PERPETUAL MOVEMENT: BRIEF FORMS IN LATIN AMERICA

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In this dissertation, I study the forms that attempt to capture experience in language. From the anecdotes that write a life, to the sentences that inscribe the language of prison-spaces, to the fictions that tell and retell old fables. Most importantly I examine the movement between these forms which are at once anachronic, synchronic and perpetual. In the first chapter, False Case: The Anecdote" I examine the desire that Macedonio Fernández, Jorge Luis Borges and Ricardo Piglia share for the anecdotal, which I define as the recording of an untraceable life. The writing of anecdotes I propose, consists of going to the limits of writing oneself in a single experience only to then erase oneself. In this "project" all three authors work with the anecdotal to challenge positions of authorship, to establish a community of writers who operate under the understanding that plagiarizing and copying are not a violation of the law but rather what brings them together. In my second chapter "Metaphysical Case: The Sentence," I look at the ways in which an experience is captured in the form of a sentence as a specific form of the aphorism but also a grammatical and juridical structure for the inscription of order on a body. I analyze the works of Eduardo Lalo, Piglia and Borges, especially the texts written inside the prison. The prison, works both as the opening for a place to think, but also as a dead-end and a literal condemnation. For my third chapter "Fictional Case: The Fable" I study the way in which experience is organized in a causal way—as a sequence of events. Starting out from Aesop's fables and biblical parables I look at the use of the form in a traditional sense and then I analyze how Augusto Monterroso and Juan José Arreola, revitalize and reappropriate old fables and parables in order to evaluate the causal

construction of the form. For my last chapter “Perpetual Movement: The Flies” I see in Monterroso’s infinite collection of quotes about the fly the epitome of his whole literary project as well as the perpetual movement I trace throughout my chapters. By tracing this movement, I redefine what these “brief forms” have meant and still mean in the Latin American canon and I also propose them as critical maneuvers for any given text.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Geraldine Yvonne Monterroso (Guatemala City, 1983) obtained her Bachelor of Arts in Hispanic Studies and Philosophy, from Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago and a Masters of Arts from Cornell University in Ithaca New York.

Para Grandma

(Mary Grace Papadopolo)

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Introduction

Writing and speaking are not the same. The latter sentence is both true and a generalization. But most importantly it is one of the conclusions of the vast experiences of the project that lays before us and which are invisibilized by the grammar of the first statement. It could certainly also be the comment made in passing by someone who is repeating an old cliché. However, in this case it is the result of the affirmation of the same old saying—the cliché—after a long and thoughtful project on the perpetual movement of anecdotes, aphorisms, sentences and fables. We could call it a case of repetition where "everything has already has been said" and at the same time the articulation of something new.

People who know me, are first surprised to learn what kinds of texts I like to read or the style of my writing. This is mostly because when I speak, I can extend myself for hours telling stories about the characters that surround my life. It is as if I would be "reciting a novel"—if such a thing would exist—straight out of my thoughts. Many times, I have fooled myself with the idea that I could do this—write a novel—especially following the many remarks I have received in conversation with friends who have told me "you should write this down". But the truth is that if I would want to write down those stories, I would not be able to do so—at least not in the same form in which I tell them. I know that the impossibility of copying the spoken word into the written form is something that happens to many of us. I remember Eduardo Lalo writing about a similar issue when he says that all of us have at one point or another have constructed perfect paragraphs in our minds but then hit the impossibility of writing them on the blank page.

Many of the stories I frequently repeat are anecdotes about my father. All the stories I tell about him reiterate an essential characteristic which is that he is like a broken record, always repeating the same old tune. Besides him being an excellent character of anecdotes he is also a storyteller himself. However, it took me many years, and probably this dissertation to see him as a traditional storyteller, instead of him as the man who keeps lecturing me with the same old phrase. I do not remember at what point it was I noticed that my father always repeated the phrase, or that he was repetitive in nature. I also do not remember how old I was when I realized that he would apply the same sentence when he would sense that he had just witnessed something extraordinary. Certainly, you would have to know my father to understand what "extraordinary" means to him, but whenever one of these moments had just occurred, he would call on me or anyone around him to presence the "extraordinary moment" that would inevitable be followed by the phrase: *existen otros mundos y están aquí.* To a dentist, a lover of birds and a self-taught astronomer, extraordinary still is: a rare molar infection, the sighting of an unfamiliar bird, the hour without a shadow (an astronomical event) but also could refer to the experience of seeing the old, but same corrupt political order coming into power.

Existen otros mundos y están aquí, which translates into "there are other worlds and they are here" is the sentence that would always follow the experience of amazement, but not before he shared a sort of short explanation or story about what was being presenced. The explanation was not just informative, but usually revealed the experience that led to the knowledge of the subject. For example, when telling me about "the hour without a shadow" he would explain the astronomical phenomenon, but would also tell me how he had learned about this from his good old-friend. Standing underneath the sun at the right hour and on the right day my dad inevitable said *existen otros mundos y están aquí*. Without my father's story and phrase, those other worlds

would had gone unnoticed. However, he has never told me what the phrase is supposed to mean, it was always supposed to be self-evident. The phrase, I discovered, meant in that moment the amazement of the event itself, of the "other worlds" that where present in the one I inhabited and that I had just experienced.

At another point, I realized that the phrase was followed by something else, he would add: "that is what Paul Eluard said"—but he said that in Spanish of course. One day I asked Paul who? To which my dad answered, "an important writer" but really, he knew not much about him. He had heard the phrase somewhere and had made it his own. Thirty plus years later the man still repeats the same old phrase, along with five or six other phrases that he will not let go of until this day. I had understood what the phrase meant at one point or another, but it baffled me that this phrase could be repeated so many times and in completely different contexts. I am not sure if I was the one who noticed that my father kept repeating this phrase, or if someone else had already pointed it out, but I do know that unlike my father I had to know where the phrase that was tattooed in my memory came from or meant.

Eluard's quote was somewhat different to the one I had inscribed in my mind. The translation from the French would go as follows "there is another world and it is in this one" or "there is another world but it is this one." The French Surrealist and Communist poet had meant to say the that there was another—singular—world and that it was in this one. In my father's version contrary to Eluard's he had added worlds to the phrase, perhaps an invention of his own, a slip or just a missed translation. Even with the change of the phrase, the surrealist sentiment is still able to operate. Furthermore, Eluard's quote is a quote from Albert Béguin citing Iganz-Vitalis Troxler. This chain of quotations is indicative that the phrase can outlive its own time and its supposed author, and that inadvertently my father was continuing to move the phrase in a similar

way as Eluard had done. Even though Eluard is the most recognized author for the famous phrase some have also attributed it to Rilke and others, but it was somehow he who was able to mobilize it. Given Eluard's political conviction that knowledge is not a property, the ownership of the phrase is not what is at stake, its continuous reproduction only proves the force of that which cannot be owned or contained. When I tell the anecdotes about my father I only tell the parts of him as the mechanical being repeating the same trick, but I never explain the story of Paul Eluard. This investigation is the theorization of the phrase that exceedes the anecdote of my father, that had consciously or not linked him with the history of literature, and that through my experiences led me to the space of inquiry and knowledge

It is not the same to tell than to write these anecdotes about my father. There is a certain kind of dryness when trying to explain and tell an oral anecdote in written form, since the explanation takes away the humor or clever aspect that is almost always present in the form. Furthermore, these anecdotes that I tell, are ones that many people who know my father also tell about him, and who make him a sort of "humorous character" since everyone is trying to predict which one of "his" phrases he will produce at any given moment/situation. Whenever I tell people how my father is, I always recur to the anecdote about the saying by Paul Eluard, with an attempt to capture the experience of knowing him.

Many of the authors that I engage with in this project are known to be great storytellers—Macedonio Fernández, Jorge Luis Borges, Ricardo Piglia, Eduardo Lalo, Juan José Arreola and Augusto Monterroso. Some of these authors are known because of their writings, but others for their conversations if not for both. What usually makes a talented storyteller in orality is the ability to express emotion, elaborate on the characters and expand on the experience being shared. But when referring to anecdotes and fables we can see the discrepancy that occurs in the oral and

written traditions, since for the written expression of these forms the imperative relies on concision, precision and intricacy. The time spent, expansion and showmanship needed in the good teller of anecdotes is not transferred for the writer of the same kind of stories who is looking to express the same experience in the least amount of words.

Anecdotes, aphorisms, sentences and fables—as literary practices—are deeply entangled with the spoken word and to oral traditions. However, the fact that these forms are associated with the spoken word does not mean that they by any way mimic or attempt to mimic the flow of orality—neither of a dialogue or conversation nor of an internal monologue. Instead of a copied transcription of a conversation or of the stream of consciousness, these writings are the inscriptions of the multiple forms that break the continuum of a progressive language. In a line where language and time seem to move in unison from left to right—in the written form—and from beginning to end, these brief forms are the eternal—hence timeless—interruptions breaking the order of time in favor of sense. Thus, these forms are nothing if not maneuvers of displacement. By this I mean devices that dislodge themselves, firstly, from linear narrative by telling, re-telling and copying old and well-known stories that at times invoke an ancient or medieval aesthetic, and, secondly, by presenting themselves as de-contextualized events. This is the reason we can always insert personal anecdotes, sayings, aphorisms, and fables into conversations and texts without losing the track of what we are saying.

Writing a dissertation about brief forms seemed always a treacherous or in the very least contradictory project. Not only was there an imperative on brevity that was in tension with the extensive discussion of the forms—the dissertation—but more importantly the explanation of the eternal forms would create a temporal narrative, or worse a progressive one that would deny the interventions of the form. However soon I realized that even an “eternal” must be in a place and

in a time, since the forms as interruptions, intersect with a progressive temporality. For that I decided to look at how these forms operate within their confined spaces to dislocate themselves from historical time, and place themselves deeply in the literary production of the twentieth and twenty first centuries in Latin-America. Even though I engage with different authors form the Latin-American continent— Macedonio Fernández, Jorge Luis Borges, Ricardo Piglia, Eduardo Lalo, Juan José Arreola and Augusto Monterroso—you will rarely encounter in the chapters the word "Latin-America", a historical date, or any other reference to geopolitical space or time, unless it is relevant to the texts themselves. This was the way I settled the problematic of expanding brief forms, and explaining something that is supposed to be self-evident, since anecdotes, fables, aphorisms, and sentences are theoretically self-explanatory. Instead of relying on context to provide an interpretation or reason for the text, I wanted to see if the form would provide an interpretation for the context. Furthermore, the text was already an eternal form, meaning something that had outlived its own time, and thus could be told and retold in a different historical context, the form itself theoretically could provide meaning or "make sense."

When first beginning this project, I remember having a conversation with my advisor Bruno Bosteels about my fascination with the concision of language, definition, short-stories, and texts that can be decontextualized and still carry their meaning. It was in this conversation that a significant distinction between the short-story and these pre-modern forms was made that would make me define the brief forms that would compose my project. While doing research I found a vast amount of scholarship regarding *microficciones, micro-cuentos, mini-cuentos*, etc., produced by the experts on the Latin-American short-short-story such as David Lagmanovich, Lauro Zavala and Juan Armando Epple which was paramount to my investigation. Each of their works focused on different taxonomical approaches but agreed that the micro-story is the condensed version of

the short-story of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, one of the main aspects of these forms is the importance of brevity for bevity's sake which has made possible the production of the canon of this form through writing competitions that restrict the number of words. On the other hand, all three theorists mention the importance of anecdotes, fables and aphorisms, whch are prior to the short-story of the nineteenth century but do not concentrate on the stury of these forms.

It is known to many that anecdotes, fables and aphorisms are present and even ubiquitous in the Latin-American artifice, and yet there is no real inquiry into the meaning of these specific forms. In other words, these brief forms are only present, mentioned or recognized when they are collected with titles such as "fables," "aphorisms," or "anecdotes." By ubiquitous I mean that these brief forms are perpetually moving in our Spanish language from the written to the oral—or the other way around—which is precisely what I trace in my project.

Juan Armando Epple writes that it was Enrique Anderson Imbert who in his *Teoría del cuento* said that the anecdote, the aphorism, and the fable, among other forms, had a longer tradition than the short-story and belonged to the "simple forms" that André Jolles had categorized. In his project, *Simple Forms*, Jolles enumerated nine different forms—legend, saga, myth, riddle, saying, case, memorabile (also translated as anecdote), fairy tale, as elementary structures that depending on various experiences would be actualized through different forms. Jolles was trying to create a taxonomy of a new kind of form—a simple one according to him. According to Peter J. Schwartz the English translator of the book, *Simple Forms* has been a significant precursor to structuralist and narratological literary theories, in fact it is usually compared to Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* since they were both published in 1928. However, Jolles text has not shared the same exposure, perhaps because of a lack of translation. Due to Jolles commitment to Nazi Germany the French and English translations of the book took several decades, having the

English translation only come out this year. However, the Spanish translation was available at least since the 1970's, which made it available for Spanish readers—who may have also been German readers—to access Jolle's work. His readers' among of them Anderson Imbert who wrote the history of the short story used Jolle's work to separate the anecdote, aphorism and fable as some of these "simple forms." This distinction between the forms was essential for my project since it connected the simple forms to experience and created a significan difference from the short-story of the nineteenth century.

In a similar way that Jolles and Propp had dificulty deciding which forms to include or were necessary to make part of their project, one of my most difficult tasks was also to decide which forms to incude in this dissertaion. Even though I knew I did not want to engange in a taxonomical endevour like the they did I know I had to make some inclusions and exclusions. Therefore, the way in which I delve into this problem was to inquire on the roll that experience has on the formation of knowledge. For that I had to focus on my own experiences with knowledge and my relationship to language and literature. I was not surprised to find that I had a keen eye for repetitive phrases, turn of phrases, anecdotes and sayings. At one point, I realized that the anecdotes I told—like the one's of my father—were of great importance to my understanding of language, literature and knowledge. Furthermore, I recognized similar gestures and patterns repeated in the works of the authors I read. Sometimes expressed differently, realizing that the same experience can be repeated in the same phrase in a different text, or rephreased as another form of repetition. Not only can phrases be me moved from one place to another but they can also be moved from one form to another, from narrative to phrase, meaning from narrative to abstraction which can continue to circulate just as the quote that Paul Eluard quoted and that now

everybody quotes. Thus, I decided to trace that movement, form one form to another, to see what is lost and what is gained in the perpetuity of the form.

The three brief forms I decided to study and analyze were the anecdote, the sentence as a form of the aphorism and the fable. Each one of these forms are vital both to popular culture and to the literary tradition of the Spanish language. As we will see through the chapters there is an invisible movement between each of these forms that I trace in order to see the influence that language exerts on bodies to re-shape the forms that circulate into different social, political and literary apparatuses. It is the purpose of this dissertation to show that there is a movement that goes unnoticed, which is unique to these forms and that gives us an insight into the relationship between experience, language and knowledge. An experience that is expressed as a personal anecdote, which then is abstracted into an aphoristic thought, or a fable which can be a collective anecdote that usually contains a moral or aphorism. Like Eluard's saying these are sayings that exceed their own time and can make it into the collective unconscious.

The dissertation is divided into four chapters. The first three chapters are dedicated to each of the three brief forms and the last chapter is a reflection of the movement between them. Beginning with a chapter on the anecdote is not arbitrary, however it was difficult deciding an entry point for a perpetual movement. For that I decided to structure my dissertation like my experience, which I traced to the anecdote of my father. Thus, the introduction begins with my own anecdote and the first chapter is the copy of the entry point to this perpetual movement into the study of the form, which as we will see in the chapters is not the necessary order of the movement, since it is not progressive.

In the first chapter titled "False Case: The Anecdote" I study the ways in which Argentinian author's Macedonio Fernández, Jorge Luis Borges and Ricardo Piglia engage in the writing of

what I call an "untraceable life" through anecdotes. I argue that after Macedonio's success of turning himself into an anecdote—since he was mostly known through them—he influenced both Borges and Piglia to carry on with what would be their own anecdotal projects. Since the anecdote is always oscillating between, the oral and the written, and the real and the fictive, it makes possible the writing of an untraceable. These writings consist in the writing oneself only to erase oneself through the negation of authorship and of subjectivity, mostly by engaging in plagiarism, self-plagiarism, repetition, doubles, and apocryphal texts. Although each author related to the form in a distinct way, all three implement similar devices for most of their work. There are many dimensions in which the figure and memory of Macedonio Fernández has been recovered through the years in Argentina. Most singularly Macedonio, as he is referred by everyone, has become the construction of a kind of myth, constructed by his closest friends, who were, amongst others Jorge Luis Borges. Macedonio, wrote, but more than that he was a great conversationalist and most of his work was published posthumously. Part of the magic of Macedonio is of never really knowing if his anecdotes happened or not or if it was a "happening" in the sense of a performance of the avant-garde or if it was a "real" political gesture. Macedonio was Borges´ good friend and mentor, and when he died, Borges published a book with some of his late friend's texts. Here he "confessed" that he had admired Macedonio so much that he had imitated him to the point of plagiarism. We can see, the teachings of Macedonio embedded in Borges work, where he has already been contaminated and inscribed by the other—so much so, to the point of involuntary plagiarism. Borges is no longer Borges but is also Macedonio. In a more conscious level we encounter in Borges' work a voluntary plagiarism in the creation of doubles, of copying and redoubling, of citation and intertextuality and an almost complete distrust towards the modern figure of the author as almighty, and Borges masterfully disfigures it. He is not an author but a

writer who cheats, steals, plagiarizes and falsifies translations—and not from anyone but also from his friend and mentor. However, for Borges the gesture of copying Macedonio and of speaking about him in anecdotes is not sufficient, I argue that elsewhere he theorizes the anecdote as the "biography of eternity" and describes the form almost in the same way that he saw his friend. Piglia, who borrows and steals many maneuvers from both of these authors has many times as his protagonist, Macedonio Fernández. In fact, I decided to begin this chapter historically backwards, which means that I began with Piglia's texts about Macedonio or I should rather say, searching for Macedonio. From the beginning, I want to argue that Piglia's works are already in complicity with those of Macedonio and Borges', but that like Borges', Piglia has taken the project into another part of theory, into literary criticism, from where he operates with the anecdotal.

For the second chapter titled "The Metaphysical Case: The Sentence" I already start tracing the perpetual movement between the forms, which is also at once synchronic and anachronic. The aphorism was on my list of forms already but, I was debating the next form to place in the perpetual movement and if the "aphorism" as such was the right form for the project. From my experience, I had gathered already that I would pick the anecdote first, and therefore the aphorism came second, which was the quote that my father would repeat. I was not very pleased with my choice, but while doing research I found in Deleuze's book about Nietzsche a quote that resolve the problem indefinitely in which Deleuze defined one of Nietzsche's methods: "where the anecdote of life and the aphorism of thought amount to one and the same thing." That was enough to continue with the intuition that the aphorism was the next chapter. The movement from the experience of life to the abstraction of thought was not one that I saw simply, since the abstractions would have to be conceived at many levels. For that reason, I argue, that the "sentence" is the form of abstraction that can capture our experiences in the space of the prison, which I see the as the paradigmatic

experience of the literature of the twentieth and twenty first centuries in Latin America literature. However, as I argue in the chapeter, soon we will see that these prisons are not only only the modern prison, the city, the body, but also our grammatical and juridical structure, which ultimately condemn subjects to perpetual prisons. In this chapter, I argue how in Ricardo Piglia's "Prisión perpetua" a paranoid sentence, becomes the catalyst for his interpretation and reinterpretation of all Argentine history as a complot, a highly creative and self-condemnatory enterprise. But the writing of experiences in "sentences" does not always have to end in self-condemnation like in the case of Borges and Eduardo Lalo. Borges is known for being a sententious writer but quite differently than Piglia he does not sentence subjects to "perpetual prisons" because in Borges' universe there are no subjects. What I argue is that Borges creates the possibility of pronouncing the sentence, in the plotting of his stories only to then make sure he refuses to pronounce the sentence. In the case of Eduardo Lalo, I present and analyze his work *El deseo del lápiz: castigo urbanismo, escritura* as the impossibility of writing experience beyond the sentence since most everything is contained by the state, like in a prison. However, Lalo's proposal is imperative, even if dreadful at times, since its able to open up the space of thought and say something that is neither affirmation nor negation, what he calls *lo impensado*, and I argue that this is a way to move from the thought of the sentence into another way of thought.

For my third chapter "Fictional Case: The Fable" I look at well-known parables and fables that are retold by Juan José Arreola and Augusto Monterroso and I analyze the ways in which they innovate with the form but also display the mechanisms to rearticulate a new meaning and disintegrating the logic of the narrative. Having analyzed a fable, I move to theoretical discussion on the different meanings of the concepts. I argue that the sentence, and the fable can at times be considered the same form. At this point of the movement we start to see that it is truly not a

progressive movement since all three forms can operate as the other at any moment in time. The fable can be a communal anecdote (the people's anecdote) while the moral of a fable can be an aphorism or a sentence that can be attached or taken from its original form. Furthermore, I study the way in which experience is organized in a causal way—as a sequence of events and Aesopic tradition. I argue that Arreola's "El guardagujas," juxtaposes a modern narrative of a train, with a story about a train that is going nowhere, leaving us with a metanarrative for the eternity of the fable.

The last chapter "Perpetual Movement: The Flies" is a meta-chapter and it not a closure of my investigation but rather an immersion in the movement. The title of the chapter, also the title of the dissertation, is the title of Augusto Monterroso's book *Movimiento perpetuo*, a miscellaneous book on brief texts on different subjects and quotes about flies. I must confess that first time I re-read this book while doing research (I had read it several years ago) I decided it would be part of the project, but for a while I was not sure in what capacity. However, it was here that I saw the movement and the whole project come together. I argue that this miscellaneous book is the epitome of Monterroso's whole literary enterprise which I later trace in the chapter. I also argue that in his infinite collection of quotes about flies Monterroso was attempting to create an eternal history about the fly. In this project, I see a perfect connection between the oral—since there are so many sayings about flies in Spanish—and the written, which is the collection that Monterroso is creating. With this collection, I speculate about the meaning of his flies, and argue that Monterroso had a crafted, calculated and ethical aesthetic project of movements different forms that he called perpetual.

After so many years of hearing my father tell me the same old anecdotes, with the same old punch-line I cannot help but to get annoyed sometimes and point out the variations and

exagerations that have piled on thoughout the years. But the old man smiles and says, “yeah yeah I know, but nothing important change, everything I added is just for dramatic effect” and continues to say Eluard’s quote. After all these years I figured that the little lectures followed by the quote by Paul Eluard that had been drilled into my counsciousness had not been lectures at all but were the fables of a storyteller who also happened to be a father.

To Paul Eluard

False Case: The Anecdote

> Para mostrar a Macedonio no he hallado mejor medio que las anécdotas, pero éstas, cuando son memorables, tienen la desventaja de convertir a su protagonista en un ente mecánico, que infinitamente repite el mismo epigrama, ahora clásico, o tiene la misma salida. Otra cosa fueron los dichos de Macedonio, imprevisiblemente agregados a la realidad y enriqueciéndola y asombrándola.
>
> Borges, *Macedonio Fernández*

Anecdotes

Through anecdotes is that we most consistently tell the story of our lives in the oral form, in a conversation here and there and piece by piece. And yet, when it comes to the written form an anecdote always becomes suspicious. This is because traditionally in the written language our demands and expectations for reliability, consistency, and a linear narrative makes the anecdote, the joke or "trivial" material of an experience to be inserted into the rigorous and most importantly "trustworthy" text. This is not to say that there are not differences when writing and speaking—especially different expectations—but I am questioning the preference that has been given to "factual" information—versus experience—when tracing a life.

The writing-project of anecdotes can be analyzed from various perspectives, but as we will see their different perceptions will ultimately place the form on either side of the end of the spectrum: as completely trivial or as the kernel of truth or reality. Even within literature anecdotes are perceived as extraliterary, perhaps because they are identified more with the oral tradition than with the written one. This happens in the case when anecdotes in literature are supposed to act as pieces of historical truth. Although, as I said, I am asserting the dichotomy of the spoken and written anecdotes to elucidate this first point—the suspiciousness of written anecdotes—it is important to note that anecdotes function to make sense of experiences and not to historicize life

and neither to create facts. Therefore, the project of tracing a life in anecdotes is one based on experiences and creating sense rather than on the accumulation of data.

As I mentioned earlier the project of writing anecdotes, can be analyzed, and framed through different disciplines and perspectives. Mainly, anecdotes have been the subject of History, Philosophy, and Literature. Anecdotes in historiography have been deemed as "no-account items" which means that they have been considered as superfluous or trivial items in a text, used as examples of the data that a historian presents. However, it is imperative to remember that while these examples may be interesting, they are considered of no value to the text (i.e. no-account items). It was not until left-wing historians, primarily culturalists like E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams who thought literature was counterhistory, that anecdotes gained value in a historical context since these historians saw them as devices that "opened" history.[1] Within the discipline of history we can see then, that the debate lies between a tradition of academics that believe that anecdotes have no place in the rigor of the text, and left-wing historians who want to articulate a counterhistory in which the anecdote gives voice to the underrepresented voices, turning written anecdotes from no-account items to valuable kernels of truth that opened history.

Anecdotes in philosophical discourse have also been a subject of debate. Traditionally they have been considered superfluous items since their narrative form fails to provide a logical argument. Anecdotes are only practical (not superfluous) as a rhetorical device that can resolve the deadlock hit by a logical impasse that only a narrative—which does not have to relate to a real event—can dissolve. However, for other philosophers and thinkers like Paul Fleming the anecdote is the perfect device in which to express the "non-conceptual" in similar way, he discusses, as a

[1] For a discussion on this subject see "Counterhistory and the Anecdote" in Gallagher and Greenblatt.

metaphor can do. In, "The Perfect Story: Anecdote and Exemplarity in Linnaeus and Blumberg," Fleming explores and defines the theoretical boundaries of the anecdote at the intersection of philosophy, literature, and experience. He argues that the anecdote at its core: "opens the issue of whether it is the exception or the norm, whether it only speaks for itself (and thus is devoid of all authority) or assumes exemplary force" (Fleming 74). Fleming wants to decipher if the anecdote functions as an isolated experience or if it can become paradigmatic. In the anecdotes of the traditional philosophers, contrary to the ones of the historian, the anecdotes do not need to claim any "reality" but can be completely invented just to make a point. Thus from this point of view, we can see that the anecdote is superfluous in a logical system or it is a device that can be entirely disconnected from any experience because its function is only to assist and contribute to the development of the philosophical system to continue in its process. However, when trying to figure the theoretical parameters of the anecdote, like in the case of Fleming's investigation, the question of experience is taken back to the center but from a different angle, asking if the anecdote as the expression of experience only speaks for itself or has the power to speak for more, in the form of example.

In literature, my object of study—since the texts I analyze are literary—anecdotes are also placed within different perspectives that I have discussed above. In recent debates, anecdotes in relationship to literature are mostly discussed among new-historicists such as Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher,[2] whose affiliation is on the side of radical history and the counterhistorical. Their view of the anecdote comes from anthropologist Clifford Geertz's use of it in the field: "For it is precisely not as fiction or as a little philosopher's tale that Geertz invites

[2] See *Practicing New Historicism,* a project by both Gallagher and Greenblatt, where they discuss the anecdote at length.

us to read his anecdote; it is as a 'raw' sample of his field notes. The frame is crucial, since in this case it helps us to conjure up a 'real' as opposed to an 'imaginary' world" (Gallagher 30). We here clearly see the tension between the philosophical anecdote and the historical anecdote. What Greenblatt requires of him with the "raw" sample that Geertz could obtain from the field in order to obtain a sort of ethnographic view of literature. However, Greenblatt would say that he does not want a social science, so instead he calls it "ethnographic realism": "What we wanted was not social science but ethnographic realism, and we wanted it principally for literary purposes" (Greenblatt 28). The anecdote at this juncture would be the piece of realism, of data, or counterhistory, that would reveal something about the rest of the text and its time.[3]

The debates presented above are not directly discussed or contained in my study of the anecdote, however my own conception of the "case of the anecdote" would not be possible without the study and work of the aforementioned authors of the form. I will present not a taxonomy, nor a poetics, but the anecdote in literature as a "false case." Thus, the construction of a perfectly constructed "false case" oscillating at-all-times between the real and the fictive, the private and the published and the spoken and the written through the interrelated projects of Macedonio Fernández, Jorge Luis Borges and Ricardo Piglia.

