whole structure and theme of this paradox is reminiscent of Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot.”

Appearing always before himself, Nevermore *represents* or *plays* an absolutely distinctive role, “el del Pasado, o el de lo Pasado, o si queréis también, de lo pasado de Moda” in what he calls “el teatro de nuestra tradición” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 98). In this sense, he is “un personaje real que representa a una entidad abstracta sobre este tablado ... Cuando menos eso es lo que ha querido el autor de este monólogo que yo sea” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 98). “Pasado anterior” is an allegorical abstraction reasserting the paradoxical unity between the contingent—albeit “real”—representation and the abstract transcendental concept. Elizondo is staging an allegory through the figures of Nevermore and Rightnow. An allegory in the sense that these characters represent abstract entities and embody unrepresentable and universal principles such as the present and the past. The names of the characters function as subjective concretions of universal abstractions. And, at the same time, these rather plain and flat “characters” are nothing but a convention. It can be said that the past before the past and the rightnow are conventions in a representation, just as the characters embodying these principles are also conventions. What is more, the very frame of the representation, theater, is also a convention and mode of traditional representation. The scene with Nevermore proposes that the character’s role in the theater of “our” tradition is to represent a past before the past, which is nothing but a theoretical device to presuppose an origin. There is an origin and an identity: Nevermore is a character, waiting for his antagonist, and he enters a scene in a luxurious restaurant, where the author places him. This theoretical origin and identity is that which must be de-originated by means of the theatrical representation.

Theater is not merely a stage but that which Nevermore describes as “el teatro de nuestra tradición” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 98). In this context, the theater of our tradition has two different meanings: first, the tradition of “our” theater and, second, the performative nature of

tradition. the fictive “theatrical” nature of our idea of tradition. In the first sense, theater has a longstanding tradition and is still a form of representation creating and renewing its tradition. “La tradición,” says Elizondo, “informa una morfología (es decir: una escritura)” (*El grafógrafo* 72). When staged, a play is actualized. For example, in “Pasado anterior” we read the following: “(aquí el actor deberá agregar la fecha exacta en que está teniendo lugar la representación, como, por ejemplo: 1° de diciembre de 1932” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 98). In each and every one of the representations the tradition of the theater is enriched and actualized—the whole of “tradition” converges in *that/this* precise date and time. The playwright, in order to produce what we might call a “dramatic or theatrical *effect*,” sets the representation—of the past before the past—always in the present. In the second sense, the idea of tradition is deemed to be a performance in which we are actors playing a role in a play. The name of this play is tradition as we are constantly enacting our tradition as it becomes “our” tradition through each performance or repetition. Tradition functions—as I also argued in my analysis of José Emilio Pacheco’s novel, *Morirás lejos*—as the development of an “historical sense.” The historical sense is the knot formed by the past and present, the timeless and the temporal. In this case, it is the staging of tradition, a timeless representation enacted within a temporal frame of representation. The director and the playwright are rewriting tradition in each and every one of the representations. In *Miscast*, his obscure comedy in three acts, Elizondo mentions, “no ha sido vano el sueño dramático que quiso componer esa secuencia de lo que en todo momento y también en todas sus partes es a la vez eterno por la escritura y efímero por la expresión ... los elementos que componen la manifestación del texto dramático como representación de un instante por medio de la escritura” (6). Thus, the “real character” performs an abstract role in the theater of our tradition. Time is dislodged, the theater of our tradition pierced, and their contradictory nature

revealed. However, we must not only understand the paradoxical encounter between Nevermore and Rightnow, or how they become one and the same figure in the eternal representation of their repetition. We must also think about the place their encounter occupies in relation to a tradition, especially if we consider that the encounter within tradition in “Pasado anterior” is built on the basis of the possibility to “represent” reality in general or as a single reality.

Nevermore’s monologue includes the figure of the author within his discourse when he says that he is nothing other than “un personaje real que representa a una entidad abstracta sobre este tablado ... Cuando menos eso es lo que ha querido el autor de este monólogo que yo sea” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 98). The figure of the author, as I proposed in the first part of this chapter, becomes part of the discourse when he includes himself in this discourse. The author becomes the guarantor of the staged fiction, and he is also reduplicated in the figure of the perplexed character trying to figure out what a creator or demiurge intends for him, or what is his ultimate purpose. Nevermore provides a possible answer when he says the author intends for him to represent an abstract entity. By having the character say this, the author becomes involved in the discourse he creates or writes. As a result, two contradictions are brought to the fore: the creator is named by the created or created by the discourse of the character; and, the author is unable to find a perfect correspondence between his “real” character and an abstraction. Therefore, he includes himself in the discourse so as to assure the spectators that they are attending a representation and this scene is not real—which brings us some kind of comfort; the symbolic remains in the symbolic, the past in the past, and they do not invade our reality. Thus, the stage is the very space where the paradox appears: identity is staged; time is but a mental and discursive monologue.

