

Bodies of Evidence: The Grotesque Body and the Reconfiguration of Nation in Mexican
Historiographic Metafiction

by

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INTRODUCTION

TOWARD A GENEALOGY OF THE BODY IN MEXICAN HISTORICAL LITERATURE

Mexican nationhood and the imaginary construction of its national identity are littered with bodies. The deployment of the body as metaphor and metonymy for the nation, its tribulations, and its vicissitudes enjoys a long history in Latin America. In Mexico, one can trace the compulsive attention to the reality and materiality of the body in literature from the moment Hernán Cortés penetrates into the heart of present-day Mexico City and reports his experiences back to Spain. To the extent that the exoticism of Mexico's markets and those who populate them amaze and astound the conquistador in the second of his *Cartas de relación* (1522), to the extent that he must dominate and destroy them in order to recreate them under the orderly, comprehensible aegis of Spanish rule, the conquest of Tenochtitlán-Tlatelolco and the subjugation of the Aztecs is principally and indisputably a matter of bodies. This compulsive attention describes an extended, chameleonic trajectory throughout the history of Mexican literature, a trajectory whose most recent manifestation appears in the explosion of historical literature produced in the last thirty years.

In order to properly situate the analysis that I proffer in this dissertation within the broadest historical and literary contexts, in this introduction I will trace the changing functions of the human body, in regrettably schematic and reductive fashion, across several of the

most prominent periods in Mexican literary history during which literature became an apt medium for staging the vexing questions confronted by the nation.¹ I do not intend to offer a complete or groundbreaking account of Mexican literature, or even to give the literary works that I will invoke in this section the attentive analyses they merit; my purpose in offering the genealogy that occupies the next few pages, is rather to sketch out the contours of a well-established, trans-historical literary tradition whose trajectory intersects with the novels taken up by the analyses offered in the body of this dissertation. I locate this trajectory's critical points of articulation in texts that reflect or portray Mexico in a state of crisis and transition: the conquest (the conquered body), the post-Independence nation-building national romance (the allegorical body), the novel of the Mexican revolution (the metaphorical and metonymic body), and the aftermath of the 1968 massacre in Tlatelolco (the massacred body and the testimonial body). By locating present-day historiographic metafiction as the most recent variation in an familiar literary trend, I will ground my research in an ongoing narrative and question the appropriateness of the epithet "new historical novel," the prevailing appellation applied to group the texts that I propose to study together. I leave a more complete and wide-ranging study of the appearance of the body in Mexican literature to a more appropriate document.

The human body bursts immediately onto the scene of narration during the discovery and conquest of the New World in the production of accounts rife with bodily discourse. Indigenous and European bodies continuously figure into new and spurious hierarchies (of secular and religious character), first in desperate attempts to classify and categorize New World

1. Here I use the term "nation" in the broadest possible sense to include all literature produced in what is now known as Mexico since the time of the conquest.

bodies in the eyes of European models, and later to justify and condemn the actions taken upon them as a result of those characterizations. The corporeal discourse in Mexico proper begins with Cortés,² whose double conquests of the Aztec people and of the marketplace in Tlatelolco both depend partially on his diplomatic ability to turn indigenous bodies against one another, and partially on his discursive capacity to transform indigenous bodies and their wares into commodities through which to linguistically “transact” his subjugation of the New World subject.³ In her gloss of Cortés’s description of the market in the second *Carta de relación* (1520), Stephanie Merrim marks both products *and* Indians as merchandise offered up for the pleasure and possession of Spain:

A festival of commodities and a spectacle of Indians solely devoted to the merchandise that the New World can deliver to Spain, the marketplace of sixteenth-century texts provide a site in which the new could be enjoyed, contained, transformed, taxonomized, commodified, utilized—in short, possessed. (56)⁴

Cortés’s symbolic domination of the Aztec body also plays out in reverse: rather than merely inscribing mastery on the bodies of individual subjects transformed into merchandise, he also manifests his progressive knowledge and domination of the imperial space both inside and outside of Moctezuma’s empire. His conquest of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco begins with his

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2. The corporeal discourse of the New World truly begins with Christopher Columbus’s continual references in the *Diario de a bordo* (1493) to the “beautiful bodies” of the indigenous people he finds in the islands in the Gulf of Mexico. Cortés initiates a similar (but not identical) discourse in Mexico proper.
 3. Cortés’s discursive capabilities are surely the more impressive of the two, allowing him to maintain throughout his lengthy Second *Carta* that the Aztecs are simultaneously a civilized and barbarous people. He is only required to call on his diplomatic wherewithal in his successful campaign to draft allies (both willing and unwilling) after Pedro de Alvarado’s unprovoked attack on the Indians in Tenochtitlán-Tlatelolco nearly brings the conquest to a disastrous conclusion. The use of the term “transact” is Stephanie Merrim’s.
 4. Merrim notes that Cortés stresses “the ready perfectibility of the Indians” who merely “lack Christianity,” which allows him to offer them up “as merchandise to be seized” (57).

seizure and professed control of Moctezuma's body (and by extension over the people over whom he reigns); it progresses, however, in his assertion of supposed mastery over independent, interrelated sectors of the city. This space coalesces into another, metaphorical body: the body of the city. The events of the *Noche Triste*, however, give the lie to his dominion over both real and metaphorical bodies: Moctezuma is powerless to quell the indigenous uprising, and Cortés's purported mastery of the city brings little advantage as he finds its entrances to *tierra firma* closed to him. He and his battered forces, harried by combat on all sides, beat a hasty and devastating retreat that leaves many Spanish dead and much treasure abandoned. He returns, his forces rested and reinforced by new indigenous allies, to lay siege to and destroy Tenochtitlan, the "body" of the Aztec empire, and rebuild atop its ruins an ordered city under Spanish rule.