The False Case

In the section of "Hotel Almagro" in *Formas Breves*, Ricardo Piglia recounts the story of his life, as a double life. Having partially moved to Buenos Aires for work, Piglia found himself as almost being two different people; having two jobs, two sets of friends and two residencies

[3] "The new historicist anecdote as many of us deployed it is an Auerbachian device. Of course, we typically moved outsidde of canonical works of art for our anecdotes; we frequently sought an effect of surprise by selecting passages from what looked, in the context of literary criticism, like oddly marginal eccentric works, and we allowed the analysis of the anecdote to pull away from or alternatively to swamp the explication of the canonical work of art to which it was at least nominally conjoined" (Gallagher and Greenblatt, 35-6).

which consisted in two nearly identical hotel rooms—one in Buenos Aires and the other in La Plata. Of significance in this mirror life were the experiences in the hotel rooms he occupied, which remained unchanged: "lo que era igual, sin embargo, era la vida en la pieza de hotel. Los pasillos vacíos, los cuartos transitorios, el clima anónimo de esos lugares donde se está siempre de paso" (Piglia, *Formas* 10). His social and work relationships were of course, different, since he was in two different cities; but inside that hotel room, surrounded by empty and anonymous spaces, Piglia did not recur to the story of himself to find unity in this split life because he found that: "vivir en un hotel es el mejor modo de no caer en la ilusión de 'tener' una vida personal, de no tener quiero decir nada personal para contar, salvo los rastros que dejan otros" (Piglia, *Formas*10). Instead, he found unity in the impersonal and generic space of that repeated hotel room in which he drops the personal anecdote—of the man Ricardo Piglia who lives in two hotel rooms in two different cities of Argentina—to tell the anecdote of the mysterious letters he finds hidden in two hotel dressers.

Having left his personal anecdote, Piglia turns to observe the similarities of the two hotel rooms. Not only are the surroundings of his room similar, but the rooms themselves are duplicates; both rooms had a great opening—a balcony and a picture window, respectively—very high ceilings and similar dressers. One day, in La Plata, Piglia finds the letters of a woman which were hidden in the dresser: "siempre se encuentran rastros de los que han estado antes cuando se vive en una pieza de hotel. Las cartas estaban disimuladas en un hueco como si alguien hubiera escondido un paquete con drogas" (Piglia, *Formas* 10). He says that later on—after trying to find this woman and failing to do so—he forgot about the letters. However, one day in Buenos Aires while laying in the bed of his hotel room it occurred to him to examine the dresser, where he found "sobre un costado, en un hueco, había dos cartas: eran la respuesta de un hombre a las cartas de la mujer de La Plata" (Piglia, *Formas* 11). In "Hotel Almagro" we find the brief story, or rather *la*

forma breve in which a seemingly naïve anecdote—a single event in the life of Piglia—turns into the fictive anecdote of a man who finds the letters of two strangers in two similar hotel rooms in two different cities, who are connected themselves and who hid their letters in that generic dresser of a hotel room. The movement between what could be an autobiographical event—the author Piglia living in two cities of Argentina at a given time—and the construction of what seems to be a fictive event—the generic man who "coincidentally" and almost unbelievingly finds a letter and its answer in two different cities—could also have another doubling effect; the story of a man who abandons the story of himself to tell the story of another, and more specifically the story of the traces of another. In this way Piglia creates a Quijote-like adventure, where instead of invoking the romances of chivalry, he invokes his very particular 20th century equivalent: the Macedonian machine.[4]

It is well known, or at least repeatedly told, that Macedonio Fernández used to leave or "forget" his writings in the dressers of hotels or *pensiones* where he spent many years of his life after his wife died and after he left his juridical life to devote himself to the literary and contemplative life. This anecdote was retold by Borges in his prologue to *Macedonio Fernández*: "Macedonio no le daba el menor valor a la palabra escrita; al mudarse de alojamiento no se llevaba los manuscritos de índole metafísica o literaria que se habían acumulado sobre la mesa y que llenaban los cajones y armarios. Mucho se perdió así, acaso irrevocablemente" (5). It is almost impossible not to think that perhaps Piglia wanted to create and inhabit an "adventure" in which Piglia the man and author would encounter the mythical texts left behind by Macedonio. This does not mean that Piglia was looking to become Macedonio or duplicate him, but rather that he wanted to encounter this anecdote of Macedonio. By this I mean not the actual texts left by Macedonio—

[4] See Piglia *La ciudad ausente*, especially 46-7.

which would verify Borges' anecdote, turning the anecdote into a biographical or autobiographical fact—nor that Piglia wanted to encounter the absence of the texts—which would neither verify nor falsify their existence or inexistence. Piglia, thus, wanted to encounter the anecdotal Macedonio through those texts that, as Borges said, were irrevocably lost. This encounter for Piglia is necessary not only to construct a narrative from it but also indispensable to move from the personal to the impersonal narrative or, in other words, from the autobiographical fact to fiction. Certainly, saying that the letters "found" in "Hotel Almagro" were in reference to the anecdote of Macedonio is a speculation, but one that becomes more plausible not only when we remember Piglia's well-known interest in Macedonio, but also because the *formas breves* following "Hotel Almagro" are in direct relation to Macedonio.

In "Notas sobre Macedonio en un Diario" and "La mujer grabada" which immediately follow "Hotel Almagro," we again witness the creation of a Piglia narrative that is built in complicity with a Macedonian anecdote. In "Notas sobre Macedonio en un Diario," Piglia collects fifteen different texts that appear to be diary entries within an eighteen-year range; and I say "appear" since these texts, as well as "Hotel Almagro," oscillate and most times move to and from the autobiographical and the fictional, a movement that I precisely call "the anecdotal." In the first collected diary entry, Piglia writes a text that could indirectly refer to one of Macedonio's best-known anecdotes—the one about the anarchist commune he started in Paraguay: "Carlos Heras habla de Macedonio Fernández, inesperadamente, en un seminario sobre la anarquía del año veinte" (Piglia, *Formas* 15).[5] The diary entry continues to record what Carlos Heras had to say about Macedonio. Heras, who allegedly had met Macedonio in his litigating years, told the writer of these entries (presumably Piglia) different anecdotes about Macedonio. One was about the way

[5] For different accounts of the existence or inexistence of the anarchist commune see Abós 43-51.

he argued in court, another was about how Macedonio did not like to shake hands, another about how women used to throw themselves at him, etc. But besides these anecdotes the diary entries are filled with theories about Macedonio's writings: "se trataba de un estilo oral, aunque parezca su antítesis"; conversations with Piglia's fictional character Renzi: "larga conversación con Renzi sobre Macedonio Fernández"; apocryphal texts: "releo el *Diario escrito en la Estancia*. Macedonio lo escribió entre enero y marzo de 1938, en La Suficiente, de Pilar";[6] as well as the transcriptions of Macedonio's handwritten notes found in a copy of *Una novela que comienza* which was held at the library. The diversity of registers in this fictional diary illustrate the hybrid nature of Piglia's aesthetic, which is only then reaffirmed by the author's explicit explanation in the epilogue: "en este libro he trabajado sobre los relatos reales y también sobre variantes y versiones imaginarias de argumentos existentes. Pequeños experimentos narrativos y relatos personales me han servido como modelos microscópicos de un mundo posible o como fragmentos del mapa de un remoto territorio desconocido" (*Formas* 142). These experiments with the telling of "real" events, could also be thought of as Piglia's *casos falsos*,[7] since it is Piglia the critic who as a "scientist" simulates the possibilities of these microscopic models: "los científicos construyen en el laboratorio situaciones artificiales, lo que llaman caso falso, un hecho producido y estudiado bajo condiciones perfectamente controladas" (Piglia, *Prisión* 128). What is of interest here is precisely the use of personal stories—anecdotes—as *casos falsos*, which are, as discussed above, the microscopic models of a world that serve as experimental narrative pieces of something unknown. Piglia uses not only his own anecdotes for these experiments but builds some of them on anecdotes of Macedonio. It is with the construction of the "false case" that the anecdote can mobilize the story of a life, based on Piglia and Macedonio's real experiences. However, we know these are "false"

[6] For more information on the inexistence of "Diario escrito en la Estancia" see González Álvarez 70.
[7] For a ampler discussion of Piglia's "*casos falsos*" see González Álvarez 34-7, 48, 50, 82, 265-8.

because they have been perfectly crafted by Piglia who is chasing Macedonio's anecdotes as a narrative experiment all the while establishing a literary tradition. What is interesting about Piglia's anecdotes is that contrary to the traditional written anecdote—which rises suspicion from the reader that they are not true—Piglia's false cases rise suspicions, that they may have happened; just like Macedonio's anecdotes. The maximum expression of this kind of anecdotal movement found in *Formas breves* is that of "La mujer grabada."

As mentioned before, hotel rooms seemed to Piglia to be the preferred place to tell the "personal" life of others, since in a hotel room one does not fall into the illusion of "possessing" a personal life:

> Junior decía que le gustaba vivir en hoteles porque era hijo de ingleses…pensaba en los viajeros ingleses del siglo XIX, en los comerciantes y contrabandistas que abandonaban a sus familias y sus conocidos para recorrer los territorios donde todavía no había llegado la revolución industrial. Solitarios y casi invisibles, habían inventado el periodismo moderno porque habían dejado atrás sus historias personales (Piglia, *La ciudad* 9).

Being in a hotel room displaces all kinds of sentiments and apprehensions of ownership in which one cannot even hold on to the self. It is not surprising then, that to tell the anecdote of "La mujer grabada" Piglia returns to his days in the Almagro Hotel. This time, no apocryphal Macedonian letters are found. However, the author is still creating an encounter between his own anecdote and one of Macedonio, or better yet, his (Piglia's) encounter with a woman who carried a picture of Macedonio: "En la puerta del estadio paraba una mujer que vendía flores y en el vestido llevaba prendida una foto de Macedonio Fernández…yo la invitaba a tomar el té en la confitería Las Violetas" (Piglia, *Formas* 31). The woman who was called *la loca del grabador,* because she

always carried a recording device—her only belonging—around her waist, told him that she had met Macedonio when she was young and that she used to visit Macedonio when they lived nearby. Piglia, the narrator, acknowledges that this woman may have never met Macedonio: "nunca supe de dónde había sacado la foto y nunca supe si lo que me contaba era verdad. Supongo que realmente lo había conocido y que lo había querido" (*Formas* 32). But what mattered was not if she had in fact met him, but rather that she could have *possibly* met him. What suffices for Piglia as much as what suffices for an anecdote is not the verifiability of the story but rather how conceivable it is. After acknowledging that he is not sure if she had ever met him, Piglia gives us an image of this woman which makes her a conceivable teller of a Macedonian anecdote: "a veces se quedaba un rato callada y después me decía que era 'totalmente macedoniana' y con eso tal vez quería decirme que era inocente. A veces de pronto se perdía y me miraba con los ojos vacíos y decía que estaba muerta y que tenía todo el cuerpo hueco por dentro" (Piglia, *Formas* 32). Whether she had met Macedonio or not does not matter; what matters to Piglia is that a crazy woman who carries a recording device, a picture of Macedonio on her dress, and at times does not know if she is dead or not, is a perfectly conceivable teller and character of a Macedonian anecdote. She may have never actually met Macedonio but they somehow knew each other, and that was enough for Piglia to tell the anecdote of a woman who loved Macedonio. As Piglia's anecdote continues, the woman apparently is taken to a hospital, and Piglia does not see her again. A few months later he receives the recording device the woman, and when he turns it on he hears the voice of a woman who speaks and sings and then speaks to herself and then finally "una voz que puede ser la voz de Macedonio Fernández" (Piglia, *Formas* 33). We do not know if the voice is verifiably Macedonio's, however the fascination of Piglia the character and Piglia the writer of the anecdote is in that the voice is *possibly* Macedonio's. This possibility then, allows Piglia to experiment with

the *caso falso* of the recording machine. The false case is, thus, an experiment with the possible—of what was, is and what could have been.

In "La mujer grabada" we see a movement of the personal anecdote that negates the story of one's self to tell the story of another. As I mentioned before, this anecdote is the maximum expression not only of the movement from the personal to the impersonal, but of the microscopic model which moves to explore something which is unknown. In the last paragraph of "La mujer grabada" Piglia states how this anecdote was the model for one of his novels:

> Ese grabador y la voz de una mujer que cree estar muerta y vende violetas en la puerta de la Federación de Box de la calle Castro Barros, fueron para mí la imagen inicial de la máquina de Macedonio en mi novela *La ciudad ausente*: la voz perdida de una mujer con la que Macedonio conversa en la soledad de una pieza de hotel. (Piglia, *Formas* 33)

Though my interest here is not in Piglia's *La ciudad ausente*, it is noteworthy that this "image" or *caso falso* became the axis of that novel. The "image" of the recorded woman in "La mujer grabada," however, is not a static image, since there are a series of relationships and beliefs. From a single image, we would not be able to tell what the beliefs of this woman are, or whether or not she ever moved from that particular street where she sold flowers to a lonely hotel room to talk with Macedonio; we can, however, see this moving image in the narrative told by Piglia in "La mujer grabada." This image, enters into the realm of the story but one that cannot be easily classified as a short-story not only because there is an oscillation between the autobiographical to the fictive—the anecdotal—but because it focuses on one single event-image, *el caso falso*. El *caso falso* is more interested in the signification of that single decontextualized event than with

what happens in the story or its characters.[8] In other words, the anecdote and the anecdotal focus on the form of the event—the autobiographical instance turned fiction or the fictional turned into autobiographical or biographical event—while the content could be any, as long as it is bewildering enough to draw out signification. However, as Borges warns us in the prologue to *Macedonio Fernández*: "las anécdotas…cuando son memorables, tienen la desventaja de convertir a su protagonista en un ente mecánico, que infinitamente repite el mismo epigrama, ahora clásico, o tiene la misma salida" (20). What Borges means by "memorable" seems uncertain, since the anecdotes of Macedonio are worthy of memory and yet they do not turn the protagonist (Macedonio) into a mechanical being: "Otra cosa fueron los dichos de Macedonio, imprevisiblemente agregados a la realidad y enriqueciéndola y asombrándola" (*Macedonio* 21). Perhaps what makes the anecdotes about Macedonio exceptional is that they were both memorable and non-transcendental, that is, grounded in experience and unable to be abstracted, which is why they enrich and amaze reality.

But going back to Macedonio and Piglia, and taking the example of "La mujer grabada" into account, we see the woman with the recorder turned into a protagonist, neither for what happened to her before or after her supposed meetings with Macedonio, nor for what this woman supposedly was or meant to Macedonio, or Piglia. The remarkable aspect that turned this simple flower seller into a protagonist is that she had met Macedonio. If the encounter was imaginative or real, accidental or eventual—she was always already a Macedonian woman. The anecdote, when it is memorable becomes an image, creating different levels of signification. Nevertheless, when we are dealing with an unknown protagonist—a woman who sells flowers—there is no actual signification in the anecdote itself. If we take Piglia's image: "ese grabador y la voz de una

[8] For more on the relevance of signification on the anecdote see Fleming 74.

mujer que cree estar muerta y vende violetas en la puerta de la Federación de Box de la calle Castro Barros" (*Formas* 33), we don't necessarily find something memorable in it—which is not to say that one could not draw signification from it. However, it is when the image is related to a well-known Macedonio that it may become bewildering. This signification already implies a contextualization or embedding of the anecdote, which means, placing it within a world of meaning. If we can think about it in this way, then we can see Piglia's collection of Macedonio's anecdotes in *Formas breves*—the book—as an interpretation of them as well as a place in which to collect them. But Piglia's endeavor goes beyond a mere collection. The process of the collection of the anecdotes themselves creates an anecdote precisely about this collection. We can see this, for example, in texts like "Notas sobre Macedonio en un Diario." In this text, a Macedonian anecdote is already working in complicity with a Piglian anecdote—Piglia looking for the traces of Macedonio in Buenos Aires—and then Piglia makes this complicity intelligible by adding both as a storyteller and as a literary critic. The addition of Macedonio's and Piglia's anecdotes, Piglia's apocryphal texts and Piglia's theories about Macedonio are what make the *formas breves* about Macedonio a work of literary criticism rather than just a holding place for anecdotes. Through the embedding of all of these anecdotes into the narrative of this kind of experimental criticism, is that Piglia is able to use and re-work the anecdote into a different framework.

Embedded Anecdotes

Anecdotes are quite difficult to define and yet they are, even if only at some level, understood by many and practiced by most.[9] They are part of our conscious and unconscious everyday speech, but when they become part of the written world, on many occasions and as I will

[9] For a discussion on the difficulty of defining the anecdote, see Fleming 74.

elaborate, they become a problem. An anecdote in its simplest form refers to a short interesting or amusing story of a real incident or person. Moreover, in its etymological sense it refers to the "secret, private, or hitherto unpublished narratives or details of history" ("anecdote"). Taking both meanings into account we can see that anecdotes are the laconic tales of a real event that lend themselves primarily to orality—to what is said, known or spoken, privately written but not published. Nevertheless, anecdotes too make it to the written world, even if as a contradiction, as the publication of the private and secret histories that leak into the publicized sphere—as published.

Since anecdotes are the decontextualized and recontextualized events, when in written form, they must either be collected or embedded within an argument, essay, story, novel, etc., or, as in the case of Piglia, criticism. *Formas breves* is for Piglia both a critical exercise on brief forms as well as a place holder for them. More specifically, in *Formas breves*, we can find both the recontextualization of anecdotes—Macedonio's, Piglia's and those of others—as well as a collection of anecdotal texts (at least in "Hotel Almagro," "Notas sobre Macedonio en un Diario" and "La mujer grabada"). The texts collected in that book (especially the ones I have mentioned) already invoke the anecdotal or "barely-written," not only because they exist at the threshold of the oral and the written but because they are also at the threshold of the private and the published: "los textos de este volumen no requieren mayor elucidación. Pueden ser leídos como páginas perdidas en el diario de un escritor y también como los primeros ensayos y tentativas de una autobiografía" (Piglia, *Formas* 141). It is uncertain whether these "lost pages" refer to Piglia's own diary or if they refer to Macedonio's irrevocably lost pages, or if in fact they refer to both and/or neither. What is certain though, is that these texts invoke hearsay and therefore orality, especially in the case of "Notas sobre Macedonio en un Diario" and "La mujer grabada"; that they

exist within that contradiction of the "barely written," since they refer to the writing or reading of lost pages and/or hearsay, while also existing as framed or embedded within a particular interest or context. In the case of Piglia, as I mentioned before, anecdotes exist within the context of literary criticism: "La crítica es la forma moderna de la autobiografía. Uno escribe su vida cuando cree escribir sus lecturas. ¿No es a la inversa del *Quijote*? El crítico es aquel que encuentra su vida en el interior de los textos que lee" (*Formas breves* 141). Either Quixote or the reversal of Quijote, Piglia is venturing between the creation of life and the creation of a text, where never one—life/creation— antecedes the other.

It is not in vain that Piglia pays so much attention to Macedonio and plays with the idea of him in these texts. Macedonio the emblem of the anecdotal, the impossible to grasp, the oscillating figure between the spoken and the written word, and the real and the fictive possibility. Borges wrote in the preface to *Macedonio Fernández* that no one has written Macedonio's biography: "no se ha escrito aún la biografía de Macedonio Fernández, hombre que raras veces condescendió a la acción y que vivió entregado a los puros deleites del pensamiento" (7) and proceeds to write a brief and simple one.[10] However, in the prologue to the book, Borges entertains the reader with many anecdotes about Macedonio, from how cold he always was, to the old *alfajores* he kept under his bed, to clever sayings, etc., but he tells these anecdotes acknowledges the problems that these could bring: "Estas anécdotas corren el albur de parecer ridículas; así nos parecieron en aquel tiempo y las repetíamos, acaso exagerándolas un poco, pero sin el menor desmedro de nuestra reverencia" (*Macedonio* 15). Even though these anecdotes may turn into the ridiculous Borges, adds: "no quiero que de Macedonio se pierda nada…Yo, que ahora me detengo a registrar esos pormenores

[10] This prologue was published in 1961. Since then, some attempts at writing Macedonio's biography have been made. See *Macedonio Fernández: La biografía imposible* by Abós, and for a more alternative biography, that of his son, see Adolfo de Obieta's *Macedonio memorias errantes*.

absurdos, sigo creyendo que su protagonista es el hombre más extraordinario que he conocido. Sin duda a Boswell le ocurriría lo mismo con Samuel Johnson" (*Macedonio* 15). Though Borges struggles to depict Macedonio, he recurs to the telling and more specifically to the listing of his anecdotes, which are almost always the memorable and non-transcendental doings or sayings of their protagonist. It was through anecdotes that Borges wanted to hold on to the experience of having known that ungraspable and becoming-force which was Macedonio:

> Yo anhelaría recobrar de algún modo al que fue Macedonio, esa felicidad de saber que en una casa de Morón o del Once había un hombre mágico cuya sola existencia despreocupada era más importante que nuestras venturas o desventuras personales. Esto lo sentí yo, esto lo sentimos algunos, esto no puedo comunicarlo. (Borges, *Macedonio* 20)

The incommunicable here is the happiness that Borges felt by just knowing that Macedonio existed somewhere. The experience of having known him, but most importantly the happiness that his existence brought to Borges, leads him to want to capture the memory of his friend in a linguistic form. What was of great significance for Borges was not to capture who Macedonio was, but rather to capture the way he felt about Macedonio, for as he writes: "esto lo sentí yo, esto lo sentimos algunos, esto no puedo comunicarlo (Borges, *Macedonio* 20). The experience, the feeling of that experience and the transcription of both, turns what was once thought of incommunicable into a series of emotional anecdotes.

The Experience

The happiness that came from the experience of having known Macedonio becomes for Borges the possibility for a trivial and emotional anecdote. However, there are other experiences

and feelings—other versions and conjugations of *sentir*—that trigger once again the emotional anecdote for Borges. In and with "Sentirse en muerte," Borges counts and recounts the same anecdote—the one in which he feels himself dead—three times in three different places; first in "Dos Esquinas" in *El idioma de los argentinos*, then in "Historia de la eternidad" in *Historia de la eternidad* and lastly in "Nueva refutación del tiempo" in *Otras Inquisiciones*. The tale begins with the author wanting to record an experience he had:

> Deseo registrar aquí una experiencia que tuve hace unas noches: fruslería demasiado evanescente y estática para que la llame aventura; demasiado irrazonable y sentimental para pensamiento. Se trata de una escena y de su palabra: palabra ya predicha por mí, pero no vivida hasta entonces con entera dedicación de mi yo. Paso a historiarla, con accidentes de tiempo y de lugar que la declararon. (Borges 1:236)

The experience Borges wants to record has two dimensions: the event and the telling of the event. I call it an event since it is an experience—something happens—but one that as he writes, is too fleeting and static to be an adventure (or story) and too emotional and irrational to be a thought. This event then lies somewhere between story and thought, in the *fruslería*, in the almost shapeless triviality of an emotional experience. But it is precisely this apparent "triviality" that must be recorded, what signals the appearance of the anecdote itself. If we recall Borges' anecdotes of Macedonio, and Borges' acknowledgements of the problems of the anecdote we may also recall that it is only through listing the trivial or the non-transcendental events that he can attempt to record his friend: "Yo, que ahora me detengo a registrar esos pormenores absurdos, sigo creyendo que su protagonista es el hombre más extraordinario que he conocido" (Borges, *Macedonio* 15). Added to this, there is an emotional or sensual dimensión—a *sentir(se)*—that plays a role in the recording of the anecdote: "esa felicidad de saber que en una casa de Morón o del Once había un

hombre mágico cuya sola existencia despreocupada era más importante que nuestras venturas o desventuras personales. Esto lo sentí yo, esto lo sentimos algunos, esto no puedo comunicarlo" (Borges, *Macedonio* 20). Borges himself will make the connection between the emotional/sensual—*sentir*—with the telling of the anecdote itself, when at the end of the anecdote "Sentirse en muerte" he writes: "Quede, pues, en anécdota emocional la vislumbrada idea y en la confesa irresolución de esta hoja el momento verdadero de éxtasis y la insinuación posible de eternidad de que esa noche no me fue avara" (Borges 1:238). Certainly, the feelings and consequences of each of these anecdotes are quite different: in the case of Macedonio's anecdotes it is the way Borges "feels" in regards to Macedonio, whereas in "Sentirse en muerte" it is the way he "feels" himself. Nonetheless, it is the emotional, non-transcendental event that in either case must be recorded.

In the anecdotes about Macedonio, it is the happiness of having known a magical man that lead Borges to tell the anecdotes of the most extraordinary man he had ever met. However, in "Sentirse en muerte" it is the feeling of feeling himself in death and feeling himself an abstract observer of the world that lead him to record the experience: "Me sentí muerto, me sentí percibidor abstracto del mundo: indefinido temor imbuido de ciencia que es la mejor claridad de la metafísica" (Borges 1:238). In both cases—as different as they may be—the trivial and memorable experience stimulates Borges to record them. But also, and especially in the case of "Sentirse en muerte," the possibility created by the fleeting encounter between experience and eternity, what animates Borges into recording what he calls the "biography of eternity." The telling of a "real" experience already signals the anecdote, not only by misshaping those "hechos homogéneos" with the succession imposed by language itself, but also with the possibility of the biography of eternity. The timeless experience, this anecdote, like Macedonio's anecdotes, become the only pieces of a

possible bio-graphy. One that not only recognizes the split between the experience and the inscribing of that experience, but also affirms that this inscribed "bio" refers to that non-transcendental and memorable experience which is timeless and therefore impersonal.

In "Sentirse en muerte" the author/narrator, Borges, walks during a night "without destiny," as aimlessly as possible through the streets of a fictional Buenos Aires. Suddenly, after going through some remotely familiar places, he encounters a corner: "La marcha me dejó en una esquina. Aspiré noche, en asueto serenísimo de pensar. La visión, nada complicada por cierto, parecía simplificada por mi cansancio. La irrealizaba su misma tipicidad" (Borges 1:237). In this retreat from thinking, Borges looks at the simplicity of the corner, at the houses which signified both poverty and joy, until he sees the unreal which finding himself at two times in history at the same time: "Me quedé mirando esa sencillez. Pensé, con seguridad en voz alta: Esto es lo mismo de hace treinta años… Conjeturé esa fecha… El fácil pensamiento *Estoy en mil ochocientos y tantos* dejó de ser unas cuantas aproximativas palabras y se profundizó en realidad" (Borges 1:237-8). The image, object of that stare, which pauses to look at the simpleness of the is what produces Borges to then think and conjecture the ambiguous and yet precise date which displaces the idea of linear time altogether and allows him to experience eternity. This does not mean that the experience is somehow able to transport Borges to a previous time, but rather, that the experience itself is the image of timelessness: "No creí, no, haber remontado las presuntivas aguas del Tiempo; más bien me sospeché poseedor del sentido reticente o ausente de la inconcebible palabra *eternidad*" (Borges 1:238). This moment, in which he feels himself an abstract observer or the world, makes him feel himself in death.

It is not fortuitous that Borges' anecdote "Sentirse en muerte" is also an anecdote about eternity. If we recall, it is in "Historia de la eternidad" that Borges publishes this anecdote for the

second time. After having chronologically recalled the two hostile and successive dreams the human desire dreamt—which consist of the realist and nominalist eternities—Borges transcribes the anecdote which is preceded by his declaration of it as his personal theory of eternity:[11]

> Sólo me queda señalar al lector mi teoría personal de la eternidad. Es una pobre eternidad ya sin Dios, y aun sin otro poseedor y sin arquetipos. La formulé en el libro *El idioma de los argentinos,* en 1928. Transcribo lo que entonces publiqué, la página se titulaba *Sentirse en muerte*. (Borges 1:236)

This "theory" as Borges calls it must be understood first as the anecdote it is, what he calls at the end the *anécdota emocional* of the *biografía de la eternidad*. One must recall, though, that the anecdote, specifically in Borges—both in "Sentirse en muerte" and in his memories of Macedonio—in many occasions refers to the telling of trivial and yet memorable events which place the self momentarily in eternity; that is to say in the a-temporal and therefore the impersonal. After writing in "Sentirse en muerte" that he suspected himself of being "poseedor del sentido reticente o ausente de la inconcebible palabra *eternidad*" (1:238) Borges goes on to explain: "Esa pura representación de hechos homogéneos… no es meramente idéntica a la que hubo en esa esquina hace tantos años; es, sin parecidos ni repeticiones, la misma. El tiempo si podemos intuir esa identidad, es una delusión" (Borges 1:238). In this representation of homogeneous events Borges can find himself in apparently different places. These places are neither repetitions of one another nor identical to one another since that would imply that there are in fact two places. Instead, this homogenous experience is exactly the same, which is to say that time collapses, creating the possibility for Borges to experience eternity. One must also take note that Borges intuits "time" as

[11] See Flynn for a more in-depth analysis of Borges' conceptualization of eternity and its differentiation from infinity. Flynn sees "Sentirse en muerte" as a crucial text for understanding Borges' notion of eternity, though she interprets the experience as a transcendental one (15).