Therein lies one of Elizondo's principles: language is nothing but a convention and it is unable to indicate anything other than the fact that it is a convention. The use of this principle is one of the reasons why Elizondo's prose becomes increasingly self-referential. If language, as well as identity, are a convention, then the task of literature in *El grafógrafo*, is to reveal the fact that it is a convention and nothing more. In Elizondo's work—which we could ascribe to a nominalist position—the “real” and “language” present themselves as radically separate and are singular and distinct entities. This separation operates on different levels both within and outside of the text. Nevermore and mister Rightnow, for example, are abstract and separate entities and we attend the spectacle of their missed encounter. Likewise, the theatrical representation points towards the idea that characters are only façades of abstractions, allegories, and they do not correspond either to these abstract concepts or to themselves—they are façades, personae or masked characterizations. Thus, the tragedy of Nevermore, his non-contemporaneity and his precedence to himself can also be read as a rebuttal of identity as resemblance and permanence of a “self” throughout time. As a result, we conclude that representations—in particular the representation of identity—are merely a construct of our mind and language. They try to impose categories upon the “real” world or, again, “un personaje real que representa una entidad abstracta sobre este tablado” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 98). Using a term I proposed earlier, identity is a cognitive effect, “efecto mental.” Or, again, as in “El grafógrafo,” “[e]scribo. Escribo que escribe. Mentalmente me veo escribir que escribe” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 9). I believe, however, that in order to de-center the impasse of this nominalist paradox of “Pasado anterior,” Elizondo's text can be furthered through what he conceives of as “desoriginar.”

If literature, as proposed in “Teoría mínima del libro”—as well as literary theory or the theory of literature and its material support, the book—is the sphere in which origin is undone,

then there is in fact a moment in which the reality of the “potential literary universe” finds its essence for Elizondo, which is language. This means that even if representation and identity are merely conventional abstractions separate from “reality,” there is still a conjunction of the real and language in a brief and minor theory that presupposes an origin—the origin being, as we saw before, the cluster of materials preceding the book. Instead of conceiving of “Pasado anterior” as an endless non-coincidence between the past before the past and the right now, it can be thought of as the convergence of both temporalities. This convergence of the text of the dramatic monologue can be seen at the end of the play, which is the following: “poco a poco se irá convirtiéndose en yo . . . se irá siguiendo mis pasos y otra vez mañana seremos yo primero y él después el mismo personaje y cuando se levante el telón, mañana por la noche, allí estará mister Rightnow esperándome vestido de una forma que en todo momento se estará convirtiéndose en la mía” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 102-3). At this point, there is, at last, an encounter. Mister Rightnow becomes Nevermore and tomorrow, once again, the drama will take place. The encounter takes place at the end, when Nevermore finds his origin in his present form of becoming another character. It is not until he character presupposes this encounter that the duel with his antagonist happens. We can even claim that the origin we must propose is an original contradiction, the very “first” duel of how identity splits into two. Thus, positing a point of departure rather than de-activating the potential of this scheme by comfortably sitting in the spectator’s seat, the radical maneuver is to state that reality can be modified through words, through the sphere in which we de-originate, which is literature. At this very point, the atemporal is inserted within history. An origin outside of time is undone when it is included in narrative, in the staging of a drama “in the style of” the 1900’s. And this insertion activates the full potential of a subtractive affirmation. While it negates that there is an essence of origin, this subtractive

affirmation still works with the presupposition that there is such an origin that must be undone so as to build the structure of a potential literary discourse. Instead of signaling the impossibility of an origin, Elizondo's work wields the sword of a time always prior to itself, a time that never coincides with itself but that anticipates and projects concrete consequences onto the scene, the way in which we read tradition and identity in a critical way. We can affirm literature as a de-originated tradition and identity.

### **Acontecer**

The theory of the event is a common and significant thread found in several texts from *Cuaderno de escritura*, "De la violencia" and the aforementioned "Teoría mínima del libro." The latter one of these texts poses the following: "dos categorías primarias, el espacio y el tiempo. . . Es justamente ésa la manifestación del azar que siempre invalida, aunque sea en una medida mínima, la perfección de un método, que son las categorías mediante las que podríamos dar cuenta del acontecimiento de ese hecho: en un lugar, en un tiempo" (Elizondo, *Cuaderno* 14). In "De la violencia" we read: "El levísimo apenas acontecer que desordena una estructura o una continuidad se produce siempre con un carácter súbito. Denota la ruptura de una secuencia necesaria al ser mismo de la ruptura" (Elizondo, *Cuaderno* 57). In the first case, the a priori categories of time and space are inherent to all appearances. They are voided by the manifestation of chance, in order to account for an event. It is important to note that, in this description, the event is not purely haphazard nor does it come out of nowhere. The event cannot be completely explained by a given measurable spatiotemporal situation. Though grounded in the structure or continuity of space and time, the occurrence of the event and its consequences

come to disturb the “perfection” of the method of that which has already been discerned and classified by knowledge. We *could*—“podríamos”—account for the happening of an event in time and space, but these categories are not enough for registering the contingent—chance—within a spatiotemporal necessity. “Without chance,” as Georg Lukács said, “all narration is dead and abstract” (*Writer* 112). In a similar vein, the theory Elizondo offers in “Teoría mínima del libro” is that the “perfection of a method” and the order of this method is either altered or invalidated by a “manifestación del azar” (Elizondo, *Cuaderno* 14). When something happens, this “acontecer” (happening) invalidates part of a given stable structure. Therefore, the perfection and imaginary cohesion of the structure are shown to be imperfect. Note, furthermore, that in Elizondo’s theoretical meditations there is no “pure” event, but rather only the account of the happening of an event or of a fact. The sudden occurrence of an event suddenly—as in the second quote—breaking or interrupting the presupposition of a “perfect” spatiotemporal ground is irrelevant if it is not represented or theorized *après coup*. Elizondo’s intervention consists—within the possibility to account for an event in time and space—in naming or representing that something will have happened or is happening, at the moment in which a method breaks down and chance disrupts the “present” state of things by becoming part of it.