At the other end of the spectrum, one can open to nearly any page of Bartolomé de las Casas's celebrated and polemic *Brevísima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias* (1552) to read accounts of the atrocities inflicted on indigenous bodies during the conquest, justified by claims of the in- or sub-humanity of the conquered. While Cortés's conquest registers the use- or exchange-value of each object—including the human body—in an imperial equation, Las Casas hyperbolically appeals to his readers to cast the indigenous body as fundamentally human and to treat it as such. The body in Las Casas's account is continually transformed into a corpse: burned, tortured, mangled, and torn to pieces. Its omnipresence in the narrative is enhanced by egregious exaggerations, both numerical and descriptive in nature. His insistent numerical exaggeration—how many Indians were murdered on any given island, and on how many islands the same practice (and other, much worse practices) was re-

peated— makes a consideration of each individual body utterly impossible. While this impossibility is incidental in Cortés's account, it is strategic to Las Casas's enterprise. The sheer amount of death and destruction enables Las Casas to forge from his corpses a new, indefinite, fully depersonalized collective indigenous body, and to inscribe his summary denunciation of the practices of the conquest on that body. The Indian body becomes so unspecific as to be reduced to a horrifyingly large number, repeated with such frequency as to lose all precision and meaning. The corpses of Indians thus become one collective corpse, and the destruction of the collective corpse comes to represent the destruction of the Indians.

The debate over the status of the conquered, subjugated, and decimated indigenous body pervades much of the literature produced in post-conquest, pre-Independence Mexico, often explicitly, but at times by stark omission. The polemics regarding the status of the indigenous figure as an ontological problem, and its place with respect to social organization and political structure, continue throughout the Renaissance and redouble in expressive potential as they are read and rewritten during the New World Baroque. By way of example, Bernardo Balbuena's *La grandeza mexicana* (1604), which bridges the waning Renaissance and the nascent Baroque in New Spain, contains a single, derisive reference to the "indio feo." As Merrim explains, Balbuena's silence does not prevent his myriad Baroque, creole readers from engaging with the question of Mexico's "hombres y mujeres de diversa color" (64), alternately confirming and contesting his position (see Merrim 139 and 260, respectively).

The next literary landmark and transformation of the body's presentation and deployment as a prop for national affairs occurs after Mexico secures its independence from Spain,

sparkling decades of political and social unrest. Like many of its Latin American brethren, Mexico begins to address its developmental predicaments textually in the coming together of beautiful bodies. These foundational fictions express their ideological projects in national narratives that allegorize unexceptional personages of different racial categories (i.e. Spaniards, *criollos*, mestizos, and Indians) whose romantically charged encounters metonymically stage potential resolutions to national questions and crises. Written in 1872, a decade and a half after the death Mexico's first indigenous president Benito Juárez (1858–1864, 1867–1872), Ignacio Altamirano sets his national romance *El Zarco* (completed 1888, published 1901) prior to Juárez's deposition by Maximiliano and Carlota (1864), but after the liberal victory over the conservatives in the War of Reform (1867–1861).⁵ In her renowned study *Foundational Fictions* (1993), Doris Sommer characterizes Altamirano's late national romance as an allegory of the long-postponed national consolidation that was meant to be the natural outgrowth of the Reform Wars and the establishment of a "Liberal indigenous republic" (224).⁶

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5. I omit José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's *El Periquillo Sarniento* (completed 1816, published 1831), widely regarded as the first post-Independence novel published in Latin America. Though Fernández de Lizardi puts his protagonist's body through its paces and is manifestly concerned about the status of the burgeoning Mexican nation mired in a protracted war of independence, I would argue that the Periquillo's abuse responds more accurately to a picaresque trope and aesthetic than to any questions suggested by the events unfolding on the national stage.
 6. This consolidation did not come to pass until much later, interrupted by the French Intervention (1864–1867), followed by the return of a quasi-dictatorial Juárez, who was succeeded upon his death by Porfirio Díaz, who ruled for 36 years until he was unseated at the outset of the Mexican revolution in 1910. The revolution set off another ten years of civil war, followed by further political unrest. National consolidation of the kind Altamirano desired was arguably not achieved until the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940).

While Sommer (and others) puzzle over the particulars of the allegorical meaning suggested by some of *El Zarco*'s finer points,⁷ the large-scale significance of the protagonists' bodies could scarcely be more bluntly indicative of Altamirano's urgent support of the rule of law. At the tail end of the War of the Reform, the victorious liberal forces confront the vexing responsibility of ridding the country of the bandits whose mischief they had leveraged and legitimized to their advantage during the war, but who continued to roam the countryside interfering with liberal nation-building projects. Among a cast of "personajes unidimensionales" (Cruz 73), the four main characters, essentially reducible to a skin color and an ideological stance, materialize conspicuous racial tensions that require resolution and become transparent allegories of these two opposing sets of values: that of the law and that of the brigand. Both Manuela and el Zarco, on the one hand, are perfect metonymies of the bandit way of life, light-skinned, superficial, indolent, and disdainful of work.⁸ Both reject the prevailing, "traditional" order as reified in doña Antonia, the Manuela's mother: Manuela by running away with the title character to become one among his many lovers; El Zarco by spurning social norms and becoming a criminal merely because he has nothing better to do. Pilar, doña Antonia's god-daughter, and Nicolás represent the opposite extreme. Pilar's skin, "morena; con ese tono suave y delicado de las criollas que se alejan del tipo español, sin confundirse con el indio," mirrors her diametrical opposition to her Manuela's world-view. The

7. The conclusions she reaches are, by and large, quite convincing.

8. The former is described as "blanca, con esa blancura un poco pálida"; the latter's blue eyes and light, pale skin, and blond hair mark him as foreign, but his skin color is overwhelmed by the silver with which he decorates his body.

indigenous, hard-working, masculine Indian Nicolás likewise contrasts (to his great advantage) with El Zarco on all counts physical and psychological.

When doña Antonia perishes from the grief occasioned by her daughter's flight, the traditional values that her body allegorizes threaten to die with her. In a patently symbolic gesture, Nicolás swears marriage to Pilar over the matriarch's expired corpse, plainly signaling his honorable intention to follow in the footsteps of his ideological antecedent as the bearer of order and traditional values. The marriage of the dark-skinned mestiza with the Indian assures the persistence of socially sanctioned values and rule of law in Juárez's liberal republic, while simultaneously championing masculinity and the virtues of honest work over indolence and delinquency, and sanctioning the union of mestiza and Indian over that of mestiza and foreigner. Conversely, the values espoused by the bandits who postpone Mexico's consolidation under Juárez's liberal program prove to be unsustainable. Significantly, Altamirano shows that the values allegorized by el Zarco and Manuela are *internally* unsustainable, bringing the two to their tragic ends.⁹ The former is symbolically executed on the day of Nicolás and Pilar's (civil) wedding and in spite of the couple's petitions for pardon on the bandit's behalf; the latter, disillusioned and disgusted by the reality of the life of adventure her lover's banditry promised, her virgin body despoiled, loses her sanity and soon dies.