"identity" when he states: "El tiempo si podemos intuir esa identidad" (Borges 1:238), for which then, one can understand that where there is no time there cannot be any identity either. It is not surprising then that Borges' theory of eternity is presented in the form of the anecdote. It is the anecdote, that oscillating figure between the personal and the impersonal—as well as between the biographical and the fictional—which is too fleeting and emotional to be either story or thought.

In "Sentirse en muerte," Borges experiences the eternal, and though this may sound complex and abstract, one must remember that this abstraction is only possible through the visions of trivial quotidian things. After all, it was literally the vision of a corner, the same corner which he had seen before—though at the same time—what brought Borges to his theory of eternity. But this is not the only anecdote in which Borges finds experiences of eternity. If these experiences of eternity can only be expressed through anecdotes—then Macedonio is for Borges another experience of eternity.

As mentioned earlier in this text, Borges writes that "[n]o se ha escrito aún la biografía de Macedonio Fernández" (*Macedonio* 7), followed by a concise and semi-fictional biography of him and then in the prologue followed by many of the anecdotes about Macedonio. It is not surprising that Borges addresses the absence of Macedonio's biography, followed by anecdotes about him, since it was the only conceivable way of *graphing* his life. Even less surprising is that the only biography about Macedonio, written by Álvaro Abós is entitled *La biografía imposible.* In the prologue to the impossible biography, Abós writes that he understands the countersense of his endeavor: "habiéndome decidido a escribir la biografía imposible, me he visto ante el contrasentido de que mi libro *sobre* Macedonio —y *a favor* de Macedonio, ¡a muerte!— sería, al mismo tiempo, un libro contra Macedonio" (11-2). Even if it is an impossible biography—which

is to say that Abós acknowledges the intrinsic negation in writing Macedonio's biography—what Abós really intends is that a more accurate Macedonio will rise above the trivial anecdotes:

> El mito cristalizado por Jorge Luis Borges contiene, como lo verá el lector si me acompaña en la aventura, hechos erróneos. Macedonio no fundó una comuna en el Paraguay; no fue un viejito extravagante sino un hombre que alcanzó alta edad con decoro; no olvidaba sus escritos en los armarios de las pensiones sino que preservó con cuidado su obra a pesar de su errancia… Lo que aquí se narra, basado en una investigación rigurosa de las fuentes escritas y orales disponibles a medio siglo de la muerte de Macedonio, desmiente muchos de esos tópicos. (12)

By doing this rigorous investigation of Macedonio's life, Abós overlooks the importance of the Macedonian project, which has as its axis the anecdote in all its dimensions—hearsay, orality, the barely-written, the written and not published, the published private histories, the oscillation between the autobiographical and the fictional, etc.—and which therefore negates the biographical at every turn. It is precisely through the "less accurate," anecdotal Macedonio, that the project becomes actualized, lending itself not only to the possibility of an anecdotal being, in the case of Macedonio, but also, by looking at anecdotes as anecdotes we open the way to at least two other possibilities: the biography of eternity in the case of Borges and the *casos falsos* for Piglia.

The Anecdotal Project

Macedonio suggested the possibility of a different kind of being by purposely or inadvertently becoming the subject of a myth, while also—and this time completely deliberately—by propagating and imposing this new kind of fiction into the world: "sembró de pistas falsas su vida, ocultó hechos, pero también, como un titiritero de sonrisa felina, destacó otros, sugirió el

retrato que otros escribieron al tiempo que llenaba su obra de señuelos autobiográficos" (Abós 11). Macedonio worked arduously for this endeavor a great example was when he "jugó con el vasto y vago proyecto de ser presidente de la República" (Piglia, *Formas* 24), in which the key to the plan consisted of "insinuarse en la mente del público de manera 'sutil y enigmática'" (Abós 102). Among one of the conspirators of this plan was Norah Borges, who with some of her friends was to "escribir el nombre de éste [Macedonio] en papelitos o tarjetas que dejarían olvidados en confiterías, tranvías, veredas, salas de cine" (Abós 102), propagating while at the same time, imposing the anecdotal Macedonio into the world. These moves, which can be seen as "movimiento[s] típico[s] de la vanguardia: aislamiento, ruptura con el mercado y a la vez fantasías de entrar en los medios masivos" (Piglia, *Formas* 24), operate within Macedonio in a specific vein, since there is rarely anything "typical" about Macedonio. Piglia suggests that Macedonio used the avant-garde as a genre, I find that this would imply that Macedonio had a perfectly crafted strategy for the delivery of his project. Macedonio's project was more than a gesture of the avant-garde; it was less aesthetic and more personal. The relationship to the avant-garde is certain, but what actually mobilized the project is the affect Macedonio had on people, especially his friends. Through his friends, and the impact he had on those who surrounded him, Macedonio was able to infiltrate the world. The myth and project of Macedonio were then propagated, not through the efforts of the avant-garde, but rather through his friendships.

Even though, "una de las aspiraciones de Macedonio era convertirse en inédito" (Piglia, *Formas* 21), many of his texts were published posthumously. The author did publish some works while he was alive, but it was not until after his death that most of his privately-written work became part of the public sphere. If we recall what has been said throughout this investigation, the anecdote comes to existence as that which was privately-written but that somehow becomes part

of the public sphere by being published. But as Piglia writes, Macedonio "quería convertirse en inédito" (Piglia, *Formas* 21), which is not to say that he would have not wanted to ever publish, but rather, that he wanted to become—*convertirse*—in *inédito*. The word *inédito* literally refers to the writer who writes but it is not yet known or is not yet published—or to the work of a known writer which is not yet known. And as mentioned earlier the word anecdote etymologically refers to the unpublished narratives and details of history. Therefore, the actions of Macedonio, both of publishing and not publishing, of writing and not writing, of conversing about projects that may or may have not happened made him a real figure of literature—an anecdote—in the story of Argentine fiction.

Macedonio's anecdotal project can be understood then, as the turning of the self—*convertirse*—into a series of private and published fictional histories that make the graphing of this new "being" impossible. As we have seen though, there will always be an attempt to bring the fragments into the whole, or in other words, to turn the anecdotes of Macedonio into the life of Macedonio. But as Borges understood it, there could not be a biography of Macedonio, because in Macedonio, there was no time—and therefore no personal identity—but rather eternity:

> Mi última emoción, en Europa, fue el diálogo con el gran escritor judeo-español Rafael Cansinos Assens, en quien estaban todas las lenguas y todas las literaturas, como si él mismo fuera Europa y todos los ayeres de Europa. En Macedonio hallé otra cosa. Era como si Adán, el primer hombre, pensara y resolviera en el Paraíso los problemas fundamentales. Cansinos era la suma del tiempo y Macedonio, la joven eternidad. (*Macedonio* 10)

If we recall "Sentirse en muerte"—the emotional anecdote of the biography of eternity—Borges intuits that time is equal to identity, which leads us to conclude that where we have no time (i.e.

eternity), identity is impossible. Since Macedonio is the young eternity, in the word "Macedonio," there is no identity, no life to be graphed, but rather, what is left is only an emotional anecdote—a biography of eternity.

Borges' anecdotal project is quite different from Macedonio's. In him, too, we find without a doubt the fictionalization of the autobiographical, but there is also in him a fictionalization of anecdotes that abstracts these in order to make them into the axis of a fictional world. With "Sentirse en muerte," Borges presents a seemingly personal anecdote which consists of the experience, the narration of the experience, and the theorization of the narration. This presentation of the anecdote is then doubled, when he re-presents the anecdote for the second time as his theory of eternity, and re-re-presents a third time in support of his "Nueva refutación del tiempo." With this triple presentation of timelessness—through the emotional anecdote of the biography of eternity—Borges insists on refuting time, insists on the fleeting eternal, which is to say that he also insists on refuting identity. But one cannot forget the famous words that close "Nueva refutación del tiempo:"

> *And yet, and yet…* Negar la sucesión temporal, negar el yo, negar el universo astronómico, son desesperaciones aparentes y consuelos secretos. Nuestro destino… no es espantoso por irreal; es espantoso porque es irreversible y de hierro. El tiempo es la sustancia de que estoy hecho. El tiempo es un río que me arrebata, pero yo soy el río…. El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo, desgraciadamente, soy Borges. (Borges 2:301)

It appears as if Borges is in the end refuting his own refutation of time, as if he is refuting "Sentirse en muerte"—his own theory of eternity. To be more precise, Borges is not refuting eternity per se, but rather the refutation itself. Borges did not choose the form of the anecdote fortuitously to tell

the biography of eternity. This is because the anecdote, even if compromised by language,[12] is the only way to graph eternity, and it is the anecdote that continues to be at the center of this timeless debate.

In "El Aleph," "Sentirse en muerte" is not literally present; however, it is one of the many instances in which Borges replicates an encounter with eternity—or in other words reproduces "Sentirse en muerte." Borges' desire to re-create the "moment" of timelessness creates different literary scenarios in order to explore—not experience—the anecdote, again and again. It is the fictional Borges, who walks down the stairs of Carlos Argentino Daneri's basement to encounter "el lugar donde están, sin confundirse, todos los lugares del orbe, vistos desde todos los ángulos" (Borges 2:119). But it is also the fictional Borges, who encounters once again, the intrinsic impediments in language to present the eternal: "lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo: lo que transcribiré, sucesivo, porque el lenguaje lo es. Algo, sin embargo, recogeré" (Borges 2:121). In "El Aleph" we can already see that Borges, at least for now, has shifted from a purely negative position in his refutation of time, to a more creative one: "Algo, sin embargo recogeré" (Borges 2:121).[13] This anticipation of "*And yet, and yet…*"—which is also its reversal and duplication—lets us know that Borges did not refute his own theory of eternity, but rather that he knew that his project of eternity would have to work in complicity with time because: "Nuestro destino… no es espantoso por irreal; es espantoso porque es irreversible y de hierro… El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo, desgraciadamente, soy Borges" (2:301). Borges recognized the futility in refuting time/identity, because it is what the "world" is made of, and it is horrifying,

[12] In the third version of "Sentirse en muerte" Borges introduces the anecdote with the disclaimer that: "Todo lenguaje es de índole sucesiva; no es hábil para razonar lo eterno, lo intemporal" (Borges 2:292).
[13] Throughout *The Quest for God in the Work of Borges*, Flynn discusses Borges' search for the eternal, from the essay to fiction and then to poetry. According to her the transitions between genres allow Borges to affirm eternity—that is also to say to refute time/identity—within different literary possibilities.

because it cannot be undone. At moments, then, he gives a different shape to his project of eternity—through stories like "El Aleph"—by adopting a more Macedonian maneuver: "insinuarse en la mente del público de manera 'sutil y enigmática'" (Abós). In order to do this, Borges cleverly inserts the biography of eternity—the anecdote—where it has always belonged—as a displacement—somewhere in time. By placing "timelessness" in time, which means embedding the anecdote within a narrative, Borges is able to affirm both "time" and "timelessness." This gesture is already present in the second and third transcriptions of "Sentirse en muerte," where in the second transcription in "Historia de la eternidad" Borges is attempting to historicize eternity, and in the third transcription in "Nueva refutación del tiempo" the closing lines become a declaration of the "acceptance" of time. In both of these instances, Borges is showing the apparent contradictory relationship between time and eternity; however I find that the embedding of the anecdote—eternity—into stories like "El Aleph" is a much more complicitous and successful move, since the contradiction is made invisible, and time and eternity can be affirmed simultaneously.

The anecdote—the biography of eternity—appears in Borges' work in numerous occasions. As we have seen, it appears in "El aleph" and we can also see it appear in "La escritura del dios" when Tzinancán narrates his vision of eternity: "Yo vi una Rueda altísima, que no estaba delante de mis ojos, ni detrás, ni a los lados, sino en todas partes, a un tiempo" (Borges 2:89).[14] But these instances—"El Aleph" and "La escritura del dios"—are quite different from "Sentirse en muerte," for they are embedded in the form of the short-story. Even though "Sentirse en muerte" is placed with different texts the three times it is published, it is important to note that in all three

[14] In "La esfera de Pascal" Borges discusses some of the different "spheres" that have been presented in history to represent God and/or the divine. Any story where one of these "spheres" is found, could signal the presence of the anecdote—the biography of eternity. In this text I will only discuss their appearance in "El aleph" and "La escritura del dios."

times,[15] the anecdote is never framed, or embedded, within another story. This is because "Sentirse en muerte" is tied more to the essayistic Borges who grapples with philosophers, than with Borges the fiction writer. When Borges realizes the futility in refuting time, he finds an additional mechanism for inserting his biography of eternity into "the world," which means, into the story. This is not to say that Borges abandons the essayistic attempt to deny time, to which he will come back three years after *El aleph,* in "Nueva refutación del tiempo," where he refutes time once again, but also refutes the refutation itself. What Borges found with the use of the story was a more complicitous move. Instead of denying the monumental opposition of eternity and time, he inserted eternity within time, or in other words, he plotted the anecdote—the biography of eternity—within a story.

The "philosophical" in Borges—which is present, for instance in his negative argumentations of time/identity—bends to the fictional in order to deviously transpose his theory of eternity to the pseudo-historical. The illusion of the historical in both "El Aleph" and "La escritura del dios" legitimizes, or becomes an excuse for the anecdote of eternity. It is through the use and abuse of history, and more specifically of the pseudo-historical, that Borges plots different worlds around an eternal anecdote in order to expose and impose a halt of succession—of time.[16]

[15] The first time, "Sentirse en muerte" is published in *Idioma de los argentinos* as one of the two parts of "Dos esquinas" and the texts are clearly separated with their two titles. The second time the anecdote is published in *Historia de la eternidad* in "Historia de la eternidad," and this time Borges introduces the text as his theory of eternity and tells the reader that this is an exact transcription from a previous publication. The third time it appears in *Otras inquisiciones* in "Nueva refutación del tiempo" in section "A" "II" and Borges again writes that it is a transcription from the 1928 original.

[16] See Bosteels for tan ample discussion of the legacy of the philosophical anecdote in Borges: "There is at least one instance in Borges's writing in which well-known fragments from Diogenes Laertius's *Lives* figure prominently and which, beyond all merely anecdotal interest, provides us with a privileged vantage point to grasp the place of language and literature in the universe of the Argentine writer. When put in this broad context, Borges's take on the fragments in question—the almost certainly mythical meetings between Heraclitus and Darius and between Diogenes of Sinope and Alexander the Great. Instead… The episodes from Diogenes Laertius serve Borges as dramatic instances of an underlying structural principle, the staging of a universal symbol or form, which

Piglia wrote in his "Tesis sobre el cuento" that Borges "sabía transformar en anécdota los problemas de la forma de narrar" (Piglia, *Formas* 111). This means that the anecdote, the presentation of the problems of narrating, or what is called "the philosophical" in Borges. Borges mentions in all the texts discussed here— "Sentirse en muerte," "El Aleph" and "La escritura del dios"—that everything happened all at once, but language forced them into succession, which is also to say that it was language that forced things into time/identity. After all in both "El Aleph" and in "La escritura del dios" there is a negation from the part of the protagonists to reveal their respective visions. In "El Aleph" Borges, in the spirit of revenge, refuses to discuss the vision of the Aleph with Daneri and urges him to make the most of the demolition of his house—where the Aleph was found. Similarly, in "La escritura del dios," Tzinancán refuses to reveal the vision, but this time Borges lets us know that this refusal has to do with the contradiction that comes about when narrating the vision of eternity:

> Que muera conmigo el misterio que está escrito en los tigres. Quien ha entrevisto el universo, no puede pensar en un hombre, en sus triviales dichas o desventuras, aunque ese hombre sea él. Ese hombre *ha sido* él y ahora no le importa. Qué le importa la suerte de aquel otro, qué le importa la nación de aquel otro, si él ahora es nadie. Por eso no pronuncio la formula, por eso dejo que me olviden los días, acostado en la oscuridad. (Borges 2:90)

He refuses to pronounce the formula, because narrating the vision of eternity means subjecting the vision to time and to identity. But once one has seen the vision of eternity—as Tzinancán and

eventually allows the Argentine to portray not only the place of the writer in society but also the very nature of the aesthetic or poetic act."

Borges—which is at the same time the vision of the collapse of time and identity, one can no longer look at the identity of a man and his-story because one has already seen the biography of eternity—the anecdote of timelessness.

The insertion of the anecdote in the short story has a double effect. On the one hand the story serves Borges as a devious medium in which to present his theory of eternity, while on the other hand it is the anecdote that is the axis of the story. In "Tesis sobre el cuento" we learn that "un cuento siempre cuenta dos historias" (Piglia, *Formas* 105) but we also learn that an anecdote, supposedly found in one of Chekov's notebooks, is the axis for Piglia's theses on the short-story: "En uno de sus cuadernos de notas Chéjov registra esta anécdota: 'Un hombre, en Montecarlo, va al Casino, gana un millón, vuelve a su casa, se suicida.' La forma clásica del cuento está condensada en el núcleo de ese relato futuro y no escrito" (Piglia, *Formas* 105). This anecdote allows Piglia to theorize the short-story. Even though this anecdote does not present an encounter with eternity as such—like in the case of Borges—it is this anecdote that presents itself as a displacement in the successions of events, and which therefore opens up the possibility for a future plot: "Como lo previsible y lo convencional (jugar-perder-suicidarse) la intriga se plantea como una paradoja. La anécdota tiende a desvincular la historia del juego y la historia del suicidio. Esa escisión es clave para definir el carácter doble de la forma del cuento" (Piglia, *Formas* 105). The anecdote presents itself as the untimely, as that which breaks the logical course of cause and effect. A man—who could be any man and all men—goes to the casino, wins and kills himself, and it is this incongruence of winning followed by suicide that the plotter uses in order to insert the anecdote *in time*. Setting the anecdote *in time* then, implies the construction of a logical chain of causality and/or the transformation of a generic man into an individual. In other words, it implies making the anecdote into a story.

The anecdote does not only serve the plotter—Borges—as the axis of his stories but it also serves Piglia as the axis of his criticism. As we have seen, it is Chekov's anecdote that allows him to create the thesis for the basis about his theory on the short story in "Tesis sobre el cuento." But it is also Piglia's own anecdotes as well as Macedonio's that serve Piglia as the axis for "Notas sobre Macedonio en un Diario," "La mujer grabada" and "Hotel Almagro." After all, *Formas breves* is a work of literary criticism and it is recognized as such.[17] Here, however, criticism is nothing if not the actual—and at the same time fleeting—possibility for the anecdotal. Slightly different from Macedonio and Borges, Piglia's anecdotal project consists of a multiplying effect of the anecdotal. If we recall Piglia's "La mujer grabada," it is supposedly Piglia who meets a woman who knew Macedonio, who told him stories about Macedonio, and from whom he receives the mysterious machine that will then become the intrigue for *La ciudad ausente.* The movement from "La mujer grabada" and its presence in *Formas breves* to *La ciudad ausente* exposes the operations for Piglia's anecdotal project, which consists of the mixture of personal and impersonal anecdotes, and their placements in different contexts. In the case of *La ciudad ausente,* the mysterious machine gives way to the plotting of a world that can legitimize its existence through a novel, whereas the placement of "La mujer grabada" in *Formas breves,* gives way to a conjecture—a theory. Macedonio and especially Borges had already in some ways attempted this, but it is not until Piglia—where the anecdote had become in some way normalized and introduced in several discourses—that the anecdotal can make it into a work of literary criticism.

Macedonio wanted to insert the anecdote into the world, which is to say that he wanted to create a fiction that would "walk in the streets" and would escape any kind of tracing that could

[17] In 2001, Fundación Bartolomé March awarded Piglia with "the best book of literary criticism of the year" for *Formas breves*. See González Álvarez 52.

turn the anecdote into a life. Macedonio's imposition of this project on himself allowed him to actually become anecdotal. As we have seen, it is only through the listing of anecdotes that his friend Borges is able to remember him, and it is through anecdotes that Piglia is able to invoke him in order to create his own aesthetic. In a similar vein, Borges wanted to insert the anecdote into fiction, but in this case the anecdote would operate as an impasse in the story, exposing the problems of narrating that which has no time and no identity. Finally, Piglia's project takes these attempts still further. On the one hand, he gives continuity to Macedonio's and Borges' projects, while on the other hand he demands yet another contextualization—the presence of the anecdotal and all of its implications in criticism as a *caso falso*. This multidimensional, untimely, and impersonal project, shared by three generations of writers, denies constructions of identity at all levels. This is evident from the ways in which the authors fictionalize themselves, to the transcription of the anecdote itself, to the playfulness of the authorial figure, where plagiarism and the reversal of plagiarism are always present: "En principio había pensado que se publicara como un libro anónimo. Después pensó que debía publicarse con el nombre de un escritor conocido. Atribuir su libro a otro: el plagio al revés" (Piglia, *Formas* 22). If plagiarism is the defiance of authorship by a criminal act, then the reversal of plagiarism inserts itself also as a gesture of defiance but this time through the renouncement of authorship.[18]

The impossible biography and the impasse of the story have both exhausted their possibilities and can no longer carry on the anecdotal project. One cannot become an anecdote after Macedonio, nor can one construct a plot after Borges—the ultimate plotter. What is left then

[18] Likewise, at the end of *Museo de la novela de la eterna*, Macedonio says that he will leave his novel as an "open book", the first one in literary history, because the autor, wishing his novel to be better or just good, "deja autorizado a todo escritor futuro de buen gusto e impulso…En esta oportunidad declaro que la verdadera ejecución de mi teoría novelística sólo podría cumplirse escribiendo la novela de varias personas que se juntan…se perfilarán incesantemente" (253)

is certainly a transgression, a change of form, which for now and only temporarily can be framed within criticism. This is where Piglia, with the *caso falso*, has inserted and imposed the anecdotal, which also means that this is where it can no longer be. By "this" I mean criticism, because it is not a formula that can be applied by all, since the *caso falso* or anecdote are multiple eternal forms which divert straight line narrative. Once these forms—which momentarily capture the anecdotal—are taken to their extreme possibilities by figures like Macedonio, Borges and Piglia, new forms must be found, created or re-created. The anecdotal is not a genre but a movement, which can at moments be captured by form. What is certain then, is that the anecdotal project, the project which indefinitely collapses time and identity, must continue to find the ways in which to insert and impose that which has no place in the world. For now, "bástenos saber que en Buenos Aires, hacia mil novecientos… un hombre repensó y descubrió ciertas cosas eternas" (Borges, *Macedonio* 22).

The Metaphysical Case: The Sentence

> "How does the sentence run?" asked the explorer. "You don't know that either?" said the officer in amazement, and bit his lips. "Forgive me if my explanations seem rather incoherent. I do beg your pardon. You see, the Commandant always used to do the explaining; but the new Commandant shirks this duty"
>
> Kafka "In the Penal Colony"

Walter Benjamin declared that in our time the figure of the storyteller is no longer a present force. Experience has become dated and grown poorer in value, and information is our new way of communication. According to Benjamin the experience of "the war" brought back the silence of soldiers rather than the counsel of stories that are passed from mouth to mouth. However, what we encounter in this crisis of experience, is not a lack of storytellers, but rather, a subject of experience going through a significant, slow and at times almost invisible transformation that requires a certain state of fixation. Already on the previous chapter we could see that the anecdote is precisely that gesture wherein experience and writing meet—in the graphing of an untraceable life. Benjamin and Deleuze would agree that experience relies on many linguistic devices and mainly on repetition. For Benjamin one of the main aspects regarding storytelling is "counsel" which refers to the possibility of the continuation of the story and not on the resolution of it: **"**after all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding" (*Illuminations* 86). This counseling then means a movement and a rearrangement of the story. As for Deleuze, there is also a repetition and restructuring that allows the story to continue, he calls it Nietzsche's method: "Nietzsche had at his disposal a method of his own invention. We should not be satisfied with either biography or bibliography; we must reach a secret point where the anecdote of life and the aphorism of thought amount to one and the

same thing" (Deleuze, *The Logic* 128). This method, is also a form of counsel, which again does not propose an answer that stems from an experience but the suggestion for a continuance or the rearrangement of the anecdote into a different form. From the experience of life into the form of the aphorism. And by aphorism—as Nietzsche himself called it—we are referring to one of the forms of eternity.[19] Thus, I should recall, we are coming up against the second form of eternity presented in this project.

The Aphorism and The Sentence

Just like the anecdote, the aphorism is commonly understood or recognized by most. However, it is rarely the center of study as a literary form. Currently, it would be safe to say that the word "aphorism" triggers the image of a book collecting many clichés uttered or written by famous people, or the sharing of their quotations via social media. Amongst intellectuals, particularly philosophers and literary scholars, the word prompts the names of those who have given preference to the form; among these: Seneca, Hippocrates, Francis Bacon, François La Rochefacould, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Emil Cioran, Blaise Pascal and Franz Kafka to name a few. The distinctions between aphorisms, maxims, sentences, axioms, and other forms are sometimes difficult to note, since almost always they are used as synonyms.[20] One would only have to look up "aphorism" in a dictionary to find any of these other forms as the definition of the word. According to Marion Faber it was during the Renaissance that the terms were more loosely used and started being used as synonyms: "The

[19] "The aphorism, the apothegm, in which I am the first among Germans to be a master, are the forms of 'eternity'; it is my ambition to say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a book—what everyone else does not say in a book" (Nietzsche 223).

[20] For different uses and denominations of the aphorism in literature and philosophy read Stephenson's "On the Widespread Use of an Inappropriate and Restrictive Model of the Literary Aphorism."

aphorism is a genre that goes back to classical times... Despite lexicographical distinctions among sentence, maxim, apothegm, and aphorism, the form has been defined rather loosely; certainly Renaissance scholars did not differentiate very strictly" (205). Gary Saul Morson's study on the aphorism in *The Long and Short of it: From Aphorism to Novel* is especially lucid at marking significant distinctions between different kinds of aphorisms. Inspired by Russian formalism, Morson believes that the forms of aphorism such as apothegms, dicta, witticisms, sentences, riddles, and maxims are defined as texts that portray specific views of life and experience embedded in an implicit philosophy—what Mikhail Bakhtin called a "form-shaping ideology." However, he writes that:

> Depending on age or culture, wise saying may reflect the labor of the scholar, the adroitness of the thinker, or the inspiration of the poet. One culture may ascribe them to a ruler (Solomon or Solon), another to a philosopher (Socrates or Epictetus), a third to a scientist (Galileo or Einstein). Paintings of sages, such as Raphael's "School of Athens," Jacques-Louis David's "Death of Socrates," or Murillo's portrait of Galileo in his cell, may depict the circumstances giving rise to their sayings. Such art offers a setting to inspire future saying of a similar sort. (Morson 17)

Morson is stating that aphorisms are the labor of different "workers" that depending on the age or culture could be scholars, thinkers, poets, scientists, etc. Each era has its own wise-people (usually called wise-men) who are the creators of thought depending on the philosophical debates of the time. Since aphorisms portray the views of life and experience, aphorisms privilege life and experience for the construction of thought above any other form.

When looking at the etymology of "aphorism" we first find that from its Greek roots the word means: "a distinction, a definition".[21] Aphorism is precisely what sets one thing apart from another and creates meaning; it is what draws the line in between things. Secondly, aphorisms are first traced back to the titled used by Hippocrates to his text of collections of short generalizations made by his observations of the human body, which we would now not call a collection of aphorisms but rather of symptoms. The collection composed by the father of modern medicine—still praised by physicians today—begins with an odd aphorism, compared to the rest of the collection: "Life is short, art long, occasion brief, experience fallacious, judgment difficult. The physician must not only be prepared to do what is right himself, but also to make the patient, the attendants, and externals cooperate" (Hippocrates 3). The well-known quote works here as a meta-aphorism for the rest of the collection, followed by an aphorism about what to do in the case of spontaneous diarrhea and vomiting. But returning to the beginning what we notice is that there is an awareness regarding the vast discrepancy between the art, and the fleeting experience that urges for the present art form. These are therefore abstractions of observed experiences in the form of sentences—instead of narratives—in the process of the creation of meaning. The experience is sustained and abstracted into a different form. When Hippocrates writes that life is short and art is long he is stating an urgency, a necessity in writing about the experiences of the human body and more importantly: what to do in case one of these experiences occurs. This is the continuation of the story as counsel in the sense that Benjamin refers to in the art of storytelling. Art, the discipline of the physician is long, however it is written here in the simplest terms because life is short and occasion is brief. Hippocrates recognizes in the same sentence not only this but that in his method

[21] The Oxford English Dictionary locates the origin and uses of the word "aphorism": French *aphorisme*, *afforisme*, <medieval Latin *aphorismus, aforismus*, <Greek *ἀφορισμός* a distinction, a definition. From the 'Aphorisms of Hippocrates,' transferred to other sententious statements of the principles of physical science, and at length to statements of principles generally ("Aphorism").

and that for his writing, he is relying on two more things: experience and his judgment and of those two aspects the first is fallacious and the other difficult. Nevertheless, Hippocrates with his aphorisms is able to abstract the experience—rearrange the anecdotes—into generalizations that give meaning—for better or for worse—and continue the story in a different form. Later, Seneca on his text *On the Shortness of Life* complains about how the masses have come to repeat and believe that "life is short." Even great men like Hippocrates—the greatest of physicians as he refers to him—has fallen for what he calls "a complaint against nature," while Seneca on his part says, "it's not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste much of it." In this way, Seneca is also rearranging and continuing the saying and conversation about "the shortness of life" that both the masses and Hippocrates have been engaging with, but Seneca gives a different meaning to it. His preoccupation is not the physician's: extending life and making art short; but rather his preoccupation is about not wasting time.