Broadly stated, it is possible to say that narrative is made out of and articulated through events. Events are the very core of narrative, without which there would be no movement, no plot. For Elizondo, these narrative “events” cannot be described or explained, and therefore they can only *happen* in a frozen moment in which the “infinite” is inscribed in the “present.” The next paradox we will analyze is the second paradox that Elizondo formulates: an event cannot be explained by the sum of the circumstances that surround it and yet, there is an event—an indescribable event claiming to be an event. In “Presente de infinitivo” there is but one single

event, happening in a very precise—completely arbitrary—moment in time: “El hecho ocurre a las 12:29” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 92). After stating that the fact occurs at this particular time, the narrator proceeds to phrase and rephrase the cluster of circumstances surrounding the event: the wind is blowing, there is a woman looking out the window, a boat about to come into the roadstead of Galveston, a woman pushing a stroller, a man laying down against a tree, a turtledove pecking the cement floor, a recording in the phone, telling time. Suffice it to say, this list of circumstances does not amount to explaining the event (what had occurred). Surrounding circumstances cannot be arbitrarily amalgamated to reveal an event, its nature or its occurrence. Neither the woman looking out the window nor the wind blowing are taking place or happening, says the narrator. It is just an immutable set of circumstances, “dentro de la que el acontecimiento del hecho tiene lugar” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 93). The long list of elements composes the immutable state of affairs—immutable because it is only a list of the elements of a scene set precisely at 12:29. The “taking place” or occurrence of the event cannot be described. Only what the event *is not* can be inscribed in the stiff narrative.

The irrelevant and insignificant event happening precisely at 12:29 can only be imagined through the artifice of the temporal succession of language—through its telling—but, in fact, it is a single event. “Presente de infinitivo” is the elongation of a debate discerning how and when the “event” occurs and the world in which it takes place, the necessary circumstances for it to happen. If the woman were not pushing the stroller or the turtledove were not pecking the cement floor, then the event could not have taken place. In order to continue, let us go back to the basic grammatical premises of “Presente de infinitivo.” It is important to note, first of all, that the infinitive is a non-personal and, as its name implies, a nonfinite form of the verb. This means that it is not “conjugated” and does not express any subject or time. And, there is neither a

subject that performs an action nor time where the verb is located—it is an impersonal form. In conjunction with “present,” we can think the paradoxical junction between the timeless—“infinitive”—and the instant—“presente.” So the infinitive is located within the present. The temporal concept Elizondo uses, however, is the present of the infinitive—which is not a tense and is not used in Spanish grammar except as substantivated—or in metaphysical treatises or sophistics! Fundamentally, “Presente de infinitivo” is about the intrusion of this non-subjective and atemporal infinity into the present, the nowhere to be found “event” that nonetheless occurs and is inserted by Elizondo in a temporal sequence, in this case, a very concrete time of the day. Thus, the infinite appears within the horizon of the temporal or of the finite—a beginning and an end.

There is a key moment in “Presente de infinitivo” where the narrator remarks on the circumstances which are artificially separated from the event taking place. Notice in the next quote how the narrator claims that woman pushing the stroller and the one looking out the window are not happening, but are only painted figures in a scenery:

Nada sucede mientras el hecho ocurre. Las cosas, las circunstancias, la mujer que mira por la ventana y la que empuja el carrito están allí sólo para ceñir, como circunstancias, al hecho que ocurre en su interior vacío ... El hecho ocurre como algo transparente contra la opacidad pétrea de las figuras pintadas en el escenario de circunstancias dentro del que acontece él, el hecho. (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 93)

Once again, there are two elements in this description about the nature of the event happening exactly at 12:29: the surrounding circumstances and the event itself. The opaque fossilized things