To the same extent that the crisis of liberal values plays out on the bodies of *El Zarco's* protagonists, so does the denouement of the Altamirano's national allegory suggest a solution to other national questions defined along racial lines. Borrowing heavily from Sommer's lucid

9. The internal unsustainability of El Zarco and his lover's way of life is critical to the interpretation of the novel. Note that Nicolás and Pilar, in their metonymic roles as allegories of liberal social order, have nothing to do with the fate of their counterparts; rather, Manuela and El Zarco bring their misfortunes upon themselves by locating themselves outside the prevailing system of values.

analysis, we can read the light-skinned Manuela's affair with el Zarco (as European) and the tragedy that befalls her as a literalization of the dangers of "prostituting" Mexico's resources to foreign exploitation. This sin, committed by liberalism's conservative, monarchist adversaries, ushered in the disastrous episode of the French Intervention. In similar but opposite fashion, the Indian Nicolás and dark-skinned Pilar represent the perfect mestizo marriage (pun intended) of autochthonous bodies and liberal values, who stand fearless before the disruptive, uncivilized elements of Mexico's present and thereby embodying the nation's future.

Not long after *El Zarco* is published posthumously in 1901, Altamirano's civilizing program and already long-postponed vision of Mexican consolidation must suffer further postponement when an upstart from northern Mexico challenges and ultimately deposes Mexico's democratic dictator Porfirio Díaz in 1910, ushering in a new era of revolutionary violence. Decades later, two celebrated bodies appear on which to inscribe the follies and injustices of Mexico's post-revolutionary regime. *Pedro Páramo's* (1955) eponymous *cacique* is "a living grudge" ("un rencor vivo" [182]) who has colonized the rural Comala with the bodies of his children. The restless souls and disembodied voices that haunt Juan Preciado before his death interrupts his quest for a father ultimately locate themselves in the dead bodies that populate the earth beneath the infernal city. From their grave they continue to narrate and relive the downfall of Pedro Páramo and Comala's ruin.¹⁰ Their ceaseless and fruitless complaint foreshadows, albeit in stark contrast, the recent historical narratives examined in this dissertation: the extreme pessimism of Rulfo's unquiet ghosts, who cannot alter but must merely repeat their misfortune, mirrors and inverts the optimism of today's historical fiction,

10. The perhaps unwitting agent of Pedro Páramo's ruin, Susana San Juan, is in some sense the literary predecessor of Carlota, "la loca de la casa."

whose prismatic vision of history sees myriad possible narratives unfolding from any given sequence of events.

Yet perhaps the most paradigmatic body of the Mexican revolutionary era is that of Artemio Cruz, the eponymous protagonist of Carlos Fuentes's celebrated novel *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962). Cruz's degenerating body, both metaphor and metonymy for post-revolutionary Mexican stands in metaphorically for a revolution that has failed to deliver on its promises and a regime whose foundations rest atop illegitimate and patently immoral premises; likewise, he stands in metonymically for an exemplary citizen of that regime, not only insofar as he prospers within it, but as he is actively invested in its perpetuation into the future. Cruz's dying body speaks powerfully to the breakdown of expired accounts of the Mexican revolution; Fuentes's narrative rewrites the official history of the revolution and represents a scathing critique of Mexico's post-revolutionary foundational fictions and the uses to which they have been put by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Unlike present-day historiographic metafiction, however, this critique does not provoke a search for more suitable narratives that more faithfully reflect national socio-political reality, nor does it entail resistance to the regime that has hijacked the revolution to cloak itself in a legitimacy that has proven false. Rather, Cruz's dying body opens a space in which to speculate in the realm of the might-have-been, to fantasize about who Cruz (and what the revolution) *could* have been had he not chosen the route of power and corruption. At the same time, the narrative inscribed on Cruz's body serves to reify and define once and for all the attributes underpinning the foundations of Mexican identity in the 20th century as *hijos de la revolución* and *hijos de la chingada*. In these respects, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, like its predecessor *Pedro Páramo*,

strikes a profoundly pessimistic posture toward the state of Mexico and its future prospects.¹¹

The 1968 student massacre in Tlatelolco and the PRI's increasingly repressive, desperately fraudulent tactics seem to confirm Fuentes's pessimism.

NEW HISTORICAL NOVEL?

Having located historically the body of work I will analyze, and before discussing the specific contributions my research proposes to make in the field of historical fiction, it would be prudent to locate it within a critical context as well. The most appropriate beginning for an introduction dealing with the late 20th-century historical novel or, as I have chosen to call it, "historiographic metafiction," must begin with Seymour Menton's *Latin America's New Historical Novel* (1993), a survey of what he designates the "new" historical novel of Latin America. A trend that he identifies as beginning in earnest around 1979, the New Historical Novel is for Menton the outgrowth of Latin American authors' interest or preoccupation with novels with a "muralistic scope, exuberant eroticism, and complex, neo-baroque [...] structural and linguistic experimentation," all of which owe their beginnings to a broadly-defined "postmodern collapse of the 'grandes narrativas' [...]" (14). For Menton, the capitalized New Historical Novel is to be understood in contraposition with what he wryly designates the "not-so-new historical novel" which, if we may trust the lists of New and not-so-new historical novels Menton includes in the "Prependix" of his book, *also* constitute a major preoc-

11. One might postulate these two novels of the Mexican Revolution as literary, if not ideological, precursors to Ignacio Solares's *Madero, el otro*, discussed in Chapter 2. The dead Francisco Madero might be portrayed as an eloquent amalgamation of Pedro Páramo, in that he is essentially a corpse attempting to piece together a past that ended in assassination, and Artemio Cruz, in that he is made to remember the pivotal moments in the trajectory of his life by an implacable voice who in some respects resembles Cruz's condemning superego.

cupation of post-1949 narratives.¹² According to the author, the New Historical Novel characteristically includes any, but not necessarily all of the following six qualities: the subordination of the mimetic re-creation of history to philosophical ideas (such as the impossibility of ascertaining historical truth); the intentional distortion of history (by omission, exaggeration, and/or anachronism); the inclusion of historical figures as protagonists; metafiction; intertextuality; and the Bakhtinian concepts of dialogism, the carnivalesque, parody, and *heteroglossia* (22-25).