Certainly, the aphorisms by Hippocrates are not the same as those by Francis Bacon, who in his *Advancement of Learning* decisively proposed the aphorism as a necessity in education to promote active thinking:

> Bacon called on his fellow scholars to adopt aphoristic thought in order to promote active, dynamic cogitation in an endeavor to counteract the effects of the monolithic systematizations of Scholasticism. To think and write in fragments, according to Bacon, compels the mind to seek its own connections in established thought, and thus ensures mental activity (Stephenson 3).

Bacon, who was a critic of Aristotle and syllogisms, believed that knowledge should be based on experimentation and observation. His *Advancement of Learning* did not only propose the aphorism in education as part of his new scientific method but he also wrote in aphorisms. These writings

were setting forth the axioms and maxims for a systematic and empirical method for the sciences while at the same time articulating a stronger divide between the new sciences—the divide between philosophy and science and the divide between rationalists and empiricists. This however, placed aphorisms—as axioms and maxims—with empiricists in general: scientists and philosophers.

Aphorisms also were an important device for moral philosophers. Kant who believed to have synthesized the problem between rationalists and empiricists formulated the maxim of all maxims, the self-ruling law: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law" (Kant 30). The maxim here, is not scientific data as it was for Bacon, but a law for living a moral life. When Deleuze compares Kant and Nietzsche's project each one with their moral laws—the categorical imperative and the will to power respectively—he writes that:

> The point is a completely different one: that the philosopher, as philosopher, *is not* a sage, that the philosopher, as philosopher, ceases to obey, that he replaces the old wisdom by command, that he destroys the old values and creates new ones, that the whole of his science is legislative in this sense. 'Their knowing is creating, their *creating* is a law-giving, their will to truth is—*will* to power (Deleuze, *Nietzsche* 92)

Deleuze writes that the actual philosopher is not the sage nor the one who obeys, the one who destroys the old values and creates new ones. Here he is referring to Nietzsche who in fact critiques values in themselves—destroying them with books like *Genealogy of Morals* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

As I wrote at the beginning of the chapter, Benjamin stated that experience has fallen in value and that it will continue to do so. But we see it coming out through the forms of the aphorism as affirmations of life, of experiences of life. We have seen it through the aphorisms of the physician, the axioms of the scientist, and the maxims of the moral philosophers. Continuing this movement, from the anecdote of life into the aphorism of thought, I examine the experience of "imprisonment" that creates "sentences"—a different kind of aphorism. Grammatical sentences, juridical sentences, literary sentences, condemnatory sentences, structural sentences.[22] I propose in this chapter the experience of the prison and imprisonment to rethink the construction of "sentences" at all levels. Of all the forms of the aphorisms the sentence is the basis of our grammatical and legal systems—structures of power. Even more, they are pressing experiences and thoughts in the authors that I read, and ideas that take prevalence in our current imaginary, and as it will become evident in the chapter.

The architecture of the prison, which extends to existential prisons, modern prisons, grammatical prisons and juridical prisons becomes what restricts experience; but rather than bringing silence—which is what happens with Benjamin's thesis of the returning soldiers—the architecture of the prison creates the language of sentences. This is in fact the abstraction of the

[22] It is important to note that in Spanish, the word *sentencia* which is sentence means immeadiately to a Spanish speaker: aphorism. However, the word *sentencia*, also means a grammatical sentence, although the word *oración* is the word traditionally used. To a Spanish speaker *sentencia,* will mean aphorism, but not a grammatical sentence, even though it is also one of its meanings. I am pointing this out, because in English the word "sentence" already makes the connection to the grammatical, the juridical, and the aphorism clear, put perhaps not to the Spanish speaker. The common word for the grammatical structure in Spanish is *oración* which also means prayer, but when looking at the meaning of *sentencia* we find that it also signifies the grammatical structure: "sentencia: 1. f. Dictamen o parecer que alguien tiene o sigue. 2. f. Dicho grave y sucinto que encierra doctrina o moralidad. 3. f. Declaración del juicio y resolución del juez. 4. f. Decisión de cualquier controversia o disputa extrajudicial, que da la persona a quien se ha hecho árbitro de ella para que la juzgue o componga. 5. f. Ling. Oración gramatical." (ASALE)

language of the anecdotes told in prison-like spaces. In this chapter, I discuss three writers—Ricardo Piglia, Jorge Luis Borges and Eduardo Lalo—who experience and experiment with the confinement of the prison to create thought that produces knowledge. Yet all these prisons, as we will see, affirm or negate the creation of sentences for their subjects of experience.

The Abstraction: The Fixation of the Flux of Life

As suggested before, "the transformation of the anecdote of life into the aphorism of thought" is a project not exclusive to Nietzsche. In fact, as we already saw in the chapter of the anecdote, all three authors—Macedonio, Borges and Piglia— were presented with the possibility or impossibility of capturing experience in language and therefore had resorted to their different and yet interrelated anecdotal projects. This experience, which is also that of the impossibility or possibility of writing the experience, could be called the flux of life, as Piglia describes/designates it in his text "Prisión perpetua." Here, just before the beginning of the text titled precisely "El fluir de la vida," Piglia introduces the genealogy of this text which consists mainly on his and his friend Steven Ratliff's life. He also addresses the text's other possible names, but more importantly he describes how the experience or the flux of life is in fact the act of narrating:

> Varias veces traté de hablar de él [Ratliff] y de usar su legado pero recién hace un tiempo pude escribir un relato sobre Steve. No está nombrado, pero se trata de él. He reproducido su tono y su modo de narrar. He contado lo que no conozco de su historia y la he entreverado con la mía, como debe ser. Estamos en el bar, uno de los dos tiene diecisiete años. El relato se llama «El fluir de la vida»; podría llamarse «Páginas de una autobiografía futura» y también «*Los* rastros de Ratliff». No he

> querido narrar otra cosa que la experiencia única de sentirlo narrar. Porque él fue para mí la pasión pura del relato (Piglia, *Prisión* 60-1).

This relationship—meaning the friendship, but also the passion that the mentor instills in his mentee for "el relato"—is reminiscent of Macedonio and Borges' relationship and certainly of Piglia's relationship to all three—Macedonio, Borges, and Ratliff. But in "El fluir de la vida" we encounter the fixation on this "flux of life," which is not only the obsession with an experience, and with the writing of the experience—which will turn into the creation of a thought as I will explain later—but also the loss of the experience itself. In "El fluir de la vida," el Pájaro Artigas—which is another name for Ratliff and Piglia himself-—tells his love story with Lucía Nietzsche, and it is here that he reveals that losing this experience is what leads him to the fixing of this story: "Piensa que con ella [Lucía Nietzsche], al perderla, empezó su manía de fijar el fluir de la vida. Lo que Artigas llama el «el arte de narrar». Fijar, dice el Pájaro, el lento fluir de la vida, detener ese movimiento impreciso" (Piglia, *Prisión* 64).[23] And as the narrator explains, the narrative methods of el Pájaro are those of classic narrators, because he alternates thoughts and reflections within his stories as a means to delay the next experience, and therefore feeds the experience of the obsession: "El Pájaro es un narrador tradicional, por eso intercala reflexiones y máximas en medio de sus historias. En el fondo es una forma de retardar la acción. Pensar es un modo de crear suspenso, dice. Construir un espacio entre un acontecimiento y otro acontecimiento, eso es pensar" (Piglia, *Prisión* 64). These maxims and reflections are precisely the spaces that suspend the experience in order to fixate and obsess over them, but also the moment where suspense/paranoia

[23] In "Prisión perpetua" Piglia writes that "El fluir de la vida" is a text about Ratliff, even if his name is never mentioned: "He contado lo que no conozco de su historia [Ratliff] y la he entreverado con la mía, como debe ser. Estamos en el bar, uno de los dos tiene diecisiete años. El relato se llama 'El fluir de la vida'; podría llamarse 'Páginas de una autobiografía futura' y también 'Los rastros de Ratliff'" (Piglia, *Prisión* 61).

can occur in the space of awaiting a possible future event.[24] It is no surprise then that many of Piglia's characters are found in prison or prison-like spaces, since the space of the construction of thought, between experience and a possible future experience, finds itself in a certain position of immobility of both time and space.[25] It is with thought that the narrator pretends to bring the flux of life to a halt, or at least to slow down the flux so it can suspend, fix or obsess itself in a single experience. We must not be confused in thinking that El Pájaro Artigas is a traditional narrator in the sense that he weaves events and thoughts into the thread of linear time so as to progress with the narrative. Quite differently, El Pájaro Artigas like the traditional narrator alternates between experiences and thoughts, however, the experience is only one and the thought will be one as well: the experience of life turned into the aphorism of thought, or what constitutes the "sentence" for Piglia. What is important to note at this point, is that the narrative logic of El Pájaro Artigas runs contrary to that of the traditional narrator who usually operates with the following formula: an anecdote progresses to a thought—which delays the next experience—and then moves to a different anecdote and then to a thought and so on and so forth, leading to some sort of end or conclusion. In "Prisión Perpetua" the structure of an anecdote followed by a thought is repeated. However, there is no progression but rather a fixation because it is the same anecdote and the same thought, that are told over and over again. What we find is merely the restoration and obsession with the same experience, the fixation and movement of the form. Here, therefore, the "sentence" has a double meaning as it means being sentenced both to the anecdote and the aphorism. In the

[24] The terms "aphorism," "maxim," "sentence," "apothegm," "saying," etc., are many times interchangeable: "Even the most cursory examination of the topic will convince us that there is no agreed-upon definition of terms such as 'aphorisms,' 'saying,' 'apothegm,' or 'maxim.' Meanings vary even more than with such controversial designations as 'novel' and 'epic'…One man's aphorism is another man's maxim" (Morson 4).

[25] For a reading on Piglia's "conciencia paranoica," see Fornet, who writes about Piglia's obsession with "la abolición del azar."

architecture of the prison there is no progress, only the *one* and same anecdote, the *one* experience that has the power to subject, and the sentence that restores the experience out of time. Since there is no progression, the anecdotes restore the same experience and collapse one instance on top of the other. And in the prison, comes the fixation of time, and the fixation of place, the closing-in of the walls, into the architecture of the prison and into a minimum space of sense—the sentence—both in the grammatical and juridical sense. For Piglia, the prison is the place that forces the place for thought, the construction of a sentence which is the sentence that he will condemn not only himself to, but all of his other "prisoners," as I will analyze in the section of Piglia. As Fornet writes about "El fluir de la vida:" "No se trata sólo de que en el relato aparezcan convictos…Se trata, en primer lugar, de una filosofía sobre las equivalencias y similitudes de la cárcel, la ciudad y la literatura; en última instancia, de una metáfora de las sociedades modernas" (137). In this way, the writing of sentences and subjects of sentences allows Piglia to create a new a kind of thought, one that will allow him to interpret and reinterpret the history of Argentina as a "plot" or "conspiracy" (*un complot*). But, as we will see the *counter-plot* (his own "plot" or "counter-conspiracy") condemns and sentences his subjects to dead ends, and therefore to perpetual prisons.[26]

For this I look at two other projects which offer alternatives to Piglia's sentences. Like Piglia's project, these two literary endeavors find themselves at the edge of transforming experience into thought but their aphorisms escape the condemnation of the sentence, as I will develop later in the chapter. The first of these two projects is Borges' negation to pronounce the sentence in the prison in stories like "La escritura del dios" and in the prison-like space of "El aleph," which I have analyzed in the previous chapter. And the second one is Eduardo Lalo's *El*

[26] "HAY QUE CONSTRUIR UN COMPLOT CONTRA EL COMPLOT" (Piglia, *Antología* 99).

deseo del lápiz: castigo, urbanismo, escritura, where the project of the prison has become more evidently extended into the city since the author/thinker goes inside a now abandoned and empty prison to think about the writings and traces that have been left there. In a combination of thoughts and photographs, Lalo sees the prison/city as the architecture that thinks—an architecture that *forces* one to think. And so, like Borges but unlike Piglia, Lalo reconsiders the ways of the mystic, of the imprisonment of the body. I propose that Lalo's prison is that sentence, and that the architectural space is the space of thought, rather than just a space that condemns its subject to perpetual prisons: it is the place of the interrogation of meaning that allows a stain or a mark to emerge from an already sentenced subject.

Ricardo Piglia: The Sentence

"Una vez mi padre me dio un consejo que nunca pude olvidar… me dijo, a los gritos en el teléfono, tratando de hacerse entender desde la lejanía, en febrero o marzo de 1957. No era un consejo pero siempre lo usé así: una máxima privada que condensa la experiencia de una vida" (Piglia, *Prisión* 13).

The "advice" given by Piglia's father at the very beginning of "Prisión Perpetua," which for now I've purposely omitted from the above quote with the ellipsis—though "suspension marks" as the literal translation of the Spanish *puntos suspensivos* would work better here—is misunderstood or rather misused by Piglia, who turns this "advice," which as he says is really never meant to be advice anyway, into what he calls a "private maxim." His father who had been

in prison the year prior, in 1966, for defending Perón, had made that frantic call to yell the one sentence to Piglia that he could never forget:

¡También los paranoicos tienen enemigos!

The single experience, of being incarcerated for a year, was the catalyst that marked both the past and future for his father indefinitely: "de golpe la historia argentina le parecía un complot tramado para destruirlo" (Piglia, *Prisión* 13). The paranoid screams of the once persecuted man prompted the exile from Adrogué and the beginning, or at least the fictional beginning, of Piglia's diary and writing. On the other hand, however, in this move from the "advise" of his father's life-defining anecdote, to the misuse of it as personal maxim, Piglia creates an operation of thought. In this turning of the anecdote of the prison into the personal maxim of paranoia we witness the creation of the sentence. And, more so than a personal maxim, I call this a "sentence," since in Piglia the aphorism, condemns or imprisons the subject that is affected by its experience. For, as Piglia writes, "esa frase era el fin de un relato, el cristal donde se reflejaba la catástrofe" (*Prisión* 13). The catastrophe lies both in the event-like nature of the experience, since it changes both the past and future, and also in the fact that it sentences or subjects someone to the obsessive nature of the "advice"-turned-thought.[27]

The catastrophe immediately tells us that "Prisión perpetua" will not be the narration where an event will be the catalyst for all the reactions towards the future, but rather, that the anecdote, suddenly and all at once "de golpe" changes the sense of historical time into all directions and into a superposition of the same catastrophe over and over again: "Where a chain of events appears before us, he [The Angel of History] sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage

[27] To read how this "idea fija" can be seen as paranoia in Piglia, read more in Fornet.

upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet" (Benjamin, 392). The imprisonment not only means that "de golpe" Argentine history seemed to him as a plot against him, but that every story seemed to him like a plot (*un complot*).[28] Piglia as well as Benjamin's Angel of History sees one single catastrophe, which rearranges the notion of historical time. No longer a sequence of events, *historia* –which means both history and story in Spanish—comes to be the inscription of a catastrophe, the sentence itself, the condemnation. But it also comes to be an opening of history into other temporalities, as I will discuss below.

From the beginning of "Prisión Perpetua" we know that the exile from Adrogué prompts the writing of Piglia's diary. This is the kind of writing of everyday experiences like the ones a teenage boy would write down when his family is moving from their hometown to some unknown territory. But, as Piglia writes it was until he met Ratliff—one of his doubles—that these anecdotes were pretty much uneventful.[29] In one of the anecdotes, Ratliff becomes interested in Piglia's father when he finds out he is a doctor and that he has been in prison, since according to him, only those who have been in incarcerated understand about illnesses. In the lines that follow, Piglia's father and Steve have a fantastic conversation about the dimension of an obsession and the philosophical use of alcohol to dissolve the obsession. But both before, and after this conversation there is a mention to "la idea fija." First, at the beginning of the paragraph, the phrase appears as a sort of subtitle for the section to follow and, after, as part of the fantastic conversation. Piglia's

[28] For a socio-political structure of Piglia's "paranoid stories" read *Marx and Freud in Latin America* by Bosteels, especially the section "The Right to Paranoia."

[29] As we know, Piglia wrote the same anecdotes in different instances. In the first volume of his recently published *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi* when referring to Renzi, he writes: "Al principio las cosas fueron difíciles. No tenía nada que contar, su vida era absolutamente trivial. 'Me gustan mucho los primeros años de mi diario justamente porque allí lucho con el vacío. No pasaba nada, nunca pasa nada en realidad, pero en aquel tiempo me preocupaba... Entonces empezó a robarle la experiencia a la gente conocida, las historias que se imaginaba que vivían cuando no estaban con él" (11).

father and Steve, almost line by line will define how the movement to form an experience or anecdote is constructed into what they call a beautiful and disturbing fixed idea:

> No hay nada más bello y perturbador que una idea fija. Inmóvil, detenida, un eje, un polo magnético, un campo de fuerzas psíquico que atrae y devora todo lo que encuentra… La obsesión se construye, dice mi padre, he visto construirse obsesiones como castillos de arena, sólo se necesita un acontecimiento que nos altere drásticamente la vida. Un acontecimiento o una persona, dice mi padre, de los que no podamos discernir si nos ha cambiado la vida para bien o para mal. La estructura de una paradoja, dice Steve, un acontecimiento doble o vacilante en un ser. Nos marca, pero es moralmente ambiguo. La gente se mueve hacia el futuro, dice mi padre, descentrada, sin orientación, fuera del camino en el que se movió en el pasado. Una amputación, dice mi padre, del sentido de orientación. La obsesión nos hace perder el sentido del tiempo, uno confunde el pasado con el remordimiento. (Piglia, *Prisión* 21-2)

For there to be an obsession there first has to be an experience, but one that that exceeds the limits of the real, as we had seen in the experience of the anecdote. This writing of the experience expressed in the anecdote challenges linear temporality and the progression of the narrative, but the desire to fix, obsess or dwell on this *one* experience means to attempt to bring it under a halt. Here in the move of the anecdote of life into the aphorism of thought, we have the creation of a sentence—or in other words, the abstraction of the experience. But in Piglia the construction of the sentence is not only a grammatical structure but a moral or juridico-political one of condemnation. In “El fluir de la vida” we saw that what was fixed was the flux of life, but flux here may be a misnomer. If we look at all of the different anecdotes that are told throughout

"Prisión Perpetua," we realize there is in fact no flux, but a series of anecdotes of subjects who are prisoners of one single event in their lives: "Lo mismo se puede decir del Pájaro, que sigue fiel al pasado y a las versiones del pasado en su memoria. Un hombre prisionero de una historia, empecinado en contarla hasta demostrar que es imposible agotar una experiencia" (Piglia, *Prisión* 63). But it is really in the anecdote of the fake psychiatrist who is in charge of a suicide hotline and listens to the stories of the "lives" of the ones who call that we are given a glimpse into the universe of "Prisión perpetua" and its subjects who have been inscribed or have inscribed themselves with one single event—the sentence: "No se trataba de la historia de su vida, en realidad contaban un acontecimiento, que según ellos, había provocado la declinación y la catástrofe. Todas las historias giraban sobre un punto de viraje, como si hubieran vivido una sola experiencia" (Piglia, *Prisión* 43).

For Piglia, as for Steve Ratliff, prison serves as the laboratory where sophisticated experiments abstract the life experience of individuals. With this project two important things are produced; on the one hand prison becomes a factory of tales, or "relatos," and on the other hand thoughts become circular. This isolated factory of tales is always dedicated to tell the same anecdote over and over again, which is why, Piglia says, these tales are of interest to no-one. They are not meant to entertain or to create and "addict" of their reader or listener like it is the case of the reader of the novel, who is always awaiting either for a new episode to occur or a resolution of some sort. The stories that are told and retold in prison are only of interest to the ones who tell them, since they are never meant for an audience. These anecdotes that are told by the imprisoned subjects are the restoration of a lost experience in the space where experience is no longer possible. And the circular thought is nothing but the attempt of transforming that experience into thought. The permanent inscription of the sentence—the tattoo—on the body is being the subject of a

circular thought that forever condemns the subject, since it can never be the predicate of a new sentence, or experience. Furthermore, because in this factory of tales, the stories that are produced only reaffirm the existence of that same subject and sentence—once in the prison, there is no way out. The tales produced in the prison are the variants and versions of the life-defining anecdotes, or rather of the catastrophes turned into so many life sentences.

In the case of Piglia the prison serves as that place to stop time and to reduce space to its extreme limit, so its inhabitants can dwell in a life-altering experience—the anecdote. In this attempt to freeze one experience and suspend the next possible experience, what comes about in the construction of the aphoristic thought is what I propose to call the sentence. With this sentence comes a powerful form of inscription, since it enables Piglia to interpret and reinterpret the experience of Argentine history and literature. But it is also this critical construction, what condemns and sentences the narrator and the subjects of his readings and writings to perpetual prisons. This anecdote for Piglia is the moment when he receives the frantic call from his father at the beginning of "Prisión Perpetua" and he tells him: "¡También los paranoicos tienen enemigos!" Piglia will say that he took this advice as a private maxim (a form of the aphorism) but it wasn't a maxim, it was the transformation of his father's experience of paranoia into his very own: "de golpe la historia argentina le parecía un complot tramado para destruirlo." And so the catastrophe—as he calls it—of Piglia's sentence. The abstraction of the thought, which allows it to move towards the past and future—since it refers to "la historia," all of history—to move in time and to interpret and reinterpret authors like Macedonio, Borges and Arlt, in terms of the *complot*. But the creation of a *countercomplot* which is Piglia's sentence, even if it is working as a counter structure, it nevertheless reproduces the structure of the sentenced subject and therefore conditions his subjects and himself to a self-condemned space.

In transferring his father's "advice," his own sentence to all of his writings and readings, Piglia subjects himself over and over again. He repeats the gesture of inscribing the tattoo not only in his own body, but in Macedonio, Borges, Ratliff, his father, El Pájaro Artigas and the whole of Argentine history. There is no escape, the experience has come to an end with this device—the machinery of the sentence. There is no "way back" to the anecdote—or the experience—nor is there a questioning of the sentence or any transcendence beyond it. What we do find is the obsession to sentence a subject through the readings of others that will at all cost support and try to hold in place the structure of this condemned subject.

Jorge Luis Borges: La Nadería

"Con el tiempo, la noción de una sentencia divina parecióme pueril o blasfematoria. Un dios, reflexioné, sólo debe decir una palabra, y en esa palabra la plenitud."

In the case of Borges something different occurs. First, the prison, unlike Piglia's, is not only a modern literary or legal-political enterprise. As we can see in the stories of "El Aleph" and "La escritura del dios," Borges also presents other possibilities for the prison, in prison-like spaces, as well as the creation of a different aphoristic thought in this space. The prison in Borges' case is not the product of modern institutions but rather a colonial space and a modern basement where a similar mystical experience forsakes the pronouncement of a sentence. In "La escritura del dios" we find that the last Mayan priest, at the edge of history—as it always is, writes Borges—is trying to decipher the magic sentence written by the god, which is also the sentence that would liberate him from the prison. However, one day he realizes that the search for that magic sentence—that could liberate him—is blasphemous because in the language of a god: "no hay proposición que no

implique el mundo entero…Consideré que en el lenguaje de un dios toda palabra enunciaría esa infinita, concatenación de los hechos, y no de un modo implícito, sino explícito, y no de modo progresivo, sino inmediato" (Borges 597-8). It is no surprise that by the end of the story Tzinacán refuses to pronounce the magic formula. He knows the magic formula would liberate him from the prison, but Borges also knows that uttering the sentence would mean submitting a subject to a sentence in the sense of a moral or juridical condemnation. Instead, he chooses a different avenue. There is certainly no escape from the prison, and no desire to escape the prison, but there is also no sentenced subject because in fact by the end of the story there is not a subject left: "Cuarenta sílabas, catorce palabras, y yo, Tzinacán, regiría las tierras que rigió Moctezuma. Pero yo sé que nunca diré esas palabras porque ya no me acuerdo de Tzinancán" (Borges 599). Tzinacán refuses to reproduce the central language of the prison—the sentence. He refuses the individualizing logic typical of this language, and instead honors the generic language of the union with god:

> Que muera conmigo el misterio que está escrito en los tigres. Quien ha entrevisto el universo, quien ha entrevisto los ardientes designios del universo, no puede pensar en un hombre, en sus triviales dichas o desventuras, aunque ese hombre sea él. Ese hombre *ha sido él*, y ahora no le importa. Qué le importa la fórmula, por eso dejo que me olviden los días, acostado en la oscuridad (Borges 599).

In "El Aleph," there is also this prison-like space where the presence of a god will disavow the presence of a sentence. In the story the anecdote of seeing the Aleph structurally impedes the formulation: first seeing the Aleph means the union with and the use of the language of a god, which immediately signifies that this language cannot be a succession of events; and secondly since no sequence of events can be pronounced the language to be used here is that of naming it as a list of things and never as the abstraction of a sentence. More importantly, Borges is able to

construct a thought, still in the confines of a prison but one that exceeds the language of the sentence without having to escape it altogether. But in order to see the aleph the confinement of the prison-like place is necessary:

> Una copita de seudo coñac—ordenó—y te zampuzarás en el sótano. Ya sabes, el decúbito dorsal es indispensable. También lo son la oscuridad, la inmovilidad, cierta acomodación ocular. Te acuestas en el piso de baldosas y fijas los ojos en el décimo escalón de la pertinente escalera. Me voy, bajo la trampa y te quedas solo. Algún roedor te mete miedo (Borges 624).

In "El Aleph," and "La escritura del dios," the protagonists find themselves confined in prison or prison-type spaces. What is interesting here is that in the space of the prison, be it institutional or personal, Borges' operation is an encounter with the "sentence" and a negation from it. If we recall it is in "La escritura del dios," Tzinacán finds that once imprisoned, his duty is to figure out the secret "sentencia" once written by the god:

> Éste [el dios], previendo que en el fin de los tiempos ocurrirían muchas desventuras y ruinas, escribió el primer día de la Creación una sentencia mágica, apta para conjurar esos males… Consideré que estábamos, como siempre, en el fin de los tiempos y que mi destino de último sacerdote del dios me daría acceso al privilegio de intuir esa escritura. El hecho de que me rodeara una cárcel no me vedaba esa esperanza; acaso yo había visto miles de veces la inscripción de Qaholom y sólo me faltaba entenderla (Borges 596-7).

More importantly, we know that Tzinancán refuses to pronounce the fourteen-word formula "that seems causal but isn't." The subjects of Borges' stories refuse the structure of the

"sentence," and prefer doing nothing or oblivion before ever pronouncing the formula. The move to the pronouncement of a sentence in prison-spaces, in Piglia's work, creates a double-bind. On the one hand, it creates the movement from experience to thought—Nietzsche's method of turning the anecdote of life into the aphorism of thought—which in his case creates the sententious thought.[30] But, on the other hand, it also introduces the double-edged sword, the possibility of something new and its end—its final sentence.

In Borges, there is no final sentence in the prison—literally, there is no pronouncement of the sentence, which is at once magic and blasphemous. He will not negate the condition of the prison, but even surrounded by a cell Borges has the hope or *la esperanza* that he will understand the writing of the god, where there will be no need either to escape or pronounce any formulas or sentences because there are no subjects. That does not mean that there is not creation of thought in Borges or that there is not a move from the anecdote of life into thought, but in Borges' prisons the abstraction occurs in the omission of the sentence, la nadería. By going into the language of the god, Borges negates the necessity for the succession of language and therefore negates time, the subject and the pronouncement of the sentence.

Even though neither Borges, nor his characters pronounce and condemn a subject to a sentence, many of Borges' statements are sententious.[31] What I mean by this is that Borges'

[30] See Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense* pg. 128 and *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, especially the section "New Image of Thought."