and external situations girdle the event. And, in opposition to these circumstances, this event taking place in a transparent inner void. Furthermore, the event seems to occur twice, or in a double manner: “Nada sucede mientras el hecho ocurre” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 93). Nothing happens while the event takes place. Or, rather, the event is taking place *within* time and yet, nothing happens. On one hand, when the event takes place it is actualized and located in a state of affairs or grid of circumstances, we can pinpoint it by saying “here and now, it is happening.” But on the other hand, when the event takes place—the future and the past sidestep the present—it frees itself from the spatiotemporal a priori—the roadstead, the park, the house, 12:29. Elizondo unravels the logic of the event to show its contradiction, namely, that all of the circumstances cannot explain what happens, which is always happening somewhere else. So the question the narrator poses is the following: why is it that the event cannot be causally “deduced” from a situation if it is part of this situation and is irreducible to it? Free of limitations, yet girdled by the state of affairs, “nothing” takes place. The nature of the event, continues the narrator, is to take place within “el núcleo de un cúmulo de circunstancias; que tiene lugar, sí, pero indescritiblemente, como si su verdadera naturaleza no fuera otra que la de acontecer, sin más” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 94). And that which takes place is barely registered as “el acontecer de la imagen de las doce y veintinueve en que tiene lugar un hecho que carece totalmente de importancia y que no puede ser descrito más que como una figura de la nada” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 94). Once more, it is not possible to say, here and now, what is an event. It can only be told until after its retroactive effects or its consequences are constructed or developed.

We can also say that the vignette the narrator composes by the technique of repetitively listing all the circumstances—or a mysterious cluster of images—surrounding the event is a

deviation or descriptive detour regarding the unattainable temporality of the event. Regarding the event, there is no narrative. There is only a description, an incomplete image of the circumstances surrounding the event—and, again, this image does not explain what happens or the occurrence of the event. Elizondo's wager is to modify the coordinates of traditional narrative representation to overtly reflect upon the paradoxical temporality of the event. Let us repeat that the temporality of the event advanced in "Presente de infinitivo," as the title of the text indicates, is that of the infinite as it appears within the horizon of finitude.

With regards to this impasse, the critical move is to suppose and state that an event has truly taken place. Even though it might seem ungraspable, Elizondo's narrative is effectively surrounding the ineffable event, thus affirming that it exists. Despite the fact that the event does not *present* itself, Elizondo *represents* the impossibility to grasp it. In order to represent it, he assumes that it exists and that something happened. As the narrator of "Presente de infinitivo" claims in the end, "[e]llo se debe a que del hecho sólo lo que no es él [el acontecimiento] puede ser descrito, a pesar de que el hecho está aconteciendo ya, aquí, ahora" (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 94). Something happens in text. And this is also, in broader terms, a literary event. Here, a literary event means that within the literary discourse there is a work that destabilizes the order and comes to reconfigure tradition for us to be able to read it through a new and different lens.

### **Conjeturar**

As we have seen, the paradoxes formulated in *El grafógrafo* trace a trajectory linking a series of encounters or missed encounters: Nevermore and mister Rightnow; an event and its circumstances, the conjectures on the imperfect future, and that which has already been written.

This trajectory, however, is always a theory and is located within a literary discourse. For Elizondo, theory—for instance “teoría mínima del libro”—is one of the spaces from where artistic creations emerge. It is a speculation affirming that the elements reflected in a mirror are in fact more real than those of flesh and bone. In the following fragment he takes this a step further by saying that theory is an art genre: “La teoría es el campo en que medra y prolifera ese orden de cosas que generalmente van a desembocar en el *mare magnum* de la especulación y de la fantasía. La condición proteica o universal de toda teoría permite concebirla incluso como un género del arte” (Elizondo, *Pasado* 338). It is in the shifting sands of theoretical conjectures within fiction that Elizondo theorizes his own intervention in literary discourse. Just as we saw that Eduardo Lalo says that his novel *donde* is a form of theory and theory is a form of fiction, here Elizondo states that theory is an art genre. We are, once again and as we have been seeing all throughout this dissertation, in front of a formulation of a kind of literature that thinks. It is not a theory of art, but rather an art of theory; not a theory of literature but a literature that creates its own theory and is, for example, at the same level of philosophy. Thus, speculations and conjectures are the raw materials with which a literature creating its theory produces a discourse.

As I have previously indicated, the collection *El grafógrafo* displaces the function of narrative: there are no characters but generic-abstract empty figures; there is no time as cause and effect or an imaginary original identity; there is also no plot to weave the “events” that in fact do not happen or happen in a void surrounded by frozen circumstances. So the question is then if and how literary discourse—specifically narrative—is displaced and finds other strategies to narrate. Are images the only alternative to weaving a series of events in a chain? Must we choose between narrating *or* describing? My proposal is that in Elizondo’s work and the kind of

literature I have defined as transliterature, description is not the only other method—the sometimes tiresome images are not the only alternative to narration. Instead, my claim is that conjecturing, making hypotheses, deducing facts qua events or happenings, is an alternative method through which fictions can be composed. And, what is more, this conjecturing also implies the very movement through which we as critics derive theories, departing from literature. Criticism as the art of conjectures and hypotheses and as a theoretical and philosophical undertaking. Elizondo says regarding this idea, “el carácter de un sutilísimo instrumento de crítica . . . el de un abstruso aunque, claro, inútil género literario” (*El grafógrafo* 60).