Articles and studies produced after the publication of Menton's book enthusiastically take up and disseminate his terminology (and the taxonomy it implies) while at the same time shying away from the peculiar vaguenesses of his definition, and often including novels counted among the "not-so-new" historical novels.¹³ Menton's perspective on the historical novel was necessarily limited by his temporal context: a book published in 1995, a short three years after the Quincentennial of Columbus's discovery of the New World, could not possibly take into account the life the historical novel would acquire at the turn of the century and beyond. Given this limitation, the (now lowercase) label "new historical novel" has quietly shifted for many to include historical novels of all types written since the middle of

12. The list of "New Historical Novels" written between 1949 and 1992 scarcely fills two pages, with no significant increase in output anywhere near 1979. The list of not-so-new historical novels written in the same period fully fills nine pages, peaks in the late 1980s and plateaus through the publication of Menton's book in 1993.

13. For example, Brian Price's recently published book *Cult of Defeat in Mexico's Historical Fiction* (2012) counts Jorge Ibarguengoitia's *Los Pasos de López* (1982) among the historical novels it studies; in *Confronting History and Modernity in Mexican Narrative* (2008), Elisabeth Guerrero takes Homero Aridjis's *1492: Vida y tiempos de Juan Cabezón de Castilla* (1985) and *Memorias del Nuevo Mundo* (1988) under consideration. This dissertation will depart from Menton's list by including Jorge Volpi's *La paz de los sepulcros* (1995, edited and republished 2007) and Álvaro Uribe's *Expediente del atentado 2*, both published well after Menton's book.

the twentieth century, regardless of their adherence to Menton's non-binding list of characteristics.

Despite this shift in meaning, one article which has received little attention in publications dealing with the historical novel has chosen to formally resist the epithet "new" in reference to the historical novel. In "Las trampas del concepto 'la nueva novela histórica' y de la retórica de la historia postoficial," Lukasz Grützmacher conscientiously traces the shared roots between the 19th-century historical novel (as defined by György Lukács in *The Historical Novel*, 1937) and the 20th-century "new" historical novel. Grützmacher takes as his starting point the notion that Menton's characterization of some historical fiction as "new" based on a loose and largely optional set of qualities has proven both superficial and confusing. He identifies the primary fault in Menton's work as an overemphasis on "lo nuevo" paired with an inadequate appreciation for the radical relativity of the concept of newness.¹⁴

Grützmacher subjects Menton's term to rigorous testing and finds it scarcely adequate except insofar as it gives voice to a global tendency toward the postmodern. Surveying more recent literature which neither condones nor rejects Menton's designation,¹⁵ he posits a new definition for the historical novel based not on six conditions, but on a spectrum extending

14. In fact, Grützmacher notes,

Menton, aunque toma el libro de Lukács como punto de partida (cf. el tercer rasgo de la "nueva novela histórica"), en ningún momento tiene en cuenta el análisis que el investigador húngaro hizo de estas obras. Esto no deja de sorprender puesto que Lukács, en su comentario, demostró el impacto que ideas filosóficas como "la incognoscibilidad del curso de la historia en sí", "la libre y arbitraria interpretabilidad de los hechos" o "la necesidad de la 'introyección' de los propios problemas subjetivos en la historia 'amorfa'", tuvieron en las novelas históricas ya en el siglo XIX. *Ideas que curiosamente concuerdan con aquellas calificadas de 'nuevas' por Menton cien años más tarde....* (144, emphasis added)

All subsequent italics are in the original, unless otherwise marked (as here).

15. Primarily Fernando Aínsa's *Reescribir el pasado* (2003).

between opposing poles. One pole corresponds to the “traditional” historical novel, which functions by replacing a false, official account of history with a more authentic, independent account. The opposite, postmodern pole responds to a desire not to *reconstruct* history, but rather to *deconstruct* received narratives by inserting them into historiographical discourses that access history’s literary qualities and render it indistinguishable from fiction. Grützmacher posits that any historical novel can locate itself somewhere between these two poles, suggesting that recent historical fiction does not constitute a break from tradition, but merely describes a new phase in a widely-recognized and coherent literary trend. Menton’s analysis correctly identifies a global tendency toward the deconstructive pole, but ignores that it is merely a localized tendency within a much broader literary gesture.

Grützmacher further picks up in his analysis an astute observation of María Cristina Pons. Pons acknowledges the tendency of innovative novels to question the conventions of the literary models that immediately precede them, and therefore registers the reading of late 20th-century historical novels as an “attack” on the 19th-century historical novel as a grave error in literary historical reading. Instead, she suggests, we should not treat historical fiction any differently simply because it is historical, but afford it the same basic assumptions with respect to its motivating impetus.¹⁶ Demonstrating that both Lukács and Noé Jitrik (the former an authority on the historical novel, the latter of the historical novel in Latin America)

16. “De hecho, no habría muchos reparos en considerar que la novela histórica contemporánea podría estar cuestionando a la novela histórica tradicional. Pero, ¿por que se cuestionaría a fines del siglo XX, por ejemplo, a la novela histórica del realismo cuando la nueva narrativa ya lo había hecho varias décadas anteriores? En otros términos, *sería tan absurdo pensar que la nueva novela histórica resucita al género solo para destruirlo como pensar que lo hace para cuestionar una forma literaria que ya había sido cuestionada mas de treinta años atrás*. Mas lógico sería pensar que la novela histórica de fines de este siglo deviene una forma literaria dominante, hasta entonces residual, para evidenciar que la forma de expresión literaria dominante que le precede se esta “gastando”, o quizá para evidenciar que otras formas dominantes (históricas, filosóficas o culturales) también se están erosionando” (*Memorias del olvido* 108-109, emphasis added).

link the appearance and ideological thrust of the 19th-century historical novel with the emergence of a national consciousness,¹⁷ Pons concludes

[e]s de suponer, entonces, que los cambios en el género que propone la nueva novela histórica dan la pauta de un nuevo tipo de conciencia histórica que responde a los cambios —en términos históricos, ideológicos y culturales— de las condiciones de producción material y simbólica de las últimas décadas del siglo xx. (109)

This is precisely the optic and grounding assumption from and with which I intend to approach the historical fiction analyzed in the pages that follow.