[31] Bennington begins his book *Sententiousness and the Novel* by stating that: "Sententiousness is most clearly visible in texts in the form of maxims, aphorisms, and generalizing assertions, or as I shall say later in the form of sentences that *law down the law*." However, what interests Bennington is the novel and how these "sentences" are part of the novel as well. In following Ricardou's finding that there are "narrative" and "descriptive" sentences, Bennington proposes that there are also "sententious" sentences: "It is clear that these [descriptive and narrative] are not the only types of sentence which make up the text of novels, and the following discussion will be concerned with a different type of sentence, which I shat call 'sententious' in its relationship with the narrative-descriptive complex." Borges' sententiousness it not built in relationship to the novel and neither with a narrative-descriptive complex, because his sentences like aphorism are always something that can stand on their own.

aphorisms are sententious because they make a judgement on a particular subject, but they do not condemn a subject to a particular sentence. At the end of the story "El Aleph," Borges fears he will not experience the possibility for novelty and surprise. After all it was in seeing "the Aleph" that he saw all the points of the universe converged at the same time: "Temí que no quedara una sola cosa capaz de sorprenderme, temí que no me abandonara jamás la impresión de volver. Felizmente, al cabo de unas noches de insomnio, me trabajó otra vez el olvido" (Borges 626). He fears that he would only want to return to see it, and that nothing again will ever surprise him, that nothing again will be new. But as Borges knows novelty only comes from oblivion/remembrance, and it's a recurrent subject in the writings of Borges, which he immediately recalls how to resolve in the story. In the epigraph to the short-story "El inmortal" Borges quotes an aphorism by Francis Bacon that repeats the same worry as the one above: "Salomon saith. *There is no new thing upon the earth.* So that as Plato had an imagination, *that all knowledge was but remembrance;* Salomon giveth his sentence, *that all novelty is but oblivion*" (533). Borges through his sentence about oblivion in "El inmortal" aligns himself with the thought-experience that nothing is but remembrance/oblivion—that Bacon, Salomon and Plato shared. At the same time, he inscribes himself in a tradition of sententious writers.

Eduardo Lalo: La escritura-marca

"la cárcel no es un edificio, ni una manifestación del terror, sino un territorio de la mente que permite acceder a otros territorios de la mente."

In Eduardo Lalo's *El deseo del lápiz: castigo, urbanismo, escritura* the writing of imprisoned subjects is in tension with my reading of Piglia and Borges' writings. Here we are

neither condemned to carry a life sentence nor are we negating pronouncing and inscribing the sentence of the language of the prison, that according to Lalo, we inhabit in many ways. The position of Lalo between Piglia and Borges lies between a sentence (condemnation/obligation) and an interrogation: "Nuestra escritura está obligada (¿o condenada?) a ser anecdótica" (Lalo, *donde* 149). Are we obliged to write in anecdotes or are we condemned? And if Nietzsche and Deleuze are correct, is not the secret that the anecdote of life and the aphorism of thought are already the same thing? In *El deseo del lápiz: castigo, urbanismo, escritura*, Lalo inhabits the space of the prison— "El Oso Blanco"—an abandoned penitentiary in the middle of San Juan Puerto Rico, to look at the traces, the writings on the walls, the drawings of the sentences carried out in the uninhibited building. Lalo walks through the prison and takes photographs in an attempt to record that which has always been invisibilized. The photographic essay is a project like others of Lalo, mainly *Los pies de San Juan* and *donde*, in which he roams around San Juan to think of different places—cities, islands, the Caribbean, prisons—as spaces of thought. As well as Piglia, Lalo sees the prison as the concentrated project of modernity that has always-already extended to the entire city. Even more, for Lalo the prison is *la ciudad-más-ciudad* or *la superciudad:*

> La cárcel es una superciudad, una práctica de urbanismo extremo. En ella existe un *exceso* de arquitectura y planificación urbana. Es el interior mejor organizado y más inexpugnable; el exterior más sólido defensivo y delimitado. Es hasta tal punto ciudad que apenas tiene que tomar en cuenta a la que se encuentra con solo cruzar una de las avenidas colindantes. De esta forma, si bien es un edificio más, no es uno cualquiera. Porque en él se encuentra la utopía del urbanismo de Estado. Todo acto, todo gesto, toda palabra carcelarios constituyen un supersignificante válido

> para la ciudad en su conjunto. Es desde la cárcel que se puede pensar la ciudad con más fuerza (*El deseo* 84-5).

Unlike Piglia and like Borges, Lalo sees the place of the mystic, the convent and the philosopher as prisons just as well. In fact, for Lalo, what really constructs thought is the prison itself, the architecture of the prison, which is also the loss of nomadism, the place of claustrophobia, which forces its inhabitant to an inner journey. Urbanism, law and writing all work as edifices, architectures, or in other words, structures that work to imprison and encourage the loss of nomadism. In this way the Christian mystic, the city-dweller, the writer and the prisoner are all trapped by the law of a claustrophobic architecture that disables movement and experience:

> Las adaptaciones del místico cristiano y del preso constituyen dos efectos de una misma presión ejercida por la arquitectura, el urbanismo y la ley. Perdida la posibilidad por el nomadismo, queda el viaje interior. Éste, enfrenta al individuo con una suerte de claustrofobia máxima, de ahí que toda práctica interior apueste por la trascendencia (Lalo, *El deseo* 34).

Lalo emphasizes the word "transcendence" and writes that this refers not to a transgression but rather to the Latin *transcendere* which means to go over an obstacle or to pass over it. Namely, to go over or beyond the obstacle of the sentence of the imprisoned subject. In Lalo's case the walls of the prison don't serve to reaffirm the sentence of the subject but rather to mark and transgress that which exceeds or fails to meet the expectations and therefore is always superfluous—extra. It is in these walls where the desire for writing is expressed. As Lalo calls them, these walls are "el catálogo de insuficiencias del Estado," meaning the catalogue of the inadequacies of the State.

Lalo finds the prison writings fascinating because they manifest that common interior that the state apparatus has not been successful at eliminating. Yet when he observes the writings and the drawings on the walls he notices that there is nothing unexpected about them, except that they present themselves as an interruption of the mainstream narrative—which is the language of the prision. After all, "la arquitectura, el urbanismo y la ley" wants to map language. But on the walls of "Oso Blanco" we find the opportunity beyond the sentence, written there, in the most expected signs and symbols: "En estos muros marcados, rayados, estigmatizados con pintura, sangre, semen, pero sobre todo con la modestia de un lápiz contrabandeado, se encuentran las nuevas transgresiones del trasgresor. Son la reiteración de un acto imposible de contener" (Lalo, *El deseo*14). What is impossible to contain is the writing of desire, expressed here not only with contraband but with the body itself. Desire is that which overflows the body—blood and semen. This desire that cannot be contained is what Lalo equates to life, to literature, to nomadism and to thought, which always goes against and supersedes the structures of the state or of the status-quo.

A pressing aspect of Lalo's work that must not be left aside is the one of restoring experience. By this I mean, the act of the thinker—Lalo himself—going to the abandoned prison of "el Oso Blanco" to see, think and photograph the remains and experience. This implies that he wants to not only record the past, but also put himself into the place of claustrophobia, to think and inhabit what the prison might have been. But the imperative—as Lalo reminds us throughout the book—for the writer of any kind of prison to exist, is what he calls *el deseo del lápiz*. The very beginning of the book sets this tone, this entanglement with desire—for transcendence to be possible in the first place—that the writer himself must experience not only when he enters the prison, but also and above all when he decides to write in such a space:

> Escribir desde la boca del estómago. Escribir como una entrada en prisión, bajo el efecto de una condena, como si fuera la inesperada incursión en un espacio con el que nunca se pensó ni siquiera tener relación. Escribir desde la mala noticia, desde las consecuencias del error, la estupidez o el destino (Lalo, *El deseo* 13).

Desire is entangled with an already condemned subject, meaning a subject that has already found itself in a prison or prison-like space. For Lalo, there are subjects and there are sentences for these subjects inhabiting prisons—which can be state prisons, cities, insane asylums, etc. But there are also subjects of prisons of their own bodies who are going through an inner journey which is also not at will.[32] In actuality what they share as Lalo calls it is the impoverishment of the senses and "the loss of nomadism:"

> La celda al ser parte de un sistema de reclusión determinado por normas tanto oficiales como clandestinas… impone en más de un sentido un empobrecimiento sensorial, creado tanto por la pérdida de la libertad de movimiento como por lo que se ve y escucha pero debe callarse… Este ámbito que está a la vez sobrestimulado adquiere una tautológica y mínima expresión. En ningún otro ámbito, el sistema métrico ejerce su imperio como aquí. Todo ha sido diseñado para un mundo de enanos: la prisión hace pensar en una perversa casa de muñecas. La autoridad establece los contados metros cuadrados en los que tiene derecho a moverse un hombre castigado (*El deseo* 33).

A loss of nomadism that goes hand in hand with an impoverishment of the senses and experience. Here we go back to the idea that there is a loss of experience of impoverishment of the

[32] Lalo refers and discusses the cases of Artaud and Walser.

senses but differently stated than in Benjamin. For Lalo, this loss is not caused by the return of "the war," but by an architecture of control that pervades spatial, existential, juridical and grammatical structures. However, Lalo finds that besides recognizing all the mechanisms of violence that exist within the architecture of the prison, if we remember that the loss of nomadism is also the place of the creation of thought, there is a possibility of transcendence:

> la trascendencia voluntaria de lo espectacular abre un campo de acción del pensamiento en el que la realidad no se contiene en compartimientos; no basta ya con nombrar, relatar y mostrar, ya la realidad no es el número ni la descripción, ni ninguna otra representación tradicional. Nos encontramos, aunque sólo sea brevemente, más allá de lo estatal, o dicho de otro modo, de lo encarcelable. Y esto es lo *im*pensado, lo *in*creído, en otras palabras, la posibilidad misma de seguir pensando (Lalo, *El deseo* 87-8).

When Lalo writes that it is not enough to name, or tell, or describe reality in any traditional way, he is separating himself from Borges' *nadería* and Piglia's sentence. Certainly, there is a legacy here, but one that he is trying to break, even if only momentarily, to think the unthinkable, which is to think again in the experience of nomadism. If we are somehow subjected to the architecture of the prison, Lalo is trying to think of a sentence or better yet of a *escritura-marca* that doesn't eternally condemn. To transcend the state, and to think of the prison as a territory of the mind, that can lead us to another thought. A text that thinks, writes Lalo, is one that can open a space—if only briefly—between an affirmation and a negation. By stating, and asking a question in the same sentence—"Nuestra escritura está obligada (¿o condenada?) a ser anecdótica."—Lalo opens a space between Borges and Piglia, to think a different kind of writing, besides the anecdote and the sentence for the experience of the prison. For Lalo, the space of thought or the space of

transcendence is a space outside of time and beyond the realm of answers which isn't any less real than any other affirmation. He writes that: "No afirmar (o negar) es una forma de decir lo que no se había pensado. Resistir el *momentum* de la lógica es tocar por un instante la trascendencia de lo *impensado*" (Lalo, *El deseo* 89).

Lalo certainly is thinking the structure of the prison after Jeremy Bentham's panopticon and Foucault's account of it in *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of The Prison*. In fact, he mentions both authors directly as he imagines the extension of these structures over individual subjects in modern times. Nevertheless, the text that is of most importance for Lalo in terms of the writing of the prison—the sentence—could be no other than Kafka's "In the Penal Colony." In the story, an unnamed explorer arrives to a tropical island which is known to be a penal colony. He arrives to inspect and give his opinion on a machine used for execution which is no longer accepted as a means of punishment by the islanders except by the officer who operates the machine. Throughout the story the officer is trying to convince the explorer of the "beauty" and uniqueness of the machine so that he would not give a negative opinion on it. The officer explains in details the parts of the machine. He explains that it consists of a lower part called the "Bed," where the condemned person is supposed to lay down, an upper part called the "Designer," and a middle part which moves up and down called the "Harrow":

> As soon as the man is stripped down, the Bed is set in motion. It quivers in minutes, very rapid vibrations, both from side to side and up and down. You will have seen similar apparatus in hospitals; but in our Bed the movements are all precisely calculated; you see, they have to correspond very exactly to the movements of the Harrow. And the Harrow is the instrument for the actual execution of the sentence. (Kafka 196)

The officer is explaining the machine that has been designed to punish people in the penal colony. What is fascinating about the apparatus is that it has been intentionally designed for the figure of the human body fit and lay there, while a harrow literally executes the sentence of the alleged crime committed. The story serves Lalo not only as the image of a writing-machine that inscribes bodies, but one that exists in an island which is a colony and a prison at the same time. As I mentioned earlier, In *Los pies de San Juan* and *donde* Lalo explores the city of San Juan Puerto Rico and thinks of San Juan, islands, the Caribbean and colonies not as geographical o geopolitical places but as spaces of thought. This is an imperative issue when reading Lalo that differentiates him from reading Foucault and his assessment of the extension of the prison's structure into other institutions. Because for Lalo in *El deseo del lápiz. Castigo, urbanismo, escritura* the colony is a place from where we can think the prison than contains other prisons—a double prison.

By the third or fourth page of *El deseo del lapiz: castigo, urbanismo y escritura* Lalo introduces Kafka's text "In the Penal Colony" analyzing it while at the same time quoting some of the most gruesome passages of the text. The structure of Lalo's book, which begins with Kafka's torturous descriptions of the remote practice for executing bodies, is reminiscent to Foucault's narrative in *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of The Prison*. The narrative from torture to the prison is by no means more "humane" in either text, however Lalo focuses on the question of the "penal colony" and the anachronism of the machine:

> En el famoso relato de Kafka "En la colonia penitenciaria", una máquina, es decir el artefacto por excelencia de la modernidad inflige en un reo una acción premoderna: el suplicio. En el texto, la colonia es tanto una prisión (es decir, una comunidad de individuos castigados) como una isla intervenida: un territorio

conquistado por la voluntad imperial de una potencia europea" (Lalo, *El deseo* 16-7).

The machine—the symbol of modernity—is executing bodies with a premodern tactic—torture. Added to that, the island is both a conquered place and a prison. The group of people in this penal colony is not only divided by the following dichotomies: colonizers/colonized, officers/prisoners, but also a foreign and a native tongue, which only becomes relevant when determining the language of the sentence. We, the readers, don't know what the official language of the colony is—Kafka writes in German—but there is a mention that both the explorer and the officer know French.[33] Furthermore, we know that the "natives" speak another language, and that they don't understand the sentence being inscribed on their bodies. However, this is something that the officer explains has been solved by the procedures of the machine: "'He doesn't know the sentence that has been passed on him?' 'No,' said the officer again, pausing a moment as if to let the explorer elaborate his question, and then said: 'There would be no point in telling him. He'll learn it on his body'" (Kafka 197) What the officer is explaining and later will elaborate on is that the condemned man will have a realization about his sentence. This means not only that he will be tortured to the point of death and therefore realize his death sentence through excruciating pain; but rather that he will be "enlightened" with the sentence: "But how quiet he grows at just about the sixth hour! Enlightenment comes to the most dull-witted. It begins around the eyes. From there it radiates. A moment that might tempt one to get under the Harrow oneself" (Kafka 204). This moment of enlightenment is the moment when the condemned man has the realization and which is also

[33] In *Kafka Toward a Minor Literature,* Gilles Deleuze argues that what he calls a "minor literature" does not come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language. To these effects, Kafka, by writing in German, turns it into a "paper language", an artificial language cut off from the masses, and thus deterritorialized and appropriate for minor uses (17)

coveted by the officer.[34] So much that when towards the end of the story the officer knows the explorer will not support the practice of execution by the machine he—the officer—decides that he wants to inscribe the last sentence on himself so he can experience enlightenment.

What Lalo sees in the penal colony is the literary and linguistic relationship that operates with the machine. Not only different languages separate them, since they are in a conquered territory but a "literary tradition" is being practiced as well as executed: "El condenado es un ágrafo mientras que el oficial es consciente que es el último representante de una 'tradición literaria' (Lalo, *El deseo* 20) The condemned man, is one who cannot write or has no writing. He is there to be the material, in which to inscribe a sentence, the wall where the prisoners of "el Oso Blanco" have left their mark. On the other hand, the commandant is the executioner of a tradition which he is defending and that was passed on to him from the last commandant. When he realizes that he will not be able to continue using the machine he sacrifices himself to experience the moment of enlightenment and decides that his sentence must be "BE JUST!". As Lalo writes, he knows that he is the last representative of a tradition of writers of sentences, that is why he chooses to inscribe the last sentence on his body. The result of justice in the story ends up being that the machine does not work properly, things come apart and the commandment does not experience the moment of enlightenment. As with the last writer of the tradition, its writing device also comes undone, no longer providing any movement or experience.

[34] For a reading of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" in terms of Foucault's writings see Nicholas Dungey's *Franz Kafka and Michel Foucault: Power Resistance and The Art of Self-Creation*. Dungey's writes that: "In the Penal Colony" and *The Trial*, so compelling, I argue is the way Kafka's protagonists enact a standard Enlightenment understanding of agency and power, while all the time being hopelessly entwined in a webbing of power relations from which there is no escape." (38)

Lalo already knows that there are many architectures that prevent movement and experience—the city, the prison, the colony, the mind—which also means that there are also many sentenced subjects. Lalo has gone into "El Oso Blanco" the abandoned prison to look at and photograph the writings of sentenced subjects. But Lalo is already inhabiting several of these places at once—the city, the colony, the island—and is therefore carrying many sentences. Let's not forget that this are not only geopolitical spaces but spaces of thought from where Lalo is engaging his project. And yes, as we had seen with Piglia and as Lalo seems to point at first glance: he, as well as we, seem to be in perpetual prisons without a possibility for exit.

Nevertheless, what Lalo sees is a place of transcendence, a movement passed this condition in the architecture of the prison; since it is not only a place of violence and subjection but also a place for the creation of thought. Lalo writes that: "El animal que somos no es necesariamente el que piensa, *sino el que marca*" (101). Here Lalo sees the possibility for a kind of writing in the mark or *escritura-marca* that is in tune with the animal side which we are— —rather than with what we think. For Lalo, thought means *descreer* which is to go against beliefs, and this mark is one that stains the walls of the prison as a scream that will not save anyone:[35]

> Se escribe atado, encajonado, en un voluntarioso y fracasado intento de transgresión (y de trascendencia). El resultado es la mancha, la sombra, la rayadura del vencimiento. Ésta parecería ser la única huella personal de la humanidad. Lo demás sería el imperio del castigo, de la brutalidad, de la fuerza deprimente y ciega de lo

[35] In his most recent book, *Intemperie,* Lalo says: "Descreer. Descreer del mundo equivale a interrogar las formas que lo sustentan. Hacerlo es una forma de abandono, una renuncia a las ideas universales y la apuesta por una aventura a los límites de la mente. Descreer, pues, para acceder a la condición de superviviente. Descreer para que la escritura arribe como un don" (11).

> que de incontrolable y rudimentario tienen las identidades. La marca—el acto escritural—es la única manera de ganar habiendo perdido. Es una victoria pírrica (Lalo, *El deseo* 89-90).

Lalo is not proposing an easy way out by any means. He knows that it is almost a lost battle, but as I mentioned earlier he is asking that we think of the unthinkable to try and figure out a way out of the sentence. Otherwise what we have is the empire of punishment, brutality, and the overpowering, blinding and depressing forces of identities. According to Lalo the *escritura-marca* is the only way to transcend and transgress the prison even if it does not save anyone. Here in *el deseo del lápiz*, is the desire to un-sentence oneself, or perhaps to transform the experience of urbanism, law, and writing into a different kind of thought and even perhaps to a different experience that for Lalo is the experience of nomadism, or as it is expressed in his most recent book —*a la intemperie.*

The Fictional Case: The Fable

> La tradición literaria tiene la estructura de un sueño en el que se reciben los recuerdos de un poeta muerto.
>
> "El último cuento de Borges" Piglia

"*Paurtient montes*" is the opening fable to Juan José Arreola's *Confabulario definitivo.* In the fable the narrator is being pressured by his friends and enemies to reveal the new beginning of the fable "the mountain in labor" that he has made everyone believe he knows. The narrator lets us know that the interest people have for him to reveal and tell the story had been so unrelenting that it had surpassed any interest in the story itself. One day after being threatened and blackmailed—as the teller is walking down the streets—he is besieged by a group of resented people who demand and shout that he tell the beginning of the story. Standing there, in the middle of the crowd, the teller sees more people coming together to be part of what he calls a crime. While he gathered himself from that tumultuous moment he begins:

> Con voz falseada por la emoción, trepado en un banquillo de agente de tránsito que alguien me puso debajo de los pies, comienzo a declamar las palabras de siempre, con los ademanes de costumbre: "'En medio de terremotos y explosiones, con grandiosas señales de dolor, desarraigando los árboles y desgajando las rocas se aproxima un gigante advenimiento. ¿Va a nacer un volcán? ¿Un río de fuego? ¿Se alzará en el horizonte una nueva y sumergida estrella? Señoras y señores: ¡Las montañas están en parto!" (Arreola 66)

Immediately after delivering the beginning of the tale the author feels shame, and thinks he has failed. After all, what the public was demanding was to hear the new version for the beginning of the story. As we can see in the quote above what has been added to the phrase "the mountain in labor"—how the story is recognized—is the drama leading to the beginning of the fable: the setting, the anticipation and pathos. But there is nothing new here because, as he says, these are the habitual words and gestures. The narrator is building-up the expectations of the public by having them imagine an earthquake, explosions, followed by immense pain that is ripping apart the trees, breaking the rocks, all leading the way to the coming of the birth—of the mountain of course. But in building expectations, the narrator—not the teller—is already telling another story, which is about the fable itself. Throughout the fable the narrator will tells us not only a "new version" of "the mountain in labor" but he also will make evident to the reader the mechanisms of the form. I want to highlight in particular the existence of mechanisms that are negotiating with the expectations of the public—who most likely already know the story—while at the same time relating a new experience.

"The Mountain in Labor" is an Aesopic fable.[36] The ancient story goes as follows: "A mountain had gone into labour and was groaning terribly. Such rumors excited great expectations all over the country. In the end, however, the mountain gave birth to a mouse" (Gibbs 135). In the ancient fable the mountain itself had gone into labor and the rumors were loud and growing about what would come out of that mountain. This specific fable also provides us an "epymithium," also called an "aftertale" which is an explanation that comes after the fable to ensure meaning is not lost: "*This is a fable written for people who make serious-sounding threats but who actually accomplish nothing*" (Gibbs 135). Thus, we know that the fable about the mountain giving birth

[36] See Gibbs pg. 135: (Phaedrus 4.24= Perry 520)

to a mouse is supposed to signify something that announces itself as grandiose and boisterous but delivers the opposite—a tiny mouse.

In Arreola's fable this part of the fable is told in a different way. The rumors that have spread around town, the growing excitement and expectations are not about what will come out of the mountain, at least not yet, but about the new beginning that the teller of the fable is supposed to know. This is the innovation that the teller of the fable is announcing, but which is only visible to the reader and not to the listener of the fable in the middle of the streets. The reader will be able to appreciate the commentary that the teller of the fable will make of his anxiety over the supposed failure in telling the fable which is both his innovation—not audible to the public in the fable—and his perception of the genre. After pronouncing the phrase "the mountain in labor" he continues:

> El estupor y la vergüenza ahogan mis palabras. Durante varios segundos prosigo el discurso a base de pura pantomima, como un director frente a la orquesta enmudecida. El fracaso es tan real y evidente, que algunas personas se conmueven. "¡Bravo!", oigo que gritan por allí, animándome a llenar la laguna. Instintivamente me llevo las manos a la cabeza y la aprieto con todas mis fuerzas, queriendo apresurar el fin del relato. Los espectadores han adivinado que se trata del ratón legendario, pero simulan una ansiedad enfermiza. (Arreola 66)

The teller of the fable is horrified because the public who had besieged him earlier. wanting him to produce a new version of the story, had figured out what the story was right away as he started telling it. Certainly, they had known, even before then, what the story would be since they were all asking for "the mountain in labor" but what Arreola is pointing out is that they were simulating a sickening excitement for a story they already knew from beginning to end.

The fable was popular and had been further popularized by Horace's citation of it in his *Art of Poetry*. According to Laura Gibbs it was thanks to him that the proverbial saying "the mountain in labor" has had a long-lived popularity.[37] In fact Arreola separates Horace's phrase so the first part "*Parturient montes*" becomes the title to his fable and "*nascetur ridiculus mus*," the epigraph. Horace recommends in his Art of poetry not to write with ostentatious language, otherwise in the end you will get a ridiculous mouse, which is also an advertisement for moderation and a way to promote the fable. In Gibbs' words, "the mountain in labor" is no longer thought of as a fable, since after passing through Horace's works, it was popularized into a proverb or a saying. This is indeed the case because many times a proverb is the moral for a fable that has been detached from the complete fable:[38]

> Likewise fable and proverb often coincide and are indistinguishable in respect to form, meaning, and function. This is especially true of Greek and Oriental proverbs in the middle ages, which, more often than in the West have the structural form of fables…although examples are by no means wanting in antiquity: "Someone told a story to an ass, and he wiggled his ears" (*Zenob.* V 42); "The mountain labored and gave birth to a mouse" (*Diogen*. VIII 75, Ph. IV 24); "Once a man, after seeing a

[37] See Gibbs, 135.

[38] In "Diario de un loco" Ricardo Piglia writes about the possibility of constructing the material conditions that surround a saying, for he calls these sayings the ruins of a tale. And he writes this under the subtitle "fábula": "**Fábula.** Al visitar hace un tiempo a su hermana en su oficina oye, encantado, uno de sus cuentos morales. Una mujer pelirroja está sentada al fresco en el patio de tierra de su casa, en las afueras de Dublín. Ha llovido toda la noche y el sol despunta apenas. Su marido tira agua de una bomba y baldea el patio. Ella dice entonces: 'Sobre llovido, mojado' y un vecino que la escucha lo cuenta y se divierte con esa ocurrencia que lentamente recorre un largo camino como síntesis de la sorpresa que siempre depara la repetición. Su hermana trabaja desde hace años en un 'Estudio sobre el dicho'. En verdad trabaja sobre refranes que condensan lecciones de ética popular y busca investigar en archivos y testimonios orales la situación original que dio origen a la moraleja. Ella construye la situación material en la que esa frase ha nacido. Esos dichos son ruinas de relatos perdidos de escenas reales. Si uno puede reconstruirla, dice, podría conocer la historia de la forma de vida de las clases populares. // Argumentar por el ejemplo es presuponer la existencia de cierta regularidad de la que ejemplo sería la síntesis" (*Prisión* 118-9).

palace, burned his own house" (*Aes*. Prov. 160, *Aesopica* p. 288, medieval). (Gibbs 67)

To think that proverb and fable coincide in the same place at a times moment is similar to the movement from the anecdote of life into the anecdote of thought. An abstraction of experience, but where the experience in the fable is fictional—and not anecdotal as I will elaborate throughout the chapter. It would suffice to say for now that the fictional in the fable is also an eternal form, but it does not oscillate between the real and the fictive—like the anecdote. However, one of the most significant aspects of the fable is the establishment of linear time: beginning, middle, and end because none of the fable's parts can be extracted or its order rearranged.[39]

But getting back to the middle of the fable, Arreola is letting the reader know that he is aware how the genre works and therefore he must continue to fulfill the expectations of the public. Even though they want to be surprised, they also do not want to be disappointed—they are *expecting* to hear the same story they already know. They know how the fable is supposed to go—and therefore the saying/proverb as well—and so the teller of the fable must negotiate with tradition and innovation. As he is struggling with these thoughts he decides to go with tradition: "Yo conozco las reglas del juego, y en el fondo no me gusta defraudar a nadie con una salida de prestidigitador…Recorro mis bolsillos uno por uno y los dejo volteados, a la vista del público. Me quito el sombrero y lo arrojo inmediatamente, desechando la idea de sacar un conejo" (Arreola 66). He has the temptation of pulling the magician's trick and changing the story altogether by delivering a rabbit from the mountain instead of a mouse, but he knows that he would disappoint the audience. He could, and has the ability of the magician to deliver something unexpected, but

[39] See Pinciano

that is not why he is there. After all, that is not the story that people came to hear. Furthermore, if the mountain gave birth to a rabbit and not to a mouse the comparison would not be as ridiculous and the discrepancy between the two things would not have been so vast. Changing any of the elements of the comparison would result in the loss of sense, because it is the particular experience that is able to create a specific meaning. Therefore, the fable must always be told in its entirety—beginning, middle and end. The only possible innovation in the fable lies in the surrounding aspects—the episodes.[40] How fable its told, who tells it, when its told, etc. are all variables that depend on contingencies, but the fable itself is mobilized as an eternal form which is told and retold time and again.