A “conjectural method” entails throwing or casting together elements in order to derive a conclusion from a series of facts—or lack of facts. By guessing, hypothesizing, and diagnosing, a conjecture is derived from what might seem unrelated symptoms. In many places, Elizondo talks about the act of conjecturing. And he does so in order to describe and foretell the future of writing. Through conjectures, a hypothesis can, or cannot, be proved. It is important to note, however, that Elizondo talks about a “method,” and not merely about prescient art. This method is different from what Elizondo says are “cheaper” means to foretell the future, for example, “las gitanas, la bola de cristal, los naipes, el I Ching, análisis de orina, cálculo de probabilidades, astrología, editoriales periodísticas, utopías ‘científicas’, etcétera” (*El grafógrafo* 87). As the author also maintains, “[e]n realidad el método no es misterioso, sino ignorado” (Elizondo, *Teoría* 200). Instead of following these simple and cheap guessing games, Elizondo proposes, not unlike Descartes’ methodic doubt, a method: “El artista se compromete con su obra mediante la adopción de un método” (*El grafógrafo* 62). So it is not only about doubting everything we know, but also about founding a rational system upon this doubt, a critical *endeavor* to doubt everything—but in a systematic fashion!. In order to test whether what we think we know is truly

correct, the artist temporarily suspends all beliefs. In this way, by creating a method, the artist devotes himself to his work. The artist, in this sense, imposes his own interpretations of the world and even of the future through conjectures and refutations.

In the following sentence Elizondo states that in order to describe a dynamic procedure, we are in need of a method that suspends both origins and purposes: “El método es una convención que permite la descripción de un procedimiento como si se tratara de un procedimiento que estuviera entre paréntesis tanto de sus orígenes como de su finalidad” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 74). It is suspended *as if* there were no teleology. So we must suppose that for the artist any narrative presupposes teleology. Again, an origin must be posited in order to be undone. In this case, the existence of teleology to suspend such an origin. Thus, the method needs to cut through the temporal dimension of a procedure in order to isolate it, to make it an *object* of study. To write his literary projects, Elizondo uses conjectures. Conjectures suspend narrative and its teleological development and question the idea that any method can solely or only describe its procedures. Elizondo traces the paradox of conjecturing in the following way: the method of doubt, the fact that there is nothing certain, is the very foundation of axioms, or what the author calls “la verdad indemostrable de la forma” (*Pasado* 359). Let us examine some of the anecdotal paradigms that articulate this dispute between conjectures and the indemonstrable truth of the form in two texts from *El grafógrafo*, “Novela conjetural,” and “Futuro imperfecto.”

In the way that Elizondo understands it, the form of the novel is one that lends itself to conjectures. A novel, rather, is deliberately a science of falsehoods as he says in “Teoría mínima del libro.” “Podríamos imaginar una intriga ... que fuera construyendo un relato velado acerca de otros ... La novela es la ciencia de la mentira y de la invención de pasiones” (Elizondo,

*Cuaderno 12*). “Novela conjetural” is the title of Elizondo’s experimental prose piece, consisting of seventeen hypotheses written in merely two pages. In this “novel,” the narrator will try to unravel the mystery of what is going on in the mind of and thoughts of the protagonist, Amalia. For the narrator, there is something that is not clear in how Amalia is acting lately, says the author; so he heroically decides to embark on a journey through her psyche to analyze it—psychoanalyze her. The problem in this case is that no matter what Amalia is thinking, we find nothing except “una sucesión de signos, de imágenes, de recuerdos que mientras más se afinan, más pierden de su forma, de su verdadero significado” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 79). This affirmation, however, might be a deceptive trick from the narrator. He assumes that there is a “true meaning,” an a priori content or essence of signs and images. And yet, the whole novel is based on the opposite premise. Since there is a mystery, conjectures are projected as signs onto the background curtain of empty signifiers. But, we might add, the novel does attempt to arrive at the origin of their meanings, of the psychological turmoil afflicting Amalia, in other words. The only thing left for the narrator is to conjecture. And the resulting conjectures are exhibited in seventeen sentences, where we read hypotheses on what Amalia might or might not be thinking. Thus, the narrator visibly displays these numbered sentences so that we all can clearly see the scheme of the necessarily incomprehensible content and form of Amalia’s thoughts (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 79).

The conjectures of “Novela conjetural” work their way through merely four verbs and their combinations: understanding, faking, happening, and being. These verbs are negated or affirmed in the seventeen propositions. Without delving into the specificity of the conjectures, let us read the first and the last one. The first one puts forward the following theory: “I.- Amalia no entiende lo que le pasa”. And the last one speculates: “XVII.- Se trata de una cosa que como cosa

que finge su imposibilidad de ser entendida o como cosa que finge su imposibilidad de ser, es” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 79-80). In both of these conjectures what matters is the “negative” gesture, namely, the “not understanding” or the “impossibility of being understood.” That which is impossible to understand, in this case, is not only Amalia’s thoughts but also the signs with which her thoughts are assembled. Nothing is certain. And yet, in the end, there is something—“una cosa”—that *is* and can be affirmed. How is it that through negating and not understanding it is possible to affirm something or *a* thing? After the procedure of methodical doubt, something is created. Let me propose that what is created is the novel itself. The visible display of conjectures constructs the inner scheme of the “Novela conjetural.” What comes as a surprise and provokes laughter in this very brief meditation is the way in which the development of the text disarms all expectations—of what we might think that Amalia is thinking and about the genre of the novel. After all, how would or could a two-page display of seventeen conjectures be read as a novel?! And these conjectures lead, the reader, the narrator, and Amalia, seemingly nowhere except to the affirmation of the “being” of some unspecified thing. This being or undefined thing is the carcass of nothingness, constructed through language.