Grützmacher and Pons demonstrate thus that Menton errs in reading his historical novels as the emergence of something entirely or even moderately new; indeed, the genealogical links drawn by the former critics attest to the notion that the New Historical Novel is only new insofar as it is recent. The strained distinction between New and not-so-new novels collapses under the weight of its own imprecision and reduces the New Historical Novel to a series of examples whose shared valence illustrates global literary tendencies toward postmodern techniques and a renewed interest in the past, but no more than that. Grützmacher's system, on the other hand, specifies the same series of novels as an illustration of the same global trends, but situates it among other, less postmodern (but equally new) historical novels on a well-defined spectrum within a historically established genre that informs and contextualizes it. Based on this analysis, Grützmacher recommends replacing the denomination "New Historical Novel" with Linda Hutcheon's less controversial (in this context) but equally suggestive term "historiographic metafiction," which he deems "mucho más preciso y coherente"

17. For Lukács, the emergent consciousness is bourgeois. As is so often the case, as Jitrik shows, Latin American fails to conform, manifesting instead a national consciousness that supersedes prior class distinctions.

(150). In this dissertation I will assiduously adhere to Grützmacher's recommendation and perhaps lend further support to his hypothesis.

STATUS OF THE QUESTION

Since the publication of *Noticias del Imperio* (1987), historiographic metafiction has enjoyed a vibrant critical life. While I disagree with Menton's system of classification, there is little question that *Latin America's New Historical Novel* lent historical fiction the attention it required to achieve critical prominence, and provided an analytical architecture for understanding it as a coherent movement rather than a series of isolated phenomena. Only recently, however, have critics begun to expand their focus beyond the study of individual novels in order to pay closer attention to how historiographic metafiction has coalesced, particularly since the decade before the turn of the 21st century, into one of Mexico's most prominent contemporary genres.

Menton's contribution to the field did not emerge in an analytical vacuum, but against the backdrop of a robust, universal interest in historiographic metafiction's two most conspicuous elements: metafiction and historiography. Just as Lukács's *The Historical Novel* resurfaces as a point of reference for the comparison of the historicity of the historical novel, so does Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973) constitute a definitive reference point for the meta-literary phenomenon. Both indispensable books populate, almost without fail, the literature that describes and delineates Latin American postmodernity's fascination with historiographic metafiction beginning in the mid-1980s. Even before the appearance of *Noticias del Imperio*, critics begin to interrogate the particularities of Latin American historical fiction both alongside and independent

of European trends; multiple late-1980s surveys of “modern” or “contemporary” Latin American and Mexican fiction detail a widespread fascination with national histories, so symptomatic of the literary production of that time that the word “history” rarely escapes mention in their titles.¹⁸

Noticias del Imperio’s publication in the mid-1980s sets off a flurry of critical articles that continues relatively unabated into the late 1990s detailing its pronounced engagement with historiography and metafiction. The most illuminating and important of these are collected in Alejandro Toledo’s 1997 volume titled *El imperio de las voces: Fernando del Paso ante la crítica*. Around the same time, more synthetic analyses of multiple historical novels appear on the critical scene, among them Menton’s aforementioned study as well as *Foundational Fictions*, Doris Sommer’s renowned survey of late 19th-century Latin American historical fiction. Karl Kohut’s *La invención del pasado* (1997) collects a series of essays dealing with postmodernity’s relationship with the past in Latin American literature; his introduction, which without being simplistic or reductive summarizes and calls attention to the many difficulties inherent in writing the past from an immanently fragmentary postmodern optic, is of particular value, and has been invoked in numerous recent historiographical analyses. Fernando Aínsa’s *Reescribir el pasado*, already referenced in this introduction, again outlines the theoretical considerations and obstacles presented by the historical novel and its historiographical project, but goes on to analyze in detail four “models” of historical narrative whose dates of publication range from 1888 to 1982. Like its predecessors, with the single exception of

18. Naomi Jacobs’s 1990 study of the appearance of historical figures in contemporary fiction is tangentially noteworthy for its recognition of one of the trends that bind the novels considered in this study together.

Menton, the temporal boundaries of Aínsa's unquestionably valuable book exclude *Noticias del Imperio* and the historical novels that follow in its wake.

The production of historical novels of widely varying character intensifies in the mid-2000s in Mexico as established authors try their hand at the historical genre, among them Paco Ignacio Taibo II, Eugenio Aguirre, Ignacio Solares, Jorge Volpi, Eduardo Antonio Parra, Pedro Ángel Palou, Laura Esquivel, and others.¹⁹ Not coincidentally, books seeking to unify and draw parallels between these new *Mexican* novels as a phenomenon separate from a universal Latin American interest in historical fiction, being to appear only shortly thereafter by critics such as Ute Seydel, Gabriel Osuna Osuna, Magdalena Perkowska, Elisabeth Guerrero, José Carlos González Baixo, and Brian L. Price.²⁰

I contend that, in general, the articles and studies that populate this critical history, in their eagerness to explore the disruptive implications of historiographic metafiction's scrutiny of the historical archive, have unduly prioritized the *historical* in historical fiction. As such, the novels that fall under the heading "historical" have rarely received the attention they deserve as works not merely of historiography, but of fiction. The studies mentioned above have begun to correct this dearth of attention by looking into some of the creative and

19. I would be remiss in not calling attention to these notable authors whom I have decided not to include in this dissertation, either because their work did not lend itself to the study of the body or because the bodies they deal with have already been adequately studied with by others, albeit in a fashion tangential to my methodology (but largely consistent with my conclusions). Pedro Ángel Palou's trilogy of historical novels —*Zapata* (2006), *Morelos: Vivir es nada* (2007), and *Cuauhtemoc* (2008)— figure into the former category; Rosa Beltrán's magnificent *La corte de los ilusos* (1995) into the latter. Eduardo Antonio Parra's *Juárez: El rostro de piedra* (2008), a 21st-century stylistic and ideological heir to *Noticias del Imperio*, merits more than the footnote it receives in this already lengthy dissertation.