As the narrator continues the story, a surprise comes to the teller and the reader, a stalling technique that will not only extend the laconic fable but will interrupt and delay the end giving Arreola and the teller enough time for innovation. As the teller is trying to figure out if he will pull the rabbit from his hat, the delay, suspense, and drama arrive again. Something has happened to the teller, affecting him to the point where he may not be able to finish telling the fable. We cannot immediately know what is going on with the telling of the fable but we know the tension and expectation are starting to raise again: "A punto de caer desmayado, me salva el rostro de una mujer que de pronto se enciende con esperanzado rubor. Afirmado en el pedestal, pongo en ella todas mis ilusiones la elevo a la categoría de musa, olvidando que las mujeres tienen especial debilidad por los temas escabrosos" (Arreola 66). As he is about to faint, someone notices his weakness and calles an ambulance which arrives almost immediately. The teller lets us know that this is the climax of the story, since the sound of the ambulance siren in the horizon signals a definite threat. In the delay of the end of the fable, Arreola is not only postponing the inevitable

[40] See Pinciano especially the section "EPÍSTOLA QUINTA: De la fábula"

and predictable end, but rather enacting the expectations of the fable in his own way. If we recall, the fable about the mountain in labor is about "people who make serious sounding threats but actually accomplish nothing." In other words, Arreola and the teller are raising expectations not by tearing the mountain apart but by transferring it to "breaking-apart" of the teller, for at one point it looks like he may not be able to finish the fable.

At the last moment, the teller and the fable are saved—from collapsing—and the teller lets us know that he escapes the lynching that he would have gotten had he disappointed the public by not having delivered the end of the fable. It all happened as a miracle, when he felt something growing in his armpit and moving towards the tunnel of his shirt starting to exit towards his hand:

> Suavemente, dejo caer el brazo a lo largo del cuerpo, con la mano encogida como una cuchara. Y el milagro se produce. Por el túnel de la manga desciende una tierna migaja de vida. Levanto el brazo y extiendo la palma triunfal. Suspiro, y la multitud suspira conmigo. Sin darme cuenta, yo mismo doy la señal del aplauso y la ovación no se hace esperar. Rápidamente se organiza un desfile asombroso ante el ratón recién nacido (Arreola 67).

The teller does not perform the magician's trick by pulling the rabbit out of the hat, but rather performs the colloquial trick by solving the issue *sacándoselo de la manga*, a popular saying in Spanish that literally translates into "pulling it out of his sleeve" but better translates to the English idiom "pulling it out of thin air." This trick could also be seen as recurring to the magician's trick, not the one of the rabbit, but the one who pulls the endless pieces of cloth from his sleeve. Of course, for this fable, there could be no other but a ridiculous mouse, but one that with Arreola's magic becomes a real and actual mouse that satisfies the desires and expectations of the public.

Once the end has been delivered, that everyone has seen the real mouse, that the applauses and emotions have settled, doubt and suspicion start to invade the public because they do not trust what they have just witnessed: "Apenas se alejan unos pasos y ya comienzan las objeciones. Dudan, se alzan de hombros y menean la cabeza. ¿Hubo trampa? ¿Es un ratón de verdad?" (Arreola 67) Arreola criticizes that many people are doubting if he cheated or not—even though he performed "the mountain in labor" and delivered the mouse. In a way it seems that they are disappointed that he was able to deliver—both the story and the mouse. They were excited as he was telling the story, but it was only later that they questioned everything. Afterwards, he decides that he will give the mouse to the woman who prevented him from fainting as he had made of her his muse, and whose mere face, suddenly kindled with a hopeful blush, gave him hope to continue delivering the mouse. In the end, the woman takes the mouse and tells him that she will take it home where she lives with her husband and has a cat, and that she will take the mouse as a surprise to them. Arreola concludes his fable by saying that the mouse has no significance in that space, because out of the context of the fable, it will only be an ordinary being: "Nadie sabe allí lo que significa un ratón" (Arreola 67).

As we can appreciate from Arreola's version of the fable, all parts are reproduced and happen in the same order. Meaning is not lost, and the teller is able to provide a new version as promised from the beginning, but the narrator is left knowing that "no one" in the fable is aware of what the mouse signifies. Which means that no one knows that the delivery of the mouse is the delivery of the fable itself. Furthermore, the doubt that the public has as to whether he had cheated or not is suggestive to the "mistrust of experience." The teller lets us know that after he delivers the mouse, many approached him to see if the mouse was real and verify if he was in fact breathing. Many of these people congratulated him but they were the ones who, as they walked away, started

to doubt him. As we have seen with the anecdote and the aphorism, it is not uncommon that understanding that stems from experience is suspicious even if it makes *sense*, but on the contrary that it turns into a specific kind of thought—skepticism.

As I mentioned earlier this fable is the opening text for *Confubalurio definitivo*, and therefore the text itself is also the opening of expectations for the whole book: "The story's initial position in the book can be explained only by a symbolic interpretation. Actually it constitutes an epigraph or introduction for the entire book. The inspired author has written a series of short stories which he is sure will be met by a total lack of comprehension on the part of the public" (Menton 306). In his text, "Juan José Arreola and the Twentieth Century Short Story," Menton writes that the symbolic nature of this text as introduction shows that Arreola believes his readers will not understand him. However, precisely because fables have persisted in popular culture, or because of it, they have many possibilities of understanding, which makes Arreola's texts perhaps more approachable, even if his readers do not understand him the way he would like.[41] But what Arreola is doing is presenting and enacting the fable of the mountain and the mouse to restore its sense and form. After all Arreola is composing a "confabulario," and not a collection of short stories where anything and everything can be interpreted in different ways, as I will develop. *Confabulario definitivo* announces itself as the comprehensive compendium of the fable raising the expectations of the reader just like the first fable of the collection and delivering exactly what it promises—a ridiculous mouse.[42]

[41] See Theda M. Herz for a discussion on Arreola's sources. Even though her text is about his "textos cultos" we can gather that what she is referring to is his intertextuality. However most of the sources we see she discusses are at least as "well-know" in the context of Latin-American, as mostly they are biblical passages.
[42] Previous to *Confabulario definitivo* Arreola published *Confabulario*. There are some variations on the texts, however "*Parturient montes*" is the first text to appear in both of these books.

Aesop and His Disciples

When referring to *fábula* there are several important distinctions to make[43]. The subject and even the term has been up for discussion for thousands of years and therefore elicits rather different important significations. Furthermore, it has enjoyed a long history that is ever transforming and yet producing the same forms—while inventing a few along the way. Fables and especially *fábula* keep producing extensive discussions—unlike the anecdote and the aphorism, within the study of literary criticism. Some of these discussions in the study of the Greco-Latin fable have required a study of the etymological meaning of *fábula* and our understanding of the way this has shaped the discussion of the form especially in the study of Romance Languages. This is because in Romance languages we have a notion of *fábula* that comes from Latin, but a discrepancy lies in that most that has been theorized and studied about the subject comes from Aristotle's Greek:[44]

> In the foreword to his book IV, Phaedrus speaks specifically of *fabulae Aesiopae,* emphasizing that this is a literary genre allowing variations, amplification and originality; he distinguishes the term from *fabulae Aesopi*, fables from Aesop himself. That is to say, the term *fabula*, which was an approximate translation of μύθος [myth], and, of course the term most frequently used in Latin, was not sufficient on its own. This was because in Latin *fabula* can mean any narration of story, but it also means conversation (cf. Spanish *habla*) and above all because it frequently refers to the myth and to any fabulous or poetic story. *Fabula* was a

[43] The whole conceptualization of "the fable" owes much to the three seminars "The Task of The Cleric," "Theory of the Novel: Modernity's Subjects," and "Space, Place and Narrative," taken with Simone Pinet in the years at Cornell University.
[44] See Aristotle, *The Basic.*

> vague term in Latin which served to neutralize the difference or opposition between the Greek terms λόγος [logos] and μύθος [myth], but it needed the term *Aesopiae* to make it specific. (Rodríguez 4)

Even though I do not discuss this matter at length, some of these questions are implicit in the analyses that I carry out and in the fables that we will see along the way. To understand what the fable means in the context in which I am using it, it is imperative to take into account that in Spanish the word "history" and "story" mean the same thing. And to add another layer of signification to what fable means and of how we understand it, it is important to note that it is also related to "habla." We have already seen some of these questions arising in the form of the anecdote—in its oscillation from the oral to the written. Beyond its linguistic aspect, but also related to the history of the form and how it has been understood, for now it is sufficient to say that the term "Aesopic" is used to identify it, and with this we are referring to a specific tradition of fables that refer to Aesop. Taking both of these aspects into account, the two central meanings of *fábula* that are relevant for me in this chapter are: as an irreducible sequence of events that constructs causal meaning, and as an Aesopic tradition.[45]

When I say Aesopic fables, I am referring to the kind of fables that follow the tradition of Aesop, considered to be a historical figure, a legend, the figure of fables, a genre, the leading character of the romance, *Life of Aesop,* children tales, and more:

> The Greek historian Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BCE, considered Aesop to be a historical figure who lived on the island of Samos in the Aegean Sea, near the coast of modern Turkey…The *Life of Aesop*, an ancient Greek novel of

[45] See Pinciano for the dialogues of Pinciano interpreting Aristotle's notion of fabula.

> uncertain provenance (perhaps dating to the first century CE, but almost certainly relying on earlier prototypes), provides us with an elaborate and extremely humorous account of Aesop's adventures both as slave and later as a freedman (Gibbs IX).

The once ordinary man became legendary, anecdotal, exceeding the real. Many fables—and many of the ones we keep hearing nowadays—are credited to Aesop, turning him into the ultimate figure or teller of stories: "He [Aesop] became associated with the theme of the Oriental sage, the narrator of fables and proverbs, also a victim of a conspiracy, yet who was saved: Ahikar (Rodríguez 647). When he is not the genre itself—an Aesopic fable—or the teller of the story—the narrator of fables—he then could also appear in the fable—a new fable presumably—where Aesop would take the place of the wise man. In a fable called "Aesop and the Soothsayers," a farmer with a problem goes to the soothsayers for advice: his flock of sheep gave birth to lambs with human heads.[46] One soothsayer said the head was an omen for death and since the farmer was the "head" of the family he had to offer a sacrifice. The other soothsayer gives him an equally unsatisfying interpretation where the strange happening was a sign that his wife had been unfaithful to him and that she had made him believe that other men's sons were his own, and so this necessitated a greater sacrifice to fend off the danger. Thus, both of them argue about which interpretation is right. But as the short fable goes on the problem is resolved all due to Aesop's wit: "Aesop also happened to be there, that old man, who was nobody's fool: there was no way that nature could play tricks on him! 'If you want to expiate this omen' said Aesop, 'I suggest you supply your shepherds with wives!' (Gibbs 152) Aesop, as a character and no longer as a person

[46] See Gibbs, Phaedrus 3.3 = Perry 495.

is able to enter the fictional world and solve the arguments he is presenting because of his skills as storyteller even if centuries later he will be infantilized in popular terms.[47]

It is not uncommon that when we think of fables we imagine short tales of talking animals, or inanimate objects who teach us a moral lesson. Fables—although they tend be short—do not have a specific length, can be in verse or prose, and do not need to be told by an inanimate object or animal. As a matter of fact, if understood this way, there is also a related form to the fable, that of the parable, which is also a short tale that teaches a moral lesson. The parable, however, is told by Jesus, Jesus' disciples or another human being. Like the fable, the parable carries with it a moral lesson. The moral of the story is the teaching which is sometimes explicitly told at the end of beginning of the tale, but sometimes is is tacitly in the fable and it is up to the reader or listener to decipher the meaning of the fable: "The epimythium is added by the teller of the fable to make sure that the point is absolutely clear…In other fables there may be instead a *promythium*, a moral that actually comes before the fable (Greek *pro-mythos*, 'before-story'). Unlike the moral which is fully immersed inside the fable" (Gibbs XIV). As we can see there can be an explanation of the fable, but there cannot be a fable without morals.[48] As we had seen in the chapter of the anecdote, Borges says that all language is of a successive order—which is what the anecdote is always undoing—but the fable willingly constructs and mimics linear time for an understanding of cause-effect relationships. This does not mean that the fable at all times privileges this kind of understanding, but that it does want to address the foolishness of actions in one direction or

[47] As Gibbs says, "Aesop´s fables were not considered 'children's literature' in the ancient world. In fact, this notion of a children's Aesop begins with early modern collection of fables such as Roger L'Estrange's English translation of 1962, which aimed to '*initiate the Children, into some sort of Sense and Understanding of their Duty*'" (XXI-II).
[48] Some Latin-American critics read Arreola and Monterroso as anti-fabulists because the say they do not moralize. Several of these criticisms label both authors as "absurdists" and/or pessimists of contemporary times—satirists. However, I do not believe there can be a fable without morals, what they are doing is giving them new values, as I try to show with my analysis. See Paula R. Heusinkveld's "La nueva alegoría de Juan José Arreola," and Read G. Gilgen's "Absurdist Techniques in the Short Stories of Juan José Arreola."

another. This is especially what Juan José Arreola and Augusto Monterroso are particularly interested in performing. However, instead of pointing out the foolishness of everyday human actions they target the internal logic of well-known fables still relevant to our times.

Let us go back to parables and consider them under the light of what I have just mentioned about the logic of the fable and its willing construction, fabrication, and mimicking of linear time and our conception of it as cause and effect. When Jesus speaks to Matthew and his disciples, they hear and see the fable at once. This happens in the oral and the spoken word, telling the story: "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:23) In the first sentence Matthew repeats the words of Jesus, stating that it will be difficulty for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. In the second sentence, there is another repetition that is turned into a metaphor that will elucidate or rather draw the words of Jesus, that the entrance will not only be difficult but impossible; it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Just like that—with the impossibility of the image created by language—the kingdom of heaven is separated into a class society that will silently redeem the misery suffered by the poor by denying the entrance of the rich into heaven. In a mere sleight of hand with language, an impossibility is fashioned in the parable but also beyond the parable itself. In the fable "En verdad os digo," Juan José Arreola retells this famous parable and creates a fable in order to solve this biblical conundrum. Arreola invents the possibility not for a classless society so that everyone can get into the kingdom of heaven, but rather for a way to pass a camel through the eye of a needle so the rich can enter the kingdom of heaven.

With the title of the fable and the first sentence, Arreola is able to retell the entire parable. Or at the very least, he is able to place the reader back in the narrative of Matthew. The title "En verdad os digo" which translates to "truly I tell you," places the narrator as the invocation of the voice of Matthew—saying the word or *la palabra* of Jesus. The first sentence of Arreola's fable reads: "Todas las personas interesadas en que el camello pase por el ojo de la aguja, deben inscribir su nombre en la lista de patrocinadores del experimento Niklaus" (Arreola 68). From the beginning, the narrator has already completely invoked the image of the camel going through the eye of a needle, while at the same time constructing a possibility to resolve that which once had been framed to be an impossible.

The announcement tells that anyone who is interested in the camel passing through the eye of the needle should sign-up to sponsor the experiment to be conducted. In other words, all rich people—since they are the ones who have been ostracized from the kingdom of heaven—can participate—as sponsors—in making the impossible possible. Niklaus' investigation and experiment is presented as a project whose purpose is without a doubt humanitarian: "Niklaus deriva sus investigaciones actuales a un fin caritativo y radicalmente humanitario: la salvación del alma de los ricos" (Arreola 68). It could certainly be no other way, since after all Arreola is dealing with a project that would allow everyone to enter to heaven—something that not even Jesus himself was able to do. The scientific plan consists in disintegrating the camel in a *chorro de electrones* to make it pass through the eye of the needle, by transferring it to a sort of television screen that would organize the electrons to then reconstruct the camel. Nikaus knows it would be possible since he had already successfully transferred a heavy drop of water with this method. The narrator keeps explaining the scientific details of the experiment and assures that there will be no be problem. To make this experiment possible, Niklaus needs his own nuclear power plant and to

finance it there is a special committee that will take charge of the universal collection to execute the experiment. At the time of the telling, however, the committee only has the camel and the needle. After explaining the details and support that the experiment is getting, the narrator tells us that the experiment "peca de científico" (Arreola 70) which translates into "sins of being scientific." In Spanish, the phrase "sins of" means it's so extreme or drastic that it almost "sins" in this case of being scientific, since the experiment pretends to liquify the camel and pass it through the eye of a needle and then solidify it again. Yes, the experiments "sins of being ridiculous" too, but Arreola makes the impossible possible through this fable, since the impossible—the entrance to the kingdom of heaven was shutoff to the rich with a single metaphor. For Arreola, it was more important that through the same metaphor, a sense of justice and solace was "awarded" to the poor. As the story continues the narrator criticizes the amount of money that the rich give away to charity and the church and tries to convince them to spend it in his invention: "En vez de derretir toneladas de cirios y de gastar el dinero en indescifrables obras de caridad, las personas interesadas en la vida eterna que posean un capital estorboso, deben patrocinar la desintegración del camello, que es científica, vistosa, y en último término lucrativa" (Arreola 70) He is trying to convince people that the experiment will be a good investment—better than any kind of religious attempt at redemption, since it is scientific in nature. The investment will be profitable for every contributor since, in addition to solving the problem of personal salvation, the formula would ultimately allow people to travel in liquified form. The experiment, however, is all a trick: if it succeeds, the rich will make more money and therefore will be richer and never make it into the kingdom of heaven. But Arreola has another solution prepared for them: "Pero la posibilidad de un fracaso es más halagadora. Si Arpad Niklaus es un fabricante de quimeras…Nada impedirá que pase a la historia como el glorioso fundador de la desintegración universal de capitales. Y los ricos, empobrecidos

en serie por las agotadoras inversiones, entrarán fácilmente al reino de los cielos por la puerta estrecha (el ojo de la aguja), aunque el camello no pase" (Arreola 70). In a twisted revenge, Arreola is able to create the possible out of the impossible. If in the parable of Matthew the rich are ostracized of the kingdom of heaven and the poor are silently excluded from the richness of everyday life, Arreola creates a different possibility. By disintegrating the camel—the parable itself—he also disintegrates the capital that makes them eligible for such *fabricated* exclusion. By making the rich poor he breaks the dichotomy that had in the first place created the impossible entrance.

Augusto Monterroso, a contemporary writer to Arreola, also wrote fables. Both were enacting ancient, modern and new fables, but Monterroso was bolder or more obvious in the innovation to some the stories. "La fe y las montañas," a fable by Monterroso, refers to the well-known saying *la fe mueve montañas*, "faith moves mountains," which is another reference to a parable from Matthew 17:20. In the parable, we encounter the same mechanism we saw before, where there is a fable and a saying at the same time: "And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you". Monterroso's version, of course, goes quite differently. The half page narrative tells us that at the "beginning" faith moved mountains just when it was absolutely necessary, which made the scenery pretty stable for centuries, but then when faith started to spread, people thought it would be fun to start changing the mountains from one place to another and then this created a problem more than solve anything because now you could not find the mountains where you had left them the night before. Then, good people decided to abandon faith. As a consequence, now mountains stay where they are—most of the time. Monterroso ends the fable writing that: "Cuando

en la carretera se produce un derrumbe bajo el cual mueren varios viajeros, es que alguien, muy lejano o inmediato, tuvo un ligerísimo atisbo de fe." (*La oveja* 19) In the fable Monterroso writes a tiny history of faith, based on the saying or parable "faith moves mountains." He then goes through the changes—positive and the negative effects—of the popularity of faith during its history. The irony in the text is the device used to disintegrate the fable all the way to Monterroso's contemporary moment where he is accusing faith or God's will for the landslide to occur. The narrator is elucidating the issues that arise from "faith is able to move anything" and also that this is inherently good. He takes the saying/sentence to its limits without deranging it, as it is literally the same one from the parable. Thus, he lets us know what are the consequences of the sentence first by pointing out that if everyone started to move mountains then you could not find any of them which would create problems, and secondly by proposing that if a landslide occurrs it could be because someone had a glimpse of faith.

In a fable titled "La tela de Penélope o quién engaña a quién," Monterroso writes a fable about what really happened between Penelope and Ulises in Greece. The fable is composed of three paragraphs. The first one tells that many years ago a man named Ulises was married to a beautiful woman named Penelope and that they were in Greece. The narrator says that Penelope's only defect was her obsession with weaving which was also what allowed her to be alone for a long time. The second paragraph tells a legend: "Dice la leyenda que en cada ocasión en que Ulises con astucia observaba que a pesar de sus prohibiciones ella se disponía una vez más a iniciar uno de sus interminables tejidos, se le podía ver por las noches preparando a hurtadillas sus botas y una buena barca, hasta que sin decirle nada, se iba a recorrer el mundo y a buscarse a sí mismo" (Monterroso, *La oveja* 21). In this part of the fable we find the innovation in Monterroso's version as he is adding something that we do not know about Penelope and Ulises and he is able to do it

on account that it is a legend. In the third and last paragraph of the fable he lets us know that weaving was how Penelope kept Ulises away while she flirted with her admirers or suitors—making them believe that she was weaving while Ulises traveled and not that Ulises traveled while she wove, "como pudo haber imaginado Homero, que, como se sabe, a veces dormía y no se daba cuenta de nada" (Monterroso, *La oveja* 21). In his account of the story Penelope is not weaving endlessly waiting for the return of her husband but instead she is keeping him away so she can flirt with her admirers. In this fable Monterroso is not only inverting some of the traditional understandings of very well-known stories but he is introducing new—although well-known—characters to confabulate with them. Now we don't only have Aesop, or the parables of Jesus, but we also have Penelope and Ulises. At the same time, we could say that he is *fabulating* what was in another form by weaving his very own fable with different characters and their stories.

Other characters or types that appear in Monterroso's fables are psychoanalysts, literary critics, Achilles, the parenthesis, colonizers and Kafka to name a few. In "La cucaracha soñadora" Monterroso writes a fable for Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*: "Era una vez una Cucaracha llamada Gregorio Samsa que soñaba que era una Cucaracha llamada Franz Kafka que soñaba que era un escritor que escribía acerca de un empleado llamado Gregorio Samsa que soñaba que era una Cucaracha" (*La oveja* 51). I have transcribed here the entire fable, which captures the dream-like movement from salesman-insect-writer named Kafka which has become a modern Aesop, as I will explain. In an interview in *Viaje al centro de la fábula* Monterroso writes that:

> Uno debería ser borrado por sus personajes, de quienes uno apenas estuvo al servicio. Gulliver rebasa a Swift y Otelo a Shakespeare. En cambio, Leopoldo Bloom no ha podido hacer que Joyce permanezca tras la cortina, Lo mismo sucede con Kafka; sus personajes le sirven más a él que él a ellos. El más sabio ha sido

> Cervantes al esconderse tras otro nombre para contar la historia de don Quijote, incluso al grado de que se ha llegado a considerarlo un idiota al lado de su personaje (118).

Aesop was a storyteller who became synonymous with a genre, or almost indistinguishable from it. And here we can see Monterroso telling a fable about another storyteller, if we remember Aesop was not only a teller of fables but was also a character of fables as well. When individuals make it into fables, it is because they can be typified and yet they can exceed this encapsulation. For example, as I suggested in a prior chapter, Macedonio was able to turn himself—*convertirse*—into an anecdote as it was the only way of *graphing* his impossible being, one without a personal identity. In this case, Kafka—with the cockroach—is immortalized further, by Monterroso's fable. We can see how this is also the case for the characters and authors that Monterroso mentioned in the quote, especially the case of don Quixote.

"El Eclipse" is one of Monterroso's best known texts and its found in *Obras completas (y otros cuentos).* By the title of the book the text is a short-story but structurally (and I will get to what I mean by this momentarily) it is also a fable. In fact, it could be an encounter between the fable and the short-story, the old and the new world. The story begins with Fray Bartolomé Arrazola lost in the Guatemalan jungle knowing and accepting that nothing would save him. The narrator sets the religious man sentenced to death from the beginning of the story: "La selva ponderosa de Guatemala lo había apresado, implacable y definitiva. Ante su ignorancia topográfica se sentó con tranquilidad a esperar la muerte." (Monterroso, *La oveja* 47) However, what has sentenced the man is that fact that he does not belong there, and does not know how to escape—he is imprisoned by the jungle, the narrator says. His ignorance is geographical and now he has resigned himself to death. As the story goes on, the friar just wishes to die there and thinks of Spain

where they had entrusted him in the religious zeal of his redemptive labor. However, when he woke up he saw that he was surrounded by a group of indigenous people ready to sacrifice him. After having lived there for a while the friar was able to communicate in the native tongues, and he tried saying something to save himself:

> Entonces floreció en él una idea que tuvo por digna de su talento y de su cultura universal y de su arduo conocimiento de Aristóteles. Recordó que para ese día se esperaba un eclipse total de sol. Y dispuso en lo más íntimo, valerse de aquel conocimiento para engañar a sus opresores y salvar la vida (Monterroso, *Obras* 47-8).

The friar, who had lived in Guatemala for about three years, believes that he can outsmart the indigenous people who are about to sacrifice him with his knowledge about Aristotle—universal knowledge—that he possesses and which he knows they do not. The friar tells the indigenous people: "si me matáis…puedo hacer que el sol se oscurezca en su altura" (Monterroso, *Obras* 48). They looked at him and had a counsel to discuss the matter, and the friar had no doubt that he had convinced them. However, later, as the friar's heart was lying in the sacrificial stone, "uno de los indígenas recitaba sin ninguna inflexión de voz, sin prisa, una por una, las infinitas fechas en que se producirían eclipses solares y lunares, que los astrónomos de la comunidad maya habían previsto y anotado en sus códices sin la valiosa ayuda de Aristóteles. (Monterroso, *Obras* 48). The friar is not saved by his speech since he tries to trick the indigenous people with his "universal knowledge." He is not aware that the community in which he has been living in was already in possession of an even more sophisticated and precise knowledge about the cosmic phenomena than the one he deemed to be "universal". As we knew from the beginning of the story, the friar had already been sentenced, first by the jungle then by his ignorance and then by his trickery. He

had no chance for survival in the jungle and he had given himself to death. His encounter with the indigenous group only proved the inevitable.

As I mentioned earlier, Monterroso collects "El eclipse" in his book of short stories and not of fables.[49] However, the story condenses a problematic—civilization and barbarism or the foolishness of men, like fables usually point out, that can be schematized into a fable capable of being understood beyond the specificity of the Latin-American context of the story. This is not to minimize the specificity of the fable. In fact, if the order of events were to be modified, or if the location of where the story happens changed, it is uncertain if it would have the same effect. However, what I want to underline is that where Monterroso's short stories are at times perceived as "mini or micro-fictions" in the context of the twentieth century, the term can be referring to a preoccupation with just a desire for brevity.[50] By trying to underline the "novelty" and contemporaneity of micro-fiction that seemingly stems from a postmodern paradigm, such readings forget that there is a long tradition of the fable, the anecdotal and the common, which are ever present in Monterroso's texts:

> El cuento moderno, y nos referimos a esa tradición que se origina en el siglo XIX como discurso que se desgaja autónomo tanto del artículo de costumbre como de esos extensos compendios narrativos que intercalaban relatos de raigambre folkrórica o anecdótica, estuvo estrechamente vinculado a las demandas y opciones de revistas, que a la vez crearon un mercado para este tipo de ficción y le impusieron

[49] The way Monterroso articulates his project in terms of form is precise and particular. I address this in the section of "The project" in the chapter "Perpetual Movement."
[50] See Lagmanovich for a reiteration on the importance of "brevity" and the quantification of this brevity in microfiction.

> una restricción especial que luego se confundió con un rasgo genérico: la brevedad (Epple 16).

Notice then how, in "El eclipse," Monterroso is still connected to the tradition of the fable—where the preoccupation with a market driven by brevity is not his concern. Furthermore, the content of his story is sentencing to death the ignorance of the so-called universal knowledge that only Aristotle is supposed to possess. They—the conquerors—pretend to reveal to us the grand phenomenon of which only they possess knowledge of when in reality the forms have always been part of our more indigenous community—in the sense of their being part of popular and oral culture. However, by emphasizing this tradition in the specificity of its historic and/or geographic sense, what is of interest here is to make it very clear that the brief forms I have been analyzing are first and foremost structures that are capable of being decontextualized and actualized at different times.

Monterroso's and Arreola's restriction for brevity is one that is intrinsic to the form of the fable and not to the demands of the market. This I should add that is the same case for micro-fictions that self-impose brevity due to technology—like in social media statuses. The reason for this is that what matters is only form—but form in sense of length.[51] However, if there is coherence between form and content and form was something other than just length then-and-only-then it becomes prevalent where the fable is inscribed. Like in the case of the sentence where the text is inscribed/tattooed in a body.

[51] In many discussions of micro-fictions or "flash-fictions" (in English), where Monterroso is always admired, one of the main discussions regarding the taxonomy of the genre is the number of words that are contained in the text. This is also evident in that in many of the texts that have made up the canon of this kind of literature has come into being through contests made up precisely for "micro-fictions" which impose a certain amount of words. For an extensive discussion on the subject read Lauro Zavala's *Cartografías del cuento y la minificción*.