To conclude, this brief text is relevant in two aspects both for how Elizondo thinks of conjectures and for my proposal here: its form and its development. The form of the “novel” is a series of axioms advanced through what I have defined as a conjectural method. In terms of its form, the fact that the novel is based on methodic doubt can lead to many conclusions. The first one would be that the principle of the genre is to impose and force certain regularities upon the world—or the world of fiction—by trying to interpret it in terms of the laws the novel formulates. Instead of re-presenting the world, the conjectural novel jumps to conclusions, and instead of plotting a narrative, the novel is a theory that functions as trial and error, conjectures

and refutations. Another consequence is that the novel suspends time, space, and identity. The novel functions as a parenthesis that isolates a single fact or moment in time, an “acontecer,” about which there is nothing to be said except a series of endless conjectures and consequences that could be derived from it. By creating its perhaps ironic, arbitrary method, the novel creates its own space and battlefield. The novel, then, is not cut short by the imposition of outside categories, but is instead defined in its own terms and through its laws and development. In terms of its development, the four verbs—understanding, faking, happening, and being—the conjectures mobilized end up affirming that something *is*. This affirmation is the result of a method that suspends belief while doubting the certainty of thoughts and experience—in this case, the unclear thoughts and actions of Amalia. Certainty is based on uncertainty and a rational discourse on fictive premises. And this is one of the basic principles of the way in which I conceive of literary criticism and literary discourse. First, in the sense that preemptive categories constrain readings and texts to a corset and, thus, we are only allowed to see certain embroidered parts of the otherwise prolific and defiant literary corpus. Second, that theory must create not only a transversal reading of these preemptive categories but also a series of terms through which it is possible to productively re-think literary texts and beget, in the end, an affirmation.

The second “anecdotal companion” to the paradox of conjectures is “Futuro imperfecto,” a text about an author whose commission is to write something about “the future.” The essay begins with a reflection on “la naturaleza retrocesiva y preteritante que la mera noción ‘el futuro’ proyecta sobre lo *a priori*” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 81). The narrator of “Futuro imperfecto” inquires about the projection of the future, “como si la naturaleza del curso del mundo marchara en el sentido inverso al que siguen las manecillas del reloj.” And he continues: “bastaría para concebir o formular las bases de una literatura ... con el mismo principio que ‘la máquina del

tiempo” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 81). To formulate a literary discourse, the narrator devises a rudimentary device, a time machine built on a bicycle, with a lever for traveling between past, present, and future. This rather comical device, a common place of “time travels,” is perhaps even imitating the more sophisticated version of the machine of *Back to the future*, a car with gull-wing doors. “Futuro imperfecto” might be read as a kind of speculative fiction, as it works with the projection of a future onto the present or the past. And this is the nature of the verbal tense, “futuro imperfecto,” indicating that an act has not concluded and is imperfect. The future imperfect tense also expresses the coincidence of a predicate with its subject after the moment in which it is enounced. This means that the subject will only get to enact the verb in a future, because it is not a completed action and is yet to happen. It is a possibility, doubt, and hesitation—the nature of a conjecture. And the coincidence of a predicate with its subject is articulated in the act of writing, the space of writing where, according to the narrator, three figures converge. The first one is the narrator as author, writing in present indicative. The second one is the editor, in this case Ramón Xirau, who, in the past, commissioned the author to write an article. And the third one is the reader who holds in his hands the text in *this* (this?) moment in front of his/her eyes in a future-present tense (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 82). The editor, the writer, and the reader form the triad of this particular text and its temporal paradox, and they correspond to the past, present, and future. At this point, it is important to note as well that this triad is also the tripartite organization of this chapter: “desoriginar,” an editor in the past; “acontecer,” a writer in the present; “conjeturar,” a reader in the future.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> An organizing principle, by the way, that could be taken further. The three parts of this dissertation are “Nobody,” “Nothing,” and “Never,” and they correspond to these three figures as well, though in reverse order from Elizondo's. Nothing is “acontecer,” nobody is “conjeturar,” and never is “desoriginar.”

As the author is walking, in the Universidad Autónoma de México, through “la Gran Explanada hacia la facultad de Filosofía,” thinking about “el futuro conjetural” for the text he will publish at his friend’s magazine, he runs into a man whose name is Enoch Soames (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 84).<sup>85</sup> At first, the narrator thinks the man is a hippie. And then, as the man asks him if he remembers him, the narrator thinks he might be one of his students whose name he could not remember. Soon the narrator discovers, with awe, that Enoch Soames is the personification of a demon from the future, who already knew who *he* was before having met him (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 86). What is more, not only did Soames recognize who the narrator was, but he also knew exactly what he was thinking at the moment of their encounter. He foresaw, as well, the text he would end up writing—in the future—for a magazine. Soames holds in his possession the manuscript of what the narrator will later turn in to be published. In many ways, Enoch Soames is an “evil genie.” As in Descartes’ evil genie, Soames enchants and questions the figure and constitution of the narrator:

To the point of extreme disenchantment the truth about the self that man has entrusted to his hand, his face and his language; an evil genius who operates not when man wishes to accede to the truth, but when he wishes to give back to the world his own truth, and when, projected into the drunkenness of the senses where he loses himself, he is left “immobile, stupid and astonished.” The possibility of the evil genius no longer lodges in perception, but in expression, and the supreme irony is to see man at the mercy of the derision of the immediate

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<sup>85</sup> Enoch Soames is a figure taken from its eponymous short story by Max Beerbohm. The main plot of the story bears a strong resemblance with “Futuro imperfecto” and contains most of its motifs and elements. The narrator describes Enoch Soames in his short prose as follows: “¡el más grande investigador literario que jamás ha existido! . . . La leyenda irónica y horrible que Max Beerbohm había dibujado de él contra el fondo neblinoso de Londres en la época de Jack the Ripper” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 88).

and the sensible, alienated in them through the mediation that he is. (Foucault, *History* 350)

Deceiving and bringing into question his dubious reasoning abilities, Soames leaves the narrator “immobile, stupid and astonished,” with his own image and words from the future. The narrator did not quite know what to reply when Soames condemned him to lose himself in his own future article, and so he tries to burn down the article he typed for the magazine. In the end, though, the author says to have been faithful to “the original” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 91). There is, however, a perverse assumption in this paradox full of “supreme irony.” “Futuro imperfecto” projects a narrator and a reader who are, as stated, “at the mercy of the derision of the immediate and the sensible, alienated in them” (Foucault, *History* 350). Enoch Soames anticipates the narrator’s every move; he knows precisely what he is thinking and everything he will think and write. He even hands the writer a copy of *Diálogos*, the magazine where the article he is about to write is already printed. Enoch gives the writer a piece of advice:

no debe olvidar que a estas alturas, el acto mismo de desistir de escribir ese artículo sobre el futuro que ya aparece en el cuerpo de una revista que todavía no ha sido impresa sólo es posible dentro del cuerpo de esa escritura . . . A estas alturas ¿cómo podría usted desistir de esa empresa que siempre *ya* está realizada?” (Elizondo, *El grafógrafo* 90).

If the narrator were to give up writing this article about the future, then he would still be *within* the body of the future text, as it already contains his refusal to write. Within the body of the text, everything has already been written and there is no freedom. Within writing and language, within the confinement of the machine and printed words, the time travelers of literature are always

already determined and doomed to perform the same acts in the same order—as we also saw in both “Presente de infinitivo,” and “Pasado anterior.” These are doomed verbal tenses, where freedom is not possible. And these tenses are located in a series of impossible points of encounter, where, in the logic of the sophism, Achilles will never catch the turtle. Elizondo runs into a dead end, he is trapped within his sophistry, and the content and form of his sophisms. He is unable to find a way out of his paradoxes.

While there is no way out of these asphyxiating paradoxes, taking our freedom away, we can take a step back and laugh at the linguistic constructions of paradoxes, where we reproduce our own anxieties. This anxiety is that of imagining ourselves in a universe where we are always already determined by a higher order, and our lives have been written in a text whose intention we are incapable of understanding. It is certainly true that for each and every one of the moments in time and their corresponding identity, it is possible to find causes and motives linking them to the law of natural causality. And it is also true, as in “Pasado anterior,” that characters, authors, narrators, readers and critics are determined by the logic of representation and causality. However, at the point in which all of these instances have proven to have no substance and work through non-sense, when time and identity appear to be nothing but empty mechanisms, there is the possibility of freedom and of an axiomatic set of propositions. When we think that Elizondo’s paradoxes are unsolvable, beyond our control, and dependent on a “higher” logic or law, then something—perhaps laughter—cracks open the sophisms and we are able to situate and build a different system in the “imperfection” of the future, in conjectures.

After the terminal disease of *El grafógrafo*, Elizondo could never fully recover. It could have not been any other way—his project flew as high and luminous as many artful paradoxes but its wings were burnt down by its own ambition and tricks. The disease the project developed

significantly weakened the corpus of writing. Even though Salvador Elizondo still published *Miscast* in 1981, his comedy, and a couple more books of fictions, *Camera lucida* in 1983, and *Elsinore: un cuaderno* in 1988, the rest of his artistic production consisted in anthologies of notes he wrote throughout the years for newspapers and journals. Without diminishing the importance of these works, it is possible to say that *El grafógrafo* became the formal zenith of Elizondo's literary production. And it is due to this "terminal" disease of the book that we are able to postulate, in this conclusion, what the task has been and how, from a series of non-sensical literary tricks, it is possible to affirm and conjecture other axioms, logics and models.