20. Price's *Cult of Defeat in Mexico's Historical Fiction* is particularly worthy of mention. Price, to a greater extent than the other authors mentioned, departs from the tendency to merely catalog and explain Mexican interventions into the historical archive as isolated cases of a noteworthy phenomenon and attempts to tie together the novels he analyzes around the shared theme of failure in 19th-century Mexico.

literary tropes through which recent works of historiographic metafiction operate, but scarcely exhaust the analytical possibilities offered by this line of questioning. The analyses that follow in this dissertation constitute, to the best of my knowledge, the first extended exploration of a single image common to works of recent historiographic metafiction, and the first sustained attempt to situate the genre within a larger historical trajectory based on the presence of that image.

GROTESQUE BODIES

My analysis of Mexican historiographic metafiction thus both depends on and departs from the genealogy and critical history that I have described above. I propose that the explosion of historiographic metafiction penned in the last three decades represents the logical extension of Mexico's (and Latin America's) obsession with staging national discourse on different, epoch-specific conceptions of the human body. Along the same lines, I propose a fundamental shift in the kinds of bodies that appear in narrative, the uses to which those bodies are put, and the ideological work that they perform. No longer is the body conceived as a metaphor of the nation or metonymy of the body politic. Rather, late 20th- and 21st-century authors of historical novels deploy grotesque, sexualized, dead, and farcical bodies to open a space in which to dramatize the weighty social and political questions that haunt the present-day nation. My claim, which coalesces around these grotesque bodies, is justified insofar as the literature featuring grotesque bodies appears at the very moment when the presiding political system begins to crumble definitively,²¹ intensifies over the fifteen years it

21. As Elisabeth Guerrero notes, the publication of *Noticias del Imperio* and many of its contemporary historical novels coincides with a conscious effort on the part of the PRI to shore up its claims to Mexican socio-political dominance by defining itself as the legacy of the Mexican revolution. Guerrero writes,

takes to topple the regime, and shows no signs of flagging as Mexico struggles to define itself as a modern, 21st-century democracy. We shall see in the pages that follow that grotesque bodies work to degrade national narratives as surely as they themselves are degraded.

This work furthermore proposes to move beyond previous research that underscores the importance of historical fiction as a proponent of a problematic epistemology that fundamentally rewrites national narratives. Rather, I will examine a specific trope at work within the narrative construction of novels that occupy positions of prominence within the genre. The novels through which I explore this trope are linked formally by their inclusion in a single genre, thematically through their engagement with specific historical moments and figures, and stylistically through their conceptualization of the body as depicted by the Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque.

As Bakhtin lays out in *Rabelais and His World*, the grotesque image is characterized by two essential attributes: first, by a specific relationship to time defined as a transitional state, an unfinished metamorphosis, or a process of “becoming” in which one state and its inverse are brought together (e.g. birth and death) (24); and second, by an inherent ambivalence that prevents the grotesque image from being canonized or being reduced to the status of a signifier with a single, institutionalized signified (30). The grotesque for Bakhtin thus functions to reduce the “prevailing concept of the world” to the level of the relative and the limited (49); by uncrowning the canonic, authorized narratives that define our reality, we will see that the

in the 1980s the Miguel de la Madrid administration sponsored the publication of a series of books about the revolution in order to spread the “revolutionary culture” ostensibly bequeathed to the triumphant “Revolutionary” party, the PRI. However, an unanticipated result of this reawakening of interest in the history of the revolution was the reassessment of such heroes as Madero and, implicitly, a questioning of the heroes’ revolutionary bequest to the ruling party and to the nation as a whole. (6)

grotesque image wrenches open a nonhierarchical discursive space that permits any number of alternative narratives, even when such narratives are mutually exclusive.

This dissertation's three chapters feature novels that exemplify the disruptive potential of the space opened by the grotesque image by appropriating it as a stage on which to interrogate the historical record and inscribe new foundational narratives. The grotesque bodies that they contain furthermore represent an evolution of the bodily image in Mexican literature insofar as they inherit and invert the pessimism that characterized their antecedents. The understated, cautious optimism one can detect in the ontological and epistemological programs of recent historiographic metafiction conveys the hope for a productive critical reevaluation of Mexico's foundational narratives, a rewriting not of history, but of the stories of the past that will guide the nation as it writes its future. The crux of my dissertation is the notion that the postmodern vision of history that these novels propose, and the specific narrative techniques and images through which that vision is realized are intimately woven together; to uncouple the two at best renders an incomplete reading, and at worst commits an act of textual violence. In the pages that follow I intend to analyze the revelations afforded by re-conjugating the literary and the historiographical through the lens of the common but overlooked image of the grotesque body.

In Chapter One, I examine Fernando del Paso's tour-de-force *Noticias del Imperio*, perhaps the most well-known and widely studied Mexican historical novel. *Noticias del Imperio* constitutes a fitting point of entry for a study on grotesque bodies in historiographic metafiction in that it acts as an anthology both of narrative techniques for rewriting history and of bodies that conform to Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque. A work spilling over with

bodies, *Noticias* provides the opportunity to ground the conception of the grotesque in a canonic text that demonstrates the breadth of its analytical potential. The novel confronts the reader with a plethora of unstable bodies that inhabit the interstitial spaces between states. The bodies of the French Intervention include bodies in pain, old and decrepit bodies, bodies nearing death or giving birth, hypersexualized bodies, dismembered bodies, and bodies of compromised moral and physical integrity. These are bodies full of holes; viscera, blood and excrement leak or gush out, as the external world simultaneously invades the inside.