In *Viaje al centro de la fábula*, Monterroso writes that the fable is an easier genre, since he says that he only needed to choose a subject, jot it down and then make a "clean" version of it—*pasarla en limpio*. But by "easier" what Monterroso meant is that he could address any subject without getting into trouble. For example, he says it would be in bad taste to relay an "elevated idea" in a modern short-story but if he makes it seem as if the idea came from an insignificant animal, it would not seem pretentious and people would see it as a joke:

> En un cuento moderno a nadie se le ocurre decir cosas elevadas, porque se considera de mal gusto, y probablemente lo sea; en cambio, si usted atribuye ideas elevadas a un animal, digamos una pulga, los lectores sí lo aceptan, porque entonces creen que se trata de una broma y se ríen y la cosa elevada no les hace ningún daño, o ni siquiera la notan (31).

Monterroso understands that it is in "bad taste" or outmoded to speak of elevated things in modern times so he finds that the fable is the place where he can enact the place of thought—which is an ordinary and common act as we have seen—even if it will be most likely seen as a joke. Therefore, the fable, even though is the establishment of linear time—since it constructs sense a narrative from beginning, middle and end—it is still another form of the eternal because it does not depend of its context for its meaning. Monterroso writes that the short-story needs its surroundings to function:

> Pero siempre hay que recordar que Poe escribía para gente que leía con velas (lo que ya de por sí propicia el horror. Le propongo una cosa: quédese una noche solo en su casa, apague todas las luces y lea "Ligeia" con vela) y tenían harto tiempo para leer un cuento "en una sola sesión". Los cuentos se escriben para los lectores de cada época. Por su puesto se necesita ser muy bueno para que el cuentista siga

> siendo leído por otras generaciones. Poe se sigue leyendo porque es un genio, pero no necesariamente hay que escribir cuentos como los suyos (Monterroso, *Viaje* 74).

The example of Poe is fascinating since we can see how a writer of his time can turn into a writer who exceeds his age and context. He produces eternal texts because the text can be decontextualized and still make sense. This does not mean that Monterroso is referring to the fact that Poe writes fables, but his stories are able to dislodge from their own historical time and still make sense, which is the same logic by which the fable is eternal. Furthermore, this is also the reason why Monterroso's short-story "El eclipse" can be considered be considered a fable about civilization and barbarism, as well as an enactment of this eternal contradiction.

Fábula: The Train Leading Nowhere

Besides the Aesopic tradition, *fábula* also refers to a the establishment of linear time—in the shortest of forms—that can be dislodged from historical time: "El filósofo dice que las fábulas todas de su principio salen pequeñas, y que el hacerse grandes y que el hacerse grandes ó chicas después está en los episodios; los cuales tienen muy grandes la épicas como muy chicos las trágicas y cómicas" (López 181). The philosopher is Aristotle who in his *Poetics* refers to *fábula* as the minimum expression of the story of plot in tragedy that cannot be modified.[52] I argue that is also the establishment of linear time because the sense extracted from fables are of "causal effect." Take for instance the sayings that we have seen thus far "the mountain in labor," or "faith and the mountain," or "civilization and barbarism;" one event causes another event and then we obtain a result, from which we learn something. It is important to recognize that this is an essential form of

[52] See Aristotle, *The basic.*

understanding and not just dismiss it because it is out of fashion at the time, though of course Monterroso, Arreola, and others also point at the inadequacies and foolishness of taking this mode of understanding as absolute knowledge.[53]

In "El guardagujas," Arreola steps into one of his strangest places, a contemporary-kind of story. This is one of Arreola's longest fables, where a narrator tells the story of the dialogue between a stranger and a switchman. The stranger arrives to a deserted train station where he insists that he needs to arrive to "T." by the next day. The old Switchman tells him that such a thing is nearly impossible. Ultimately the Stranger boards the train but his destination has changed. However, it is with the train, and the discussions of the train—what it does and it cannot do—that Arreola discusses his ideas of plot. This train is going nowhere and everywhere. There are accidents where communities are being built, and then there is the Stranger who insists in going to one specific place. Certainly, for Arreola who was a writer of fables most of his story happens in the conversation between the two men, and ends just as the train arrives to its destination.

"El guardagujas" begins with a stranger arriving late and out of breath in an abandoned train station. He sits and looks at his clock at the time his train is supposed to arrive but there is no train in sight. Suddenly, and out of nowhere: "Al volverse, el forastero se halló ante el viejecillo de vago aspecto ferrocarilero. Llevaba en la mano una linterna roja, pero tan pequeña que parecía un juguete. Miró sonriendo al viajero" (Arreola 77). It seems as though the old man that arrives works in the train station, and the narrator explains the he has a flashlight but that looks like a toy, alerting the reader that this is not the common train station signaling technology and progress. The image of the vague old man holding a small red toy flashlight makes the scene more amusing and

the train station a less modern place. We already know that the train station is abandoned, and now it is presumably operated by the old man with a toy.

The stranger asks if the train has left yet and insists that he needs to leave immediately because he needs to be in place called "T." by the next day. The old man tells the stranger that he does not know and asks the stranger if he ignores how everything works in the country. He tells the stranger that he must get a room, in the motel for travelers, and that he should book it for at least month, indicating that he is not leaving any time soon. They go back and forth, one arguing for staying and the stranger for the fact that he needs to leave right away. At one point the old man is explaining how the country is known for its trains but that they have not been able to organize them. The stranger asks then, if a train will pass through that town and the old man answers:

> Afirmarlo equivaldría a cometer una inexactitud. Como usted puede darse cuenta, los rieles existen, aunque un tanto averiados. En algunas poblaciones están sencillamente indicados en el suelo mediante dos rayas de gis. Dadas las condiciones actuales ningún tren tiene la obligación de pasar por aquí, pero nada impide que eso pueda suceder. Yo he visto pasar muchos trenes en mi vida y conocí algunos viajeros que pudieron abordarlos (Arreola 78).

The old man is explaining what the situation with the trains are, since this is no ordinary train. It is not a train that works by the clock, nor a train that you can rely on, but one that could or could not take you were you wanted to go. It is not the emblem of modernity, unlike the image from the stranger that we have from the first lines of the story. When we see the stranger in the first lines of the story we can envision the modern man running man late, carrying a large suitcase trying to catch his breath as he measures time by the clock and the train: "El forastero llegó sin aliento a la estación desierta. Su gran valija, que nadie quiso cargar, le había fatigado en extremo. Se enjugó

el rostro con un pañuelo, y con la mano en visera miró los rieles que se perdían en el horizonte. Desalentado y pensativo consultó su reloj" (Arreola 77) But what he encounters is that the train will not help his travels nor his keeping of time. As the stranger and the old man keep talking, the stranger keeps insisting that he needs to get to "T." and no other place than "T." but the old man either questions his relentless desire to go to "T." or keeps explaining to him that the train does not work that way.

The old man, also explains to him, the other possible things that could happen in the train, one of which is that the train main never stop in "T." He also tells him other possibilities from getting on the train:

> "Mire usted: la aldea de F. surgió a causa de uno de esos accidentes. El tren fue a dar en un terreno impracticable. Lijadas por la arena, las ruedas se gastaron hasta los ejes. Los viajeros pasaron tanto tiempo juntos, que de las obligadas conversaciones triviales surgieron amistades estrechas. Algunas de esas amistades se transformaron pronto en idilios, y el resultado ha sido F., una aldea progresista llena de niños traviesos que juegan con los vestigios enmohecidos del tren (Arreola 80).

None of this can be planned with anticipation, as he said the community was built because of an accident. Other kinds of accidents have caused other things to happen along the way. For example, there is a cemetery on the train that carries dead people, since sometimes the train travels for years at a time if it is going through an impenetrable territory.

It is certain that for Arreola there is no "T." place that the Stranger is looking for, or rather that he should not be headed there. After all the old man is a *guardagujas* or switchman, who is

the person who works in the railroad in charge of changing the direction of the train. As I mentioned, Arreola is implementing the image of the train to portray where the narrative is going:

> [Agnes Heller] observes that, for many centuries, humanity's utopian quest took the form of a sea voyage, of a ship setting sail for an island of contentment. In the nineteenth century, the image of the train came to predominate—the metaphor of the locomotive advancing, at increasing speed, towards the radiant future, towards the station "Utopia," sweeping away all the obstacles in its path (Löwy 113).

But the train system in his country is unpredictable, unsystematic. The "company" has done many things like create itineraries, and given out the tickets even in most remote of places, but nothing is executed. There is not a coherence between content and form and even if people expect the train to pass, and wait for it, it may never arrive.

The ever-going train is the image of progressive time where things move forward to a better place, which is why the Stranger is in such a hurry to get to his destination. For Arreola however, his idea is to sidetrack the modern train into his eternal fables. He is a switchman for this and his other stories, since he diverts and suspends the linear time of history by telling his eternal fables. Monterroso, in his own way accomplishes the same, by not reproducing the narrative of the train.

There are many different possibilities into what to do with the train of progressive history. Some want to jump on the train and ride it. Some are worried of not getting into the train on time—*que los dejó el tren.* While others want to break it down. Benjamin believes that the train is headed to the abyss where the catastrophe lies and what humanity must do is "pull the emergency break":

> Walter Benjamin also uses the allegory of the train, but in order to invert it dialectically: the train of history is heading for the abyss; revolution is the

> interruption of this catastrophe-bound journey… Benjamin often refers to the oppressed classes as the subject of the emancipatory praxis. Now, in the note on the train, he speaks of the whole of humanity, activat(ing) the emergency break. (Löwy 113-14)

Benjamin sees the "pulling of the emergency break" as revolutionary since it stops progress. Not only progress but the narrative of progress—the train. All of the eternal forms that I have been discussing thus far—the anecdote, the sentence, the aphorism and the fable, divert the course of progress but do not attempt to stop the train which as we saw use to be a ship and was something else before that. This is because if not a ship, or a train there will be something else that will take the place of a linear narrative as long as our language is successive.

In "El guardagujas," the old man tells the stranger about one of the other "accidents" that happened along the way. This time the train was headed towards the abyss—just like Benjamin's train—and a catastrophe could have happened. For this train, the catastrophe was a vital one, since the "company" had not finished the railroad and the bridge that needed to be built was never constructed. In the story, again the train, and the place never coincide with a natural, positivist and technological progressive narrative. The catastrophe is an immediately deadly one. Therefore, the episode is dealt with in a completely different way:

> Recientemente, doscientos pasajeros anónimos escribieron una de las páginas más gloriosas en nuestros anales ferroviarios. Sucede que en un viaje de prueba, el maquinista advirtió a tiempo una grave omisión de los constructores de la línea. En la ruta faltaba el puente que debía salvar un abismo. Pues bien, el maquinista, en vez de poner marcha atrás, arengó a los pasajeros y obtuvo de ellos el esfuerzo necesario para seguir adelante. Bajo su enérgica dirección, el tren fue desarmado

> pieza por pieza y conducido en hombros al otro lado del abismo, que todavía reservaba la sorpresa de contener en su fondo un río caudaloso. El resultado de la hazaña fue tan satisfactorio que la empresa renunció definitivamente a la construcción del puente, conformándose con hacer un atractivo descuento en las tarifas de los pasajeros que se atreven a afrontar esa molestia suplementaria (Arreola 80).

The fact that there is not a bridge that would uncomplicate the journey is not a reason to not continue going. And stopping, to stay and wait for the "company" to do something is not an option. Instead what happens is the operator of the train—who decided not to go back— harangues people so they will join him into undoing the train and carrying it on their shoulders to cross it through the abyss. The joint effort of the community of the train consists in an operation to take apart, to slow down the narrative, and put it back together in order to continue. Arreola is not asking to pull the emergency brake to stop the train of time, but to so something even more difficult, to turn history into a fable. To disintegrate the train—to pass the train through the eye of a needle.

Perpetual Movement: The Flies

"No me ubico"

Monterroso

When referring to simple forms or micro-fictions, I'm speaking less about genres per se, and more about forms, in the sense of spaces of thought, not of rigorous taxonomies. Certainly, I am and have been referring to anecdotes, aphorisms, sentences and fables, but my preoccupation as well as of the authors that I read and interpret, are not limited, for example by the length of a text—though all of the texts end up being short—but rather constitute an eternal problem, which is the organization of eternity. In other words, the problem concerning the various static forms which can capture experience.

In the text by Augusto Monterroso *Movimiento perpetuo*, we encounter a project of a what I call the continuous movement of simple forms. The project of *Movimiento perpetuo* is composed of two parts: one is a dissimilar collection of short texts ranging in subject and form and the other, is a distinctively more coherent part composed of a collection of quotations about flies from different authors such as Lope de Vega, Lucian, Dante, Wittgenstein, Meister Eckhart, Blaise Pascal, Schopenhauer, W.B. Yeats, Marcel Proust, T.S. Eliot and James Joyce. These sections are the two sides of one and the same project—presented here in a single text—and the condensation of Monterroso's entire literary edifice, as I will show throughout this chapter.

The epigraph of *Movimiento pertpetuo* already invokes the desire for movement. The line by Lope de Vega reads: "quiero mudar de estilo y de razones." Short as it is, it actualizes everything that Monterroso wishes to do and is doing in the entirety of his project. In other words, the text is the expression of desire, the desire itself and the actualization of desire. It is the desire of wanting to move through the written word, from writing itself to the reasons and the content for writing as well. The movement and the change are not random and do not supersede desire. For Monterroso there is an ethics involved with his desire, and "style" and "reasons" cannot be separated the form and content of his writing. Thus, even though the desire is to move from one place into another, everything must "fall into place." Take another example: the epigraph I have chosen for this text "no me ubico." In this aphorism, which comes from a famous anecdote from Monterroso's life, we can also see how language is actualized, since form and content are in "harmony." In this case, the desire for movement is evident as well, but this time in the presence of lack. "No me ubico," which can be translated into "I can't place myself" or "I can't find myself," already plays both linguistically and existentially with the ideas and possibilities of place, self and forms in which one can inhabit—not belong to—as Monterroso always dismisses the possibility of identity.[54] Monterroso is interested in becoming not in being, in *estar* and not in *ser*, in the places that one can occupy but never in identity.

Furthermore, the fact that he can't place himself/find himself, is the counterpart for the desire for movement. On the other hand, as I mentioned, the aphorism "no me ubico" has its history in a famous anecdote of Monterroso's life. The anecdote goes as follows: while in Guatemala Monterroso spent some time in prison for political opposition against the dictatorship of Jorge

[54] For a reading of this idea, see Sanchez Prado "Monterroso y el dispositivo literario latinoamericano" in Lámbarry 128-139.

Ubico, and after being liberated he wrote on the walls "no me ubico" and sought asylum in Mexico. Knowing the historical context about the exile of Monterroso and the name of the dictator—which was "Ubico"—we are able to see the playfulness of the use of the last name of the dictator and the word *ubico* which means "I place," to the movement or the "punch-line" of the anecdote about the exile of Monterroso from Guatemala to Mexico. This contextualization gives power for the anecdote to work as an anecdote, instead of turning the anecdote into fact —especially amongst those who understand the reference right away. This movement, or different contextualization gives the aphorism a different meaning, perhaps a more "political" one for some.[55] However, when we understand that it is an anecdote, and indeed not a historical fact, the aphorism—when known that is written by Monterroso —is quite humorous since it fits and feeds into the anecdotal persona of Monterroso—the ironic, satirical writer.[56] Furthermore, the departure from the negation of "no me ubico" to the affirmation of "quiero mudar de estilo y de razones," turns ressentiment[57] into an already ethical project. Already-ethical, since the "u" from "ubico" is never meant to be just the negation of the proper name of the dictator—the capitalized "U"—but the desire for the play with language and the creation for what is desired; which is to place himself in the affirmative project of a perpetual movement. To move from a place of negation to the place of creation, to keep transforming, and move from form to form.

The Flies

"Por eso suplicamos a Dios que nos libre de Dios, y que concibamos la verdad y gocemos eternamente de ella, allí donde los ángeles supremos, la mosca y el alma son semejantes".

[55] See Alejandro Lámbarry "Biblioteca Monterroso" in *La mosca en el canon.*
[56] It is important to note that some scholars say that the main difference between and aphorism and a proverb is that in an aphorims we know who the author is. In other words, the aphorism has an author, it matters who the author is. See Morson.
[57] Nietzsche *Genealogy of Morals*

Meister Eckart, *Sermo Beati pauperes spiritu,*

Monterroso, *Movimiento perpetuo*

The project of *Movimiento perpetuo* contains or attempts to contain the desire to collect an infinite collection of quotes about flies. The quotes are interspersed with apparently dissimilar texts: short stories, anecdotes, aphorisms, essays, praises and "nadas," that with the exception of one text, have nothing to do with flies. But as separators or bookmarks of these texts, is the other writing project, which is at the same time the same project—the perpetual movement which has been called by critics such as William H. Corral, the genre invented by Monterroso.[58] These bookmarks consist of a blank page stained by the drawing of a fly—drawn by Monterroso—and on the other page the solitary quote about the fly. This was the diminutive project that critics always adjectivize as "minimal," for barely having reached the one-hundred-page mark. [59] And that is that it would have been much less if he would not have left so many blank pages! –this is the comment that critics always make. That and that his literature is always the size of his height. In an interview in *Viaje al centro de la fábula* Monterroso jokes about his stature and a text he has dedicated to the subject:

> Yo creo que incluso personas anormalmente bajas han exagerado la modestia de mi estatura, aparte de que, como dijo Eduardo Torres en San Blas: "Los enanos tienen una especie de sexto sentido que les permite reconocerse a primera vista." Hay un texto mío en *Movimiento perpetuo* que trata precisamente ese tema: "Estatura y poesía". Justamente el modo suave de tratarlo hace que los lectores se rían sin que

[58] William H Corral in his introduction to *Complete Works and Other Stories* writes that in the famous epigraph to *Movimiento perpetuo* Monterroso names "perpetual moment" his own genre. I disagree, although I believe "movimiento perpetuo" is the innovation in Monterroso it cannot be thought of as a genre.
[59] For more information on Monterroso's drawings see Palacios in Lámbarry, *La mosca en el canon*, 125.

> se den cuenta de que ese pequeño ensayo está enfocado a señalar el drama que los grandes poetas Pope y Leopardi vivieron debido en gran parte a su escasa estatura (*Viaje* 115).

Here, Eduardo Torres, the double of Monterroso, is addressing two of his main concerns: stature in the double sense of the word (height and greatness) and poetry (art). For him, we must remember that form is not one that exists separate or outside of oneself but one where one can place oneself, *ubicarse*.

His diminutive, absurd and monumental project consisted in looking, everywhere and in all times for one or several flies. This, in the time before "Control + F" that can find any hidden fly in any text. It is like going to look for all the existing flies in a desert, and then going to the next one. Monterroso writes: "Hace años tuve la idea de reunir una antología universal de la mosca. La sigo teniendo. Sin embargo, pronto me di cuenta de que era una empresa prácticamente infinita. La mosca invade todas las literaturas y, claro, donde uno pone el ojo encuentra la mosca" (*Movimiento* 11). He then writes that this book constitutes the first attempt at this collection.

In a similar vein as Borges, who thought that there were only three or four stories to be told—the story about the strong city defended by courageous men, the story about the return linked to the first story, the story about the search, and the story about the sacrifice of a god—Monterroso declares that there are only three subjects: love, death and flies. Less solemn than Borges, and with a dash of humor, Monterroso gives himself the task, or responsibility, of dealing with the subject of flies: "Hay tres temas: el amor, la muerte y las moscas. Desde que el hombre existe, ese sentimiento, ese temor, esas presencias lo han acompañado siempre. Traten otros los dos primeros. Yo me ocupo de las moscas, que son mejores que los hombres, pero no que las mujeres" (Monterroso, *Movimiento* 11). In his project Monterroso is composing a universal history of the

fly but also a history of eternity decentralized from the life of human subjects and/or of humanity and concentrated on the fly. His humor is undeniable in thinking that a fly could be more important than anything, especially man or humanity. In Monterroso's imaginary, flies are certainly superior to men, he refers to them in various occasions as "guardian angels." Presences, always seeing us, following us, and even perhaps protecting us with those two tiny eyes that are filled with a thousand more eyes.

In the text titled "Las moscas"—which is the only text in *Movimiento perpetuo,* aside from the quotes that address the subject of flies directly—Monterroso tells us in about three pages the way he perceives flies. Here, he confirms the traditional symbolic meaning of flies as carriers of bad omens but he also reaffirms the desire of his fellow writers to write about the fly. Compiling an eternal history of flies allows Monterroso to reaffirm all the symbolic presuppositions about flies and to actualize the desire to write the fly through a weightless, humorous and vital project.

I should state very clearly that Monterroso's history about flies is not history or story per se. What we find in this text is, like I said earlier, flies interspersed with texts. Flies that as I propose could be bookmarks or even dead-flies, like the dried petals of flowers some people put inside books. There is no beginning or no end, no entry way into how to read these, except for the text "Las moscas." And when I say that these texts—the quotes—are dead flies in between texts, I mean texts that, like flies, feed and reproduce off corpses. Monterroso writes in "Las moscas": "Nuestras pequeñas almas transmigran a través de ellas y ellas acumulan sabiduría y conocen todo lo que nosotros no nos atrevemos a conocer. Quizá el ultimo transmisor de nuestra torpe cultura occidental sea el cuerpo de esa mosca, que ha venido reproduciéndose sin enriquecerse a lo largo de los siglos" (Monterroso, *Movimiento* 12). There is no improvement and no progress in the action of copying or citing texts, which is the tradition of western culture. Monterroso writes that our

clumsy Western culture has been reproducing itself without enriching itself and there has been no progress at all in this project. But I propose that what could be at stake in this project is a kind of improvement (without progression) based on the vitality of flies, based on the operations of multiplication, infestation and contamination of ours texts, and our "small souls."

As I mentioned earlier Monterroso refers to flies as guardian angels, but most ordinarily flies carry a rather transcendent symbolic meaning that amounts to one thing in particular—death. They are seen in different cultures as carriers of evil, sickness, death, punishment, demons, bad omens, and so on. This certainly following from the belief that death is unwanted and therefore "bad" in some way, flies are thus a symbol of death or that something bad is about to happen. Even though Monterroso won't explicitly acknowledge some significant anecdotes about flies, it is important that I mention them, especially since Monterroso was most likely aware of them. For Judeo-Christian traditions, Beelzebub or Baal-Zebub—god of the Philistine city of Ekron—is literally, in its modern translation, Lord of the Flies.[60] It is one of the names for the Devil, false gods, pagan gods, etc. This is where Monterroso gets his ideas that flies are like guardian angels—an angel, a fallen angel, a guardian angel, a lazy angel—or the perpetual movement, as Monterroso envisions it. Here we can imagine these forms—that could be more—of the angel and their movements as an example of Monterroso's endeavors. However, he is interested not in angels but in quite the opposite—the fly. The "guardian fly" as he calls it is truly what is watching over us and certainly worthy of being admired. Contrary to Monterroso's praise of flies, traditionally flies are widely unpopular and believed to be carriers of evil spirits.

[60] Two important books dealing with the question of evil and Lord of the Flies have been written. One is *Paradise Lost* by John Milton and *Lord o*f the *Fli*es by William Golding.

If we think about some classic proverbs or sayings in the Spanish language —which are commonly used in everyday speech—flies appear everywhere. "Por si las moscas" which translates into "in case of flies" but means "just in case" is a popular saying. One anecdote, that claims it's origin, is that food that is about to be consumed should be covered so flies will not lie over it and contaminate the food, and therefore the saying, "in case of flies." In this example, we can see how an anecdote and an aphorism are connected and disconnected from each other in a movement of forms in language and thought. The anecdote—the space of thought—which allows us to think of an experience, inevitably fabricates an "aphoristic line" as part of the anecdote, which once separated from the anecdote becomes one of the many forms of the aphorism—like the sentence. In this case, a death sentence. However, this could also be re-contextualized as the teaching or morality of a fable about flies and death or with another anecdote and so on and so forth. This is not to say, that one is to do this, or that Monterroso[61] does this himself, although he writes a fable about the fly but rather that this happens both in literature and in popular spoken sayings. Another important aspect to note here is that movements could be reversed from what they appear in this chapter. For example, the Judeo-Christian imagination could have imagined that its fallen-god would be in flies because they had already seen their horrid multiplicity and filth since they contaminated food and everything in sight and not the other way around. In other words, I am not trying to establish an origin but movements from one linguistic form to another, from image to image that carries the same meaning. Furthermore the "fly" does not suffer a metamorphosis or complete transformation in this movement from aphorism, to anecdote, to fable,

[61] Monterroso does have a fable about the fly, see "La mosca que soñaba que era águila" in *La oveja negra y demás fábulas*. However, I'm not trying to imply that there is a linear or circular movement between these forms, or that the author or authors themselves do this at will.

to sentence, etc. But the fly will always be a fly. Or rather flies—devils, angels, bad omens, plagues, "small souls," and so on.

The sentences that arise from flies condemn both flies and humans—one to be the perpetrator and the other the victims: "en boca cerrada no entran moscas" which translates into "no flies go into a closed mouth" but means silence will keep out the flies, which as I mentioned above has come to simply mean "bad." Keeping silent is keeping away death, plagues, punishment. Another example is "no te hagas la mosca muerta" which translates into "don't pretend to be a dead fly" and means do not pretend that you are harmless, implying here that flies are never innocent creatures, reaffirming the *sentence* that flies are tiny creatures of deadly omens.

The collection of quotes appears to be mostly "Spanish" and Western. As Monterroso said, this was the beginning of an infinite and universal project, and I believe he began with what was readily available to him. As he said, the fly is ubiquitous and if you look for it you will find it anywhere. In the collection within *Movimiento perpetuo*, we find two quotes that keep reaffirming the symbolic meaning of flies but that don't stem from Western culture. One is a text from the *Chilam Balam* and the other is a selection of verses from Quechua poetry:

> Yo crío una mosca / de alas de oro, / yo crío una mosca / de ojos encendidos. // Trae la muerte / en sus ojos de fuego, / trae la muerte / en sus cabellos de oro, / en sus alas hermosas. // En una botella verde / yo la crío; / nadie sabe / si bebe, / nadie sabe / si come. // Vaga en las noches / como una estrella, / hiere mortalmente / con su resplandor rojo, / con sus ojos de fuego. // En sus ojos de fuego / lleva el amor, / fulgura en la noche / su sangre, / el amor que trae en el corazón. // Nocturno insecto, / mosca portadora de la muerte / en una botella verde / yo la crío, / amándola

> tanto. // Pero, ¡Eso sí! / Nadie sabe / si le doy de beber, / si le doy de comer (Monterroso, *Movimiento* 141).

In the poem, the poetic voice is forming and fostering the life of the fly with consequently means the presence of death. However, there appears to be a contradiction when the fly is being fostered—or raised—in a green bottle as it would appear that the fly is being trapped and not being given food and water. That is why the poetic voice says: "nobody knows if I feed it or give it water." But since the beginning of the quote and throughout poem, the poetic voice reaffirms "yo la crío," which already means the fly is being fed and is receiving water. More importantly is that there is an awareness that the fly is the one who brings death and that the voice is feeding and fostering such death, though no one knows this. There is some dark humor in the task of raising the fly. While others may think he has captured death, he is taking care of it and multiplying it. In a similar way Monterroso is also fostering flies. Taking care of them, multiplying them also within his own dark humor, giving us a space in a bottle—or a book—to see and admire and perpetuate the textuality of flies.

But now that I've told you all these possible origins or genealogies of the fly that I've concocted with the help of Monterroso and his friends, I must note that Monterroso himself does not construct and is not interested in constructing a genealogy of the fly. If the fly comes from here or from there it does not matter to him. For Monterroso, flies are presences that have accompanied us always, eternally—outside of time. That is why they invade our literatures and our plane of vision, our language. But if we really payed close attention to it, we would realize that the fly always comes *first*:

> Entre la gallina y el huevo existe la duda de quién fue primero. A nadie se le ha ocurrido preguntarse si la mosca fue antes o después. En el principio fue la mosca.

> (Era casi imposible que no apareciera aquí eso de que en el principio fue la mosca o cualquier otra cosa. De esas frases vivimos. Frases mosca que, como los dolores mosca, no significan nada. Las frases perseguidoras de que están llenos nuestros libros.) Olvídalo (Monterroso, *Movimiento* 12).

Monterroso writes that phrases that attempt to give a beginning are what make books annoying. That is why he just offers a beginning and says: "here is they fly and then forget about it." Right after that he says that it is easier to imagine that a fly can stand on the nose of a pope or a president than to think that the pope can stand on the nose of the fly. And that the same goes for the Swiss Guard who cannot exterminate the fly, he can only be tolerant in its presence and every so often scratch his nose, but he knows the fly will be back. Flies are hounding, and with their thousand eyes they always get back on the nose—o f the pope and anyone else standing in their way. That is to say, the fly overpowers us, even the best army in the world could not exterminate the worst plague, they will bother from any average person walking down the street to a Buddhist monk while meditating.