The axioms that the work of Salvador Elizondo are useful deductions to mobilize closed literary discourses, especially those full of paradoxes. Beyond paradoxes and sophisms, it is necessary to create other axioms, logics and forms because the redundant and ridiculous task of the critic is, "demostrar la proposición axiomática implícita en toda obra de arte. En eso se parece un poco a la del teólogo que demuestra la existencia de algo cuya perfección imposible implica ya necesariamente su existencia, o como la del analista que pretende poner de manifiesto el trasfondo de la gran proposición cartesiana" (Elizondo, *Cuaderno* 99-100). The axioms I have built here—and throughout this dissertation—not only bring to light or group a series of disparate elements, but also propose terms and logics to read literature in a different way, as a literature that thinks. Beyond anxiety and pleasure, beyond the paradoxes of Zeno and Elizondo, I have proposed that conjectures are perhaps the most productive way to read literature if one does not want to trap the literary discourse, rendering its potential inoperative. Let us laugh, then, at these swift-footed machines that try to catch the turtle of literature. *A Poetics of Transliteration* could not end any other way. If my whole project is conceived as a conjecture, then it must end as a conjecture.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

To think is not to reason. Reason is limited to a method, a catalogue, an encyclopedia, which are systems of exclusion and inclusion, traditions of inherited knowledge and beliefs. Thought is a practice, and not only a rational activity—it leads somewhere else, and is somewhere else. Thinking is a radical and specific activity of the mind and body—which are not separate from one another—and it implies going against our own beliefs; the beliefs of culture, the society to which we belong to, and even the mind and body we inhabit. To think is to question and traverse the prison of our beliefs. Those who are certain of their origin and of belonging to a culture, history, and method of reason do not think.

Literature as a form of thought implies traversing the impasses of reason and to truly think, going against all beliefs of what we previously defined and limited as the literary discourse. It is in this precise sense that literature as a form of thought is transliterature. If thought is what questions and navigates experience, bodies, languages, beliefs, desire, and archives, then transliterature does not have a realm, a definition. If we were to delimit what transliterature is, it would become part of an encyclopedia. Instead, transliterature is a movement, the practice of thinking, a logic of reading, the flow of a conversation between multiple discourses and traditions. Transliterature, as such, cannot be defined preemptively, because such an attempt runs the risk of creating a new stifling category with limits, frontiers, absences and inclusions, attributes and characteristics.

The absence in this book of an explanation of what transliterature really means is deliberate—because, indeed, it has no meaning. It is, instead, a practice, an exercise; it is an

experiment and can only be experienced as it is being written. That is why in this project the emphasis has been placed on movement, on thinking across, on destabilizing categories and theories. Rather than establishing a new category to include or exclude authors, genres or geographies, establishing which literary work belongs or does not belong to “transliterature,” what I have managed to do is avoid such forms of predetermined templates, the constraints of reason. On the contrary, the logic of the readings offered is that of *transliterating*, that is to say, going across and through literature, against all beliefs and preconditions, to be able to conceive of it as a form of thought.

Transliterature as a practice and as thought does not exclude experience and affects. On the contrary, the visceral forces and intensities that are part of thought are always present in the wandering of thought, its coming and goings. And these corporeal and affective dispositions do not only play a role in thinking, they *are* always already thought. The beginning of my project was an inquiry on why certain kind of books compelled me to think and read my desire in literary works. Desire, conjectures, sensations, reactions, feelings, and passion for literature have brought me to this commencement. Transliterature is not only a form of theory or a cold, rational, methodic endeavor; its principle is that it is born out of a bodily exercise, a compulsion and need to write, the desire to leave a trace, and the sensitivity to face the world through a creative use of language. Having faith in the lucidity that writing provides and risking our own life in leaving behind and shattering our beliefs and imaginaries—even our ego—is what allows literature to be a process where a subject can be constructed. And in this subjective construction, thinking and feeling, the body and the mind, are not separate instances. In this sense, thought is also what a subject affects and that which affects a subject, leaving material traces on its body.

The writing-act is the laboratory of thought and such an experiment is not merely rational, but something to experience and probe in the exercise of literature.

Transliteration, in this same way, runs along the lines of the desire to write, frustration, laughter, wandering and wondering, discomfort, and it even holds a therapeutic function. There are all movements that can be found in my textual analyses, and it is not a coincidence that these are all emotions and affects that I have experienced while writing this book. The desire and need to write about my visceral reactions and affinity with certain texts and projects that led me to wonder and ask questions. And, many times, wondering about these texts and experimenting so much with writing frustrated me and, at one point, I couldn't help but laugh when reaching the paradoxes of non-sense, the short-circuit of some of the arguments I tested and experienced myself. I was the subject of my own experiment with how words are experienced and thought. But it was precisely at those points when thought led me to work against my own beliefs to traverse them and utterly question their premises and functioning. This is how transcritique works, as taking to the extreme theory and practice—which are one and the same—so as to precipitate the wager that literature as a form of thought implies.

After many trials and errors, I came to coin the term transliteration to define a logic of reading which I am certain surpasses my limited thought. It shall function as a very powerful and poignant mode of literary criticism. The term transliteration has been, simultaneously, a discovery and a missed encounter. It is an unplanned notion and it is something that has not yet been formulated except in its practice. What can be found in this book, then, are transversal readings that cut across, interrupt, contradict and, at the same time, suture holes, redefine traditions, and experiment with well-known categories and forms.

Transliteration is the written experience of thought and the thought of experience in language. This is the opening statement. And it is only about to begin.

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