The chapter opens with a broad summary of the historiographical and thematic readings that the novel has received steadily since its publication. Reading *Noticias del Imperio* through these problematic bodies, beginning with bodies of minor thematic import and progressing steadily toward the structurally and thematically indispensable body of the dying Empress Carlota herself, I will reevaluate many of the readings of the novel that have come to be regarded as canonic. The bodily lens functions in part to confirm and qualify prior readings of the text, restoring a literary dimension regrettably ignored in largely historiographical analyses; it also permits a reappraisal of sections of the novel that have until now received insufficient attention, and to perform new readings of sections previously and nearly universally regarded as superfluous. My analysis will show how Del Paso takes advantage of the constitutive ambivalence of the grotesque bodies in *Noticias del Imperio* to open a literary space for multiple creative reinterpretations of an episode that haunts Mexican history. The tactics Del Paso employs herald nearly three decades of novels that, like his, seek new and untried points of entry for the rewriting of Mexican historical narratives.

Chapter Two presents a Lacanian reading of Ignacio Solares's *Madero, el otro*, the first of *Noticias del Imperio*'s descendants to achieve critical prominence. As Carlota's expiring body propels the narration of *Noticias*, the dead body of Francisco Madero provides fertile ground for extending the analytical potential of the grotesque body, and serves as a conceptual bridge linking the dying bodies of Chapter One to the dead bodies of Chapter Three. The assassinated President's body responds to the Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque in that it inhabits a space, as Slavoj Žižek would say, "between two deaths." While his material death — his real death, in Lacanian terms — is undeniable, Madero's disembodied spirit is incapable of inserting the event into a coherent symbolic narrative and, in the novel's Hindu mythology,²² is therefore unable to quit the material plane. The still-open eyes of Madero's body, I argue, gaze relentlessly at his hapless spirit, addressing him with a wholly opaque desire, representing the radical absence that is the Lacanian real. Unable to break off the gaze (in the real), and unable to fulfill his body's desire to reconcile the reality of his death (in the symbolic), Madero's imaginary identity crumbles into an irresolvable conflict between two antagonistic, mutually exclusive versions of himself. The thrust of Solares's novel rests on the reconstruction of Madero's identity by revisiting his past, refashioning the symbolic network on which it rests, and provisionally reconciling Madero with himself, with the other Madero (Madero, *el otro*).

In radically subverting the traditionally understood identity of the Father of Mexican Revolution, one of the cornerstones of modern Mexican identity, Solares sustains and magnifies the implications of the model initiated by Del Paso. As in *Noticias del Imperio*, the body

22. Madero was a self-proclaimed devotee of the spiritual Hindu practices that provide the backdrop for the novel.

of the protagonist provides a site on which to stage pressing questions of nation, national history, and national identity. Like Del Paso, the historiographical impulse to which Solares responds (and for which the grotesque body provides a fertile *locus*) does not yield any singular result. Rather, by suggesting one possible and not fully adequate re-vision of Madero's life and legacy, it implicitly challenges its readers to explore the avenues opened up by the questions Solares presents, but elects to leave unanswered.

Chapter Three shifts from a body "between two deaths" to fully dead bodies and from the crisis of the imaginary to the crisis of the symbolic in two recent historical novels.²³ Jorge Volpi's "accidental" historical novel, *La paz de los sepulcros*, recounts a fictional double homicide involving the Minister of Justice, a possibility all too realistic, and partially realized in the murder of Luis Donaldo Colosio, Social Developmental Secretary and candidate for the presidency, in 1994, the same year in which Volpi wrote and first published his novel. Volpi's text follows a hapless and rather inept journalist's investigation of the inadequately explained murders. Through his protagonist's engagement with the bodies, Volpi narrates how we as subjects are continually duped by the symbolic order into playing roles that reinforce existing systems of power, even when we believe that we are working against them. The novel reveals that our relationship to power is at its very core uneven, unequal, opaque, and profoundly incomprehensible. Álvaro Uribe's *Expediente del atentado* in its turn reveals the constitutive lack at the very heart of how power is constructed and distributed. Set in the aftermath of the attempted assassination of Porfirio Díaz, whose would-be assassin is brutally

23. The interdependence of the imaginary and the symbolic —the latter constituting the network that provides meaning to the former— renders this distinction somewhat artificial. We will see, however, how *Madero, el otro* prioritizes the crisis of the imaginary over the crisis of the symbolic that it implies, a hierarchy that is inverted in the novels of Chapter Three.

murdered, Uribe's novel demonstrates Mexican historiographic metafiction's capacity to address topical questions by reframing historical narratives through the lens of the body.

I will organize each of the chapters of this dissertation around plot-driven elements, but in different ways and for different reasons. In Chapter One, our task will be to organize a vast quantity of materials in an effort to tease out a common thread that runs through a heterogeneous text. While the structure of *Noticias del Imperio* largely respects chronological continuity (with the significant exception of Carlota's monologue), our analysis will eschew historiographical fidelity and prefer instead to take advantage of the plethora of minor characters who illustrate the literary images we wish to highlight. While the macro-plot of the French Intervention will not feature prominently in the chapter, each example will be read through one or more of the numerous micro-plots that the novel makes available. More theoretical in nature, Chapters Two and Three deal with novels that respond to an organizational strategy akin to the detective novel; as such, it is difficult to divorce them epistemologically and thematically from the sequence in which evidence is discovered and plot points revealed. This remains true even in the case of *Madero, el otro*, whose "mystery" consists only of the available knowledge of Francisco Madero's life. The confrontation of the imaginary and the symbolic with the real in these novels will follow the itinerary of its protagonists, attending to the margins of the narratives, the dark and interstitial places where we may apprehend what they wish to repress.

CHAPTER 1.
“GROTESQUEING” THE EMPIRE: DEGRADATION AND RENEWAL IN
FERNANDO DEL PASO’S *NOTICIAS DEL IMPERIO*

In the halls of the Kunsthalle Mannheim hangs a painting that depicts a firing squad firing at point blank range on a man of dark complexion. Beside this man stands another, relatively tall and lighter-skinned, wearing a sombrero; and beside him another, again of darker complexion. Behind the six men firing, another appears to be loading or reloading his firearm. A small cluster of civilians look down on the scene from behind a wall at the foot of a steep hill beneath a clear blue sky.

The painting, by Edouard Manet, is titled *The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian* (1868-9).²⁴ The emperor stands in his sombrero between two of his Generals, Miguel Miramón to the left and Tomás Mejía to the right. According to Juan José Barrientos, even this version of Manet’s painting, completed two years after the execution, was based in part on

24. The painting in the Kunsthalle Mannheim is the last and most finished of at least five iterations of the Maximilian painting. The first (1867), third (1868-9), and fourth (1868-9) are generally in the same vein as the one I have described above, and the last’s clear precursors. The second (1867-8, of questionable attribution), while it does not depart entirely from the broad outlines of the scene, differs in some details. Maximilian is still flanked by his generals facing a firing squad composed of six men and a seventh attending to his rifle, but the scene takes place not on a hill, but on an open plain; the scene is not visibly observed by any onlookers; and one of the members of the firing squad is aiming his rifle to the side of Maximilian and well over his head (due perhaps to the recoil produced when firing). Most notably, the canvas was cut apart after the artist’s death. Each piece was sold separately, and not all of them survived, such that neither Maximilian nor General Miramón appear on the reassembled canvas at all.

“una versión de la ejecución que luego había de ser corregida” (51).²⁵ As Fernando Del Paso explains in his encyclopedic novel *Noticias del Imperio* (1987),

no hubo tras los condenados una barda por encima de la cual asomaran las cabezas de la gente, ni Maximiliano tenía el sombrero puesto, ni estaba en el centro, ni los soldados eran tan bien plantados ni tan uniformes en su estatura como quiso imaginarlo el pintor francés o como lo hubiera deseado el propio Maximiliano. (702)

In no small part Del Paso’s novel acts as a remedy for historical inaccuracies such as this one; its greatest value, however, lies in its nature as a corrective for what he perceives as broad and historically authorized historiographical injustices that inform Mexico’s contemporary troubles. The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which had in the 1980s presided over catastrophic economic collapse, the devastatingly clumsy response to the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City, and transparently fraudulent local and national elections had begun to prove itself fundamentally corrupt and inadequate in the face of modern concerns. The party quickly loses its quasi-dictatorial grasp on Mexican politics, while at the same time attempting to shore up its political viability by appealing to legitimating narratives dating back to the Mexican revolution. In this respect, *Noticias del Imperio* is among the first novels to mark the nascent transition from the “dictatorship” of the PRI and the 21st-century democracy that exploded in 2000 with the election of the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN)

25. Barrientos goes on to cite the erroneous reports from the newspaper *Entbüllungen*:

en un periódico se aseguró que el emperador había sido fusilado “en el segundo patio del convento” y registraba el rumor de que el pelotón de fusilamiento había estado integrado por extranjeros que habían disparado a seis pasos de distancia; de acuerdo con ese mismo periódico, tres días después habían sido fusilados también los generales Mejía, Arellano y Castillo, así como el príncipe Salm Salm, pero no se decía nada de Miramón, que había resultado herido de gravedad durante la toma de Querétaro.

to the presidency, and subsequently imploded over the next decade, crushed under the weight of widespread, uncontrollable, and gruesome drug-related violence.²⁶

In this chapter, we will analyze the way Del Paso deploys the grotesque human body as an instrument with which to produce a space for the frank interrogation of the ideological construction of Mexican identity. By seeking out a new narrative in the French Intervention, advancing reviled personages from a largely ignored epoch as relevant and essential components of Mexican identity, Del Paso radically subverts what he perceives as the inadequate preeminence of Mexican revolutionary heroes as the uncontested cornerstones of modern Mexican socio-political self-definition. An understandably monumental novel, *Noticias del Imperio* has generated a significant volume of critical analyses, most of which focus on its destabilizing approach to historiography. After contextualizing our analysis in a survey of existing secondary literature, we will turn to an in-depth analysis of the appearance of the grotesque body in the novel.

In order to stave off potential and quite legitimate criticism, I would like to note one peculiarity regarding *Noticias del Imperio*'s impeccable faithfulness to its postmodern epistemology, and another regarding its impressive length. The consequence of this faith is that none of the conclusions proposed in this chapter ought be taken as dogmatic, certain, or incontrovertible. Indeed, we ought to regard as suspect any interpretation that cannot be negated or disproven by another, equally probable interpretation. As a consequence of the novel's length and heterogeneity, extensive sections of this chapter could just as easily have been

26. For better or worse, the present state of Mexico has led to the restitution of the PRI to the presidential seat.

written differently by substituting different examples, but reaching the same conclusions. We will have ample opportunity to explore the repercussions of the former of these difficulties in the various analyses offered up in this chapter; my hope is that my readings prove rigorous and convincing enough to merit them a place among their mutually exclusive companions. In regards to the latter, I ask only that the magnanimous reader excuse any of the countless relevant textual examples I have elected to exclude, consciously or otherwise.

READING *NOTICIAS DEL IMPERIO*

In his landmark book *Latin America's New Historical Novel* (1993), Seymour Menton famously and effusively goes on record in declaring that *Noticias del Imperio*'s "almost certain canonization [...] depends primarily on its artistic complexity." Immediately thereafter, he defines this complexity as "a Bakhtinian symphony [consisting of] a combination of the dialogic or polyphonic, heteroglossia, the carnivalesque, and intertextuality" (83).²⁷ Even allowing for Menton's extravagant enthusiasm, it is undeniable that Del Paso's novel constitutes a watershed in the development of Mexican historiographic metafiction. Though it by no means exhausts the content of history, the novel *feels* comprehensive, even encyclopedic, in two important ways that traditional historical fiction cannot claim to. First, it represents the product of exhaustive research of the historical archives conducted over no fewer than ten years. Fernando Aínsa notes that "Fernando Del Paso confiesa haber leído durante años documentos históricos relativos al período de Maximiliano en bibliotecas de diferentes países para proyectar, hasta su más mínimo detalle, *Noticias del Imperio*" (91). This fidelity to the

27. See page 11 for a discussion of the problems with the "New Historical Novel" label and system of classification. In deference to these problems, I will strongly prefer to classify *Noticias del Imperio* as "historiographic metafiction" except when engaging with Menton's analysis directly.

authenticity of much of his subject matter is, indeed, one of the most well-noted and problematic elements of Del Paso's novel. Likewise, though no single document, however extensive, can ever amount to the total History of what is known, imagined, and fabricated about the period of the French Intervention in Mexico (1861–1867), *Noticias del Imperio* does succeed in formalizing and recording several of its constituent *histories*.

At the same time, and unlike the historical fiction that precedes its publication, the novel represents a veritable