Monterroso writes that flies are: "Euménides, Erinias; son castigadoras. Son las vengadoras de no sabemos qué; pero tú sabes que te han perseguido y, en cuanto lo sabes, que te perseguirán siempre" (*Movimiento* 11). Here is a direct relation to Greek mythology by reference to The *Eumenides* or the Erinias or Furies which were thought of as the deities who avenge injustices. But right after making the connection he says that we really don't know what is it that they are avenging. In *The Eumenides,* we can see how they are avenging the matricide Orestes has committed, but here Monterroso writes that we do not know what they are avenging. At the very moment in which you come to know that they have always chased "you", then you cannot free yourself from their punishment or sentence, that is, your unwilled realization. He repeatedly says

that they are vicariously someone unnamable who is either "buenísimo" or" maligno." What we do know is that they follow *you* they watch *you*, they are avenging something good or bad, and in order to survive we must chase them away.

Not disrupting this seemingly common belief on flies Monterroso's *collection* begins with this line by Barbuse from *El infierno*: "Linneo ha podido decir que tres moscas consumen un cadáver tan aprisa como león" (Monterroso, *Movimiento* 16). This is not only a reaffirmation that indeed flies are as powerful lions, but that in the end they will consume our flesh. They are smaller and insignificant compared to the presence of the all-powerful lion, but you only need three of the tiny flies to do the same job of the roaring lion. Here we can make a comparison between smaller and trivial texts with bigger texts that create the same effect, which is a criticism that we will soon see Monterroso clearly makes: "Fly texts" versus "lion texts;" "short writers" versus "tall writers;" "short texts" versus "long texts." In a way, these comparisons comprise the same battle that Monterroso ridicules with irony and humor.

Even though Monterroso's first collected quote reaffirms the "badness"[62] of flies, the second quote, taken from Lucian's "Praise of the Fly" turns to his desire for flies, for looking for the, finding them, seeing them, as well as collecting them:

> Tanta fuerza tiene la mosca al picar, que rasga no solamente la piel del hombre sino aun la del caballo y la del buey; y aun al elefante le causa dolor cuando se le introduce en las arrugas, y con su trompita, según la posibilidad de su tamaño, lo hiere. En cuanto a unirse unas con otras tienen las moscas muy gran libertad, y el macho no deja inmediatamente a la hembra como el gallo, sino que se le une por

[62] See Nietzsche *Genealogy of Morals* especially the "Fist essay: 'Good and Evil' Good and Bad'"

> largo tiempo y la hembra lo soporta y aun lo carga en su vuelo y se va juntamente con el macho, sin que esto los perturbe (Monterroso, *Movimiento* 26).

As Lucian, Monterroso praises flies for their amazing deeds. In fact, it is the power that flies have to affect almost everyone, in the sense of "getting under everyone's skin" both literally and metaphorically that is most significant for Monterroso. To write a book collecting quotes about flies, a book with bookmarks of flies, a book written with "fly-texts" that get under everyone's skin, a book about a plague, the plague itself. The infinite collection, as well as a one of the texts—from the other part of *Movimiento perpetuo*—written by Monterroso titled "Las moscas" give us a clearer insight into this sometimes elusive project. I have mentioned that for Monterroso his diminutive texts and projects can be thought of in the same ways as flies: multiple, tiny, annoying, ignored, bad, and the carriers of some disease. In his praise and collection of flies, however, he will also let us know all about his desire for flies.

Flies are the possibility of life in the presence of death. They announce and pronounce the continuation of movement in the absolute moment of stillness. Praising flies, Lucian writes in a different section of his text— which Monterroso doesn't quote—that the fly "is not born fully formed like this, but starts life as a maggot from the carcass of a man or other animal. Then gradually it develops legs, sprouts wings, and from a creeping creature becomes a flying one, which itself conceives and produces a little maggot, the future fly" (Lucian 4). Flies feed, reproduce and live from the waste and cadavers of animals and humans. As soon as there is a dead body, flies appear to get rid of the remainders and carry out with time, with life, when everything is else is dead. It is like the part of the text that outlives its own time. It is the flying flies over the unmoving body, which is both a common-place for death but also an uncanny image—the image of the body being consumed by the most trivial, filthy creature that was never supposed to "get

under our skin." In fact, since flies are ubiquitous even in zoological terms—the fly like the cockroach are the only animals that exist in all atmospheres, altitudes, etc. we can see that Monterroso's "fly-texts" are also in this way universalizing his project. At some point learn that we "ought to chase off flies" so as to not get contaminated by them, or because as we very well know they can be quite annoying. In fact, it is possible to say that Monterroso's collection of quotes is not merely a search for lines containing the subject regarding flies, but rather the collection of texts about flies that are fly-texts themselves, meaning texts that feed off other texts. In this perpetual movement of flies, Monterroso is attempting to collect the simple forms of language, or better yet the "universal" tradition of the written word—for better or for worse. "Una ingrávida mosca que danzaba… era otrora suficiente para llenar tu corazón hasta el desborde con ensueños que nadie conocía sino tú" (Monterroso, *Movimiento* 83).

But it would be a mistake to magnify the fly too much. In fact, Monterroso indirectly compares his flies to Melville's whale criticizing his obsession for grandiosity, novelty—and the novel itself. Because on the contrary to Ahab and Melville, Monterroso is neither hero nor martyr. He is more or less an ordinary man—let's say—that when he is not evading flies—like everyone else—he is looking for them, eternally. Monterroso criticizes Ahab's enterprise for avenging the magnificent and singular whale, when he could have expressed the same frustrations that he had one summer day when he was eating an ice cream and a fly made his day miserable.

Monterroso writes that, like Melville, many of us are dominated by our desires for grandiosity. Melville, through the creation of a protagonist, or several protagonists—Melville himself, Ishmael and Ahab—undergoes the travesty of attempting to avenge—and therefore capture—the form of the singular and grandiose novel with the singular and grandiose whale. In the movement of the flies it is the flies the ones who are avenging something, who are driving

desire and not the other way around. For Monterroso it is imperative that the role of the author becomes invisible, especially in texts like *Movimiento perpetuo*: "otra constante podría ser un perfeccionismo que no se note; el afán de que el autor desaparezca o de que se note lo menos posible su presencia" (Monterroso, *Viaje* 112). This is part of the answer Monterroso gives to Elda Peralta when she interviewes him in *Viaje al centro de la fábula* about the constants in his work. This is true in regards to the fly-texts in *Movimiento perpetuo* which do not have an Ahab, Ishmael or Melville to weave a story of man and vengeance and yet do not need these weavers either because the fly-texts operate on their own without the weaving process. As Monterroso writes about sayings, which could be regarded as fly-texts: "Explicar un refrán es negar su sabiduría" (*Viaje* 96). Which is why he only needs to collect them.

In his desire for literature and the desire not to die—which is the eternal search for the fly—Monterroso shapes his ethical project. The chasing flies and the chasing-off flies is the eternal circle of desire. To read is to be in the search for flies—to chase them—which is also the fear/wish of finding the eternal. Writing is seeing them from a close distance, silencing them and imaging for a moment that death is in your hands and not the other way around. To think that you could eat flies without infesting yourself and die. To think that you are superior to the fly because of your size and your humanity. To believe that having silenced the fly—writing it—with your flyswatter was your greatest accomplishment until you realize that flies multiply themselves, and that they are never singular, and that it is they who chase you and it is never you who chases them.

At the beginning of the book, Monterroso lets us know that this movement from form to form is the project of a life connected to the search of an unrelenting form. He writes: "La vida no es un ensayo, aunque tratemos muchas cosas; no es un cuento, aunque inventemos muchas cosas; no es un poema, aunque soñemos muchas cosas. El ensayo del cuento del poema de la vida es un

movimiento perpetuo; eso es, un movimiento perpetuo" (7). Monterroso closes the infinite collection with a quote by Cicero that reads: "espanta la mosca, niño." Reminding the reader that in front of their eyes there is always a fly.

The Project

In *Bartleby & Co.*—a book composed by footnotes that are supposed to annotate an invisible text—Enrique Vila-Matas decides to track down the writers and copyists who have suffered from "Bartleby's syndrome"; a condition that has affected many writers such as Arthur Rimbaud, Juan Rulfo, Robert Walser and J.D. Salinger. Vila-Matas diagnoses all the former authors with the syndrome because after "only" having published one or two books they decided not to publish anymore. For a moment, Vila-Matas considers if Monterroso had also suffered from the syndrome and was therefore, as he defines it, a "writer of the no." Bartleby's syndrome was first presented by the actions—or rather inactions—of the protagonist of Melville's "Bartleby The Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street." In the story, a copyist in a law firm one day starts answering—and will continue to do so throughout the story— "I would prefer not to" when he is asked to perform his duties. Vila-Matas considers and then dismisses Monterroso as a possible Bartleby: "'Is Monterroso, like Rulfo, a writer of the No as well?' I thought I could be asked this question at any time and so I was ready with an answer: 'No. Monterroso writes essays, cows, fables and flies. He doesn't write much but he writes'" (9).

Vila-Matas was thinking of Juan Rulfo and Monterroso together because not only were they good friends but also because, they had worked together as copyists at some point in Mexico. More importantly for Vila-Matas' project both writers are relevant because according to him they

did not write much, though he ends up classifying Rulfo as a "writer of the no" and Monterroso, as we saw earlier, gets barely excluded. The way Vila-Matas can establish this is because Rulfo "only" wrote two books and Monterroso kept writing, even if what he wrote was not "too much"—as according to the author what he wrote were: essays, cows, and flies.

This is an important point that I want to make when analyzing the size, temporality, and length of Monterroso's project. I already mentioned the discussions and jokes that arose from some critics of Monterroso and Monterroso himself regarding the subject of stature of his forms as well as Monterroso's stature. But there is also a pressing matter on how much, how often and what is produced that concerns his project. At least for Vila-Matas writing only two books makes Rulfo a "writer of the no," while Monterroso escapes this classification for writing, even if only a little, throughout the entirety of his life.

The first book that Monterroso published was a collection of short stories titled *Obras completas (y otros cuentos)*; certainly, and odd name for a first publication since the author had no "obras completas" to collect. However, "Obras completas" refers to the title of one of the stories in the collection and not to an assemblage of the author's works. Monterroso deliberately creates this kind of confusion for the reader that is only sort of resolved when arriving at the end of the collection or when looking at the index. Also, the parenthesis containing "and other stories" lets us know right away that all stories are not contained in "obras completas." In the title of the book we can appreciate Monterroso's concision and precision with language, as well as a gesture towards an awareness for the relationship between form and content. Here the book or "container" is equal to its parts: *Obras completas (y otros cuentos)*; since the book contains a story called "obras completas" and other stories. This is in fact the container and its contents: "Los libros son simples depósitos. Son como cajas. Uno puede poner en un libro una novela o varios cuentos,

varios poemas o varios ensayos. Uno tiene algo y lo coloca allí" (Monterroso, *Viaje* 70). Temporality is also important because, even though *Obras* is his first book—until he publishes another book—it is also his last book and therefore his complete works.

For a period of ten years it seemed as if *Obras completas (y otros cuentos)* would indeed be the collection of Monterroso's entire work. But almost exactly a decade later he published his book of fables titled *La oveja negra y demás fábulas*. It was a surprise that so much time had elapsed, especially after several of the short stories from the collection *Obras* had gained popularity. Among these "Míster Taylor," "Primera Dama," and most infamously "El dinosaurio." I say infamously because the short-story has been praised and anthologized so many times that now even Monterroso's most devoted critics are writing against the one-liner.[63] Monterroso has said that while he was writing *La oveja negra y otras fábulas* he was also writing *Movimiento Perpetuo* which he published just a few years later.

It took Monterroso yet another decade from the time he published *La oveja negra y demás fábulas* to publish his next couple of books: "he optado por publicar lo menos posible (un promedio de un libro cada diez años) y que por lo menos trato de no publicar basura. Como ves, todas éstas son libertades negativas" (Monterroso, *Viaje* 192). This is Monterroso's answer to Graciela Carminatti's question about what he thinks regarding freedom. To which he answers that for him freedom rests in a negative choice: not to publish too much and not to publish garbage. In this way, Vila-Matas was correct to consider Monterroso as a "writer of the no" and then to dismiss him as a sufferer of the disease since his project is nonetheless affirmative. To publish "not too much" was for Monterroso a sense of freedom.

[63] See Zavala's "Diez razones para olvidar 'El dinosaurio'".

We can observe thus far, with the three books presented here, an exploration of different forms as well as of a negative freedom. As I had suggested earlier in the chapter, Monterroso's entire project—and not only *Movimiento Perpetuo*—is also a movement from form to form. The first book—*Obras completas (y otros cuentos)*—is a collection of short stories, the second—*La oveja negra y demás fábulas*—a collection of fables and *Movimiento perpetuo* a miscellaneous book, and the pattern of change continued to be the same with the rest of the books he published. Even though Monterroso is usually referred to as a writer of fables—Vila-Matas' refererence of him as a writer of cows and flies is one example of many—he wrote two books of fables, *La oveja negra y demás fábulas* and *La vaca*, within an array of other forms. His other books had nothing to do with fables, but they do go along with his desire for movement.

In *Lo demás es silencio (La vida y la obra de Eduardo Torres)* Monterroso writes an apocryphal biography about Eduardo Torres, an intelectual from a fictional small-town called San Blas. The *life* is composed of four parts: the testimony given by the people who knew him; his works; a collection of his sayings and aphorisms and a section called "spontaneous collaborations." Monterroso writes that the book belongs to the novelesque genre, when asked about the form of the book in an interview.[64] In this practice of writing a *life*, Monterroso is constructing a narrative based on other people's testimony about Eduardo Torres, some of his works and his sayings and aphorisms. This is an anecdotal project like the ones of Macedonio, Borges and Piglia, where a *life* becomes an anecdote, always oscillating between the real and the fictive and never presently inscribed as historical fact. However, a significant difference that we can see with the Argentine authors is the complicity formed and established between Macedonio and Borges' friendship which transformed in the desire and imagination of both Borges and Piglia, and eventually

[64] See Monterroso, *Viaje al centro de la fábula* 81.

expanded their project of the anecdote. Monterroso, who has said that his works were a tribute to Borges, continued the anecdotal elsewhere, creating a life for Eduardo Torres for about twenty years. Around the time he published his first book, he also published a few articles about this man. He never thought about writing a *life* or a biography; he said that if he had thought about it that way in the beginning, he would have never done it. Instead the plan was to rescue articles about Torres—the articles written by Monterroso himself—and to get to know him slowly, little by little. In the interview Monterroso is asked if he was not in a hurry in creating this project: "Evidentemente no; comencé a darlo a conocer en 1959, al mismo tiempo que publicaba mi primer libro, *Obras completas (y otros cuentos).* Creo que el consejo latino de guardar las cosas unos siete años sigue siendo bueno. Yo añadiría el consejo de pensarlas" (Monterroso, *Viaje* 82). Not satisfied with the answer, the interviewer then asks him what would happen if one were to die before such a time, to which Monterroso answers: nothing.

In *Viaje al centro de la fábula* Monterroso steps into a different genre—the interview—which he calls one of the only genres invented in our time. In this book, he has different personalities interview him: Jorge Ruffinelli, Margarita García Flores, J.E Ignacio Solares, José Miguel Oviedo, René Avilés Fabila, Marco Antonio Campos, Graciela Carminatti and Elda Peralta to discuss his work. In fact, all the quotes in this text from *El viaje al centro de la fábula* are from those interviews. The entirety of the book consists of interviews, which we do not know if they have been previously crafted or guided by Monterroso or not. What we can perceive though is that he is trying to play with them as a literary genre and not just as a functional way of communication. Since it is a book, we know that anything could be edited by Monterroso, but everything that makes the interview oral is "left in" to reproduce the experience. In a section of the interview conducted by Elda Peralta she asks him about what his intentions are, whether political or literary, and this is

part of his answer: “La entrevista es el único género literario que nuestra época ha inventado. Visto, así como género, lo mejor sería, bueno, lo mejor sería no ser entrevistado. Pues bien volviendo a su pregunta, mis intenciones son tan sólo artísticas” (Monterroso, *Viaje* 111). Throughout the interviews, we see a back and forth in Monterroso’s answers or better yet and inconsistency. He is perfectly aware of this and, as we will see later, this is what he says is the constant in his work. He does not take himself too seriously and yet that does not mean the same for his work. In his answer to Elda Peralta about his intentions he writes that maybe he should not be interviewed, though we know that it is Monterroso himself who has planned and concocted the idea of a book of interviews. This is not a case of false-modesty since it is really Monterroso who is interviewing himself—he had asked the interviewers to interview him in the first place. However, Monterroso is mimicking what the interviewed is “supposed to do” at a certain point during the interview.

When asked about the long interval between the publishing of books, in a different interview, this time with Jorge Ruffinelli, Monterroso answers that: “Tal vez por la cautela de que hablaste al principio, y porque soy lento para escribir y generalmente muy perezoso.” (Monterroso, *Viaje* 18-9) This time the answer is not about a plan to only publish a book every ten years due to a sense of negative freedom but the reason is the impossibility of writing or just for being extremely lazy: “Yo no lo hago por temporadas ni todos los días; a una hora u otra; prácticamente yo no escribo. En realidad me gusta más pensar o, si esto resulta pretencioso, más bien divagar, que es un acto perezoso: después de todo escribir es un acto físico” (Monterroso, *Viaje* 67). Monterroso in this occasion is answering Marco Antonio Campos’ question regarding what is his method for writing, to which he answers that it consists of almost not writing and mostly thinking. Monterroso is a critic time and time again of writing as a routine, as rigorous and mechanical act, at least for

him. He does see literature as a profession—like any other—but the demand for production is one that he puts off with oblique comments. The answers he gives in the interviews respond and anticipate the kind of questions a writer of short and dispersed texts would get in an interview: Why such tiny texts? Why fables? Why animals? Why so many blank pages? Why so much time between one book the next one? Monterroso, who said he did not practice literary criticism, has the chance, through the book of constructed interviews—*El viaje al centro de la fábula*—to discuss with his friends and imaginary critics some of the questions about his work that have been on their minds about his work. He even lets them know in occasion that the real motivation for his work is pure vanity. When Carminatti asks him what is his biggest incentive: "¿Para escribir? Ya te lo dije: ver mi nombre en el periódico, y que algún amigo se moleste al verlo. Sé que se trata de un regocijo maligno. Pero así es" (Monterroso, *Viaje* 107). As we saw before he had said his purpose was purely artistic, at another point he says that he is interested in politics—although he says that politics is a subject like any other we can discuss and that the role of the writer is to make sure that grammar is used properly: "El escritor debe ocuparse de lo verdaderamente arduo: el buen uso del gerundio, por ejemplo o de la preposición *a*, que se acostumbra emplear mal. Yo me gano la vida corrigiendo esta mala costumbre" (Monterroso, *Viaje* 41).

In *La oveja negra y demás fábulas* Monterroso writes a fable called "El zorro es más sabio" which is supposed to refer to Juan Rulfo not publishing anymore after his second book, and which Vila-Matas also briefly discusses in *Bartleby & Co.* In Monterroso's fable, Rulfo is "the wisest fox" which is already a redundant epithet for the writer since foxes are known to be wise, intelligent animals—of the cunning type—in the in Western popular culture. The fable goes as follows: a bored, melancholic fox with the need for some money decides to become a writer. He ends up publishing two very successful books that are praised by everyone and that are even translated into

several languages. Consequently, the fox is very satisfied and he goes on without publishing another book. However, everyone starts wondering what is wrong with the fox and whenever they run into him at cocktail parties they make it a point to tell him that he should publish another book. The fox tirelessly answers that he already published two books, but people reply that they were so good that he should publish another one. The fox does not answer anymore but he keeps thinking to himself: "En realidad lo que éstos quieren es que yo publique un libro malo; pero como soy el Zorro, no lo voy a hacer" (Monterroso, *La oveja* 100). Monterroso ends the fable saying that in fact the fox never did publish another book, reaffirming him as the wisest fox. With the fable and in the interviews Monterroso criticizes the idea that writers, especially good writers, must continue producing books. Or at least a criticism for an unrelenting demand of the writer, not really of his stature—the quality of the work—but the size and length of the work as well as the amount of writing that the writer must produce throughout his or her life.

At the beginning of *Bartleby & Co.*, Enrique Vila-Matas turns the "negative freedom" that Monterroso speaks about—to not to publish or to not publish garbage—as a denial of the world:

> Twenty-five years ago, when I was very young, I published a short novel on the impossibility of love. Since then, on account of a trauma, that I shall go into later, I had not written again, I stopped altogether, I became a Bartleby, and that is why I have been interested in them for some time. We all know the Bartlebys, they are being inhabited by a profound denial of the world. (1)

Vila-Matas proposes a traumatic experience and later what he calls a "disquieting and attractive tendency in contemporary literature" as possible causes for the presence of so many Bartlebys in the literary sphere. But he does not consider the possibility that writers—who think of themselves as writers—would be satisfied and even feel accomplished by publishing "only" flies, cows, one

sentence or "one or two books." In fact, for him they are no longer writers and no longer thinkers, but people who have turned their back to the world. As we have seen with Monterroso, this is not necessarily the case. As he said in one of the above-mentioned interviews, his method consists more in thinking than in writing. In the case of Rulfo, as well, he does not publish anymore because according to Monterroso, Rulfo is satisfied with what he has written and therefore does not need to write anymore.

In *La letra e (Fragmentos de un Diario)*, Monterroso experiments with the form of the diary. In this book, we find dated entries with titles from notes taken over the period of two years. The subjects vary from thoughts on literary genres, authors, friends, diaries, language, "real life," aphorisms, all ranging from one sentence to a couple of pages. In one of the entries titled "Eduardo Torres," Monterroso remembers what Torres—the fictional character devised by Monterroso in *Lo demás es silencio (vida y obra de Eduardo Torres)*—had said in regards to not writing anymore: "recuerdo la proposición de Eduardo Torres consistente en que a todo poeta debería prohibírsele, por ley o decreto, publicar un segundo libro mientras él mismo no lograra demostrar en forma concluyente que su primer libro era lo suficientemente malo como para merecer una segunda oportunidad" (*La letra* 11). Publishing until death must not be the teleological life of a writer but rather the desire is for a concise and precise writing that encounters a specific form. Contrary to Vila-Matas' idea of everlasting production—which is what writers apparently must do—Monterroso is interested in finding a specific form—which is an idea I will develop later. It will be sufficient to say for now that this is not impossible to attain, since, for Monterroso, Rulfo was able to reach this moment and which consequently led him to be satisfied and to not publish anymore. We must not confuse this with not writing or with not thinking any longer. Monterroso warns us through the words of Eduardo Torres that: "Por otra parte hay grados: no publicar, no

escribir, no pensar. Existen también los que recorren este camino en sentido contrario: no pensar, escribir, publicar" (*La letra* 12).

The other two forms that Monterroso experiments with are the essay in *La palabra mágica* and the autobiography in *Los buscadores de oro*. In *La palabra mágica*, he writes several essays of varying subjects regarding western literature. In the one titled "Novelas de dictadores" he writes that amongst many things that Latin America has not invented are dictators, criticizing both the European perception of the region as a uniquely dominated place, and Latin American writers for having unequivocally assumed the responsibility and even joy of propagating the idea that the dictator was a Latin American trademark:

> Los dictadores son tan antiguos como la historia, pero nosotros, de pronto, asumimos alegremente esa responsabilidad y en Europa, que con dificultades ha vivido sin uno desde que los romanos les dieron nombre, hace algunos años comenzaron a pensar qué divertido, cómo Hispanoamérica puede dar estos tipos tan extraños, olvidando que ellos acababan de tener a Salazar, a Hitler y a Mussolini y que todavía contaban con Francisco Franco" (Monterroso, *La palabra* 45).

He continues to write about how Miguel Ángel Asturias is the initiator of the genre by telling anecdotes of the troubles he went through to get his book, *El señor presidente,* published. Monterroso also tells us about the time when he allegedly received a letter from Mario Vargas Llosa, inviting him to participate in a literary project composed of short-stories where certain dictators were assigned to each author. For example, Monterroso was assigned Anastasio Somoza, Carlos Fuentes had Antonio López de Santa Anna, Julio Cortázar had Juan Domingo Perón, and Mario Vargas Llosa had assigned himself Luis Miguel Sánchez Cerro. Monterroso was very interested in the project. At the beginning he thought that: "Aunque yo piense que la literatura no

sirve para cambiar la situación política de ningún país, los dictadores han sido y seguirán siendo siempre buenos temas literarios" (Monterroso, *La palabra* 51). Monterroso finds and interest in the subject but also knows that there are many other interesting subjects. Because of that, he does not participate in project and responds to Vargas Llosa's letter with a short: "thanks, but no". As I had mentioned from the beginning, this perpetual movement needs to make sense both in terms of form and content, since Monterroso is trying to find a place where to "place himself," *ubicarse*. He writes that:

> En cuanto a Somoza, a mí no me gustó como tema y no lo pensé mucho para renunciar a él y al libro y a toda la gloria que el libro traía consigo. Pero la verdad es que el tema me dio miedo, miedo de meterme en el personaje, como inevitablemente hubiera sucedido, y con la tontería de buscar su infancia, en sus posibles insomnios y en sus miedos y terminar "comprendiéndolo" y teniéndole lástima y así recordando a Pirandello renuncié a trabajar en un Somoza al que como Juez me habría gustado mandar a fusilar pero que como escritor hubiera llegado a presentar toda su indefensión y miseria, y cobardemente renuncié al proyecto (Monterroso, *La palabra 52*).

Monterroso chooses not to write, not to participate in the literary project for he cannot place himself in the space of the dictator. Even though Monterroso writes that it is all pure fear and cowardice on his part, he knows that placing himself in the form of the dictator is also reproducing the form—and therefore something he wants to avoid. His denial of the position of this form is similar to Borges' denial of the pronouncement of the sentence. It is not that they produce the same forms or because of the same reasons, but what is the same is that the denial or refusal which Monterroso calls—the negative freedom—is to not reproduce the same logic that one condemns.

As Monterroso writes, if he were a judge he would certainly execute Somoza. Therefore, there is no reason he should give life, shape, or voice to him.

As we have seen, *Movimiento perpetuo* is the epitome of Monterroso's entire literary project. Not only in the course of the book does he go through a movement of forms, interspersed with, flies, deaths, almost blank pages, and silences, but the experimentation of different forms. Furthermore, in the publication of his other texts he inhabits the short-story, fable, aphorism, interview, essay, diary and autobiography for his experiment to move forward with the form. It is uncertainty and desire to move or to be another-way that are the main subjects in his writing. Restless, Monterroso cannot inhabit a single form, but only move through the different forms, the desire to change and to be the other-ones that he is: "Me he ido dando cuenta de que mi tema principal ha sido el de la inseguridad ante lo que se es o se hace, de donde el deseo de cambiar, o de ser otro, o de otro modo" (Monterroso, *Viaje* 112).

In *Monvimiento perpetuo* it is the eternal, light, humorous, multiple, deadly, and voracious flies what mobilize Monterroso's project, but we must not enclose or define this proposal as a new of definite form. Monterroso's flies, and his movement from form to form should not be confused with Rubén Darío's pursue for a form as one of the lines of his poem says, "Yo persigo una forma," and his finding of it in the beauty of the interrogation of the swan's white neck. Monterroso is not proposing a new kind of aesthetic but has found in the fly a form where to place himself—*donde ubicarse*—that is just right for his stature—in all meanings of the word. Modernism, thus, finds its "form" in the curves of the sawn, while Monterroso's perpetual movement—which is not an aesthetic program—is that of the fly.

In the end Monterroso sought to think and sometimes to write, giving himself a negative freedom refusing to publish all the time. Even though he saw writing as a profession he did not

expect to make a living out of it—as he knew no other Latin American writer did—he was very much against the idea of over production. In a way, Monterroso refuses to profit from the surplus value of language, as he deems his project to be one of precision and measured words, and not of superabundance. His silences in between books and blank pages in between texts—sometimes accompanied by a drawing—were attempts at creating silences between thoughts, and experiences. And his movement was minimal, slow and almost imperceptible. His published works came decades in between and the works themselves were minimal as well—at least at first glance.

In "Por una literatura menor," Felipe A. Ríos Baeza writes about the anecdotes Juan Villoro tells of being in Monterroso's famous writer's workshop. One of the anecdotes consists in Monterroso asking the group a question: "'¿No les da miedo manejar por el Circuito Interior? En las vías rápidas siempre hay accidentes'" (Lámbarry 70). According to Baeza, the answer— "en las vías rápidas siempre hay accidentes"—is not only Monterroso's maxim to be used as a technique for writing but, most importantly, a way of understanding his literary enterprise. Between Achilles and the turtle, Monterroso has always been the turtle, slowly arriving first.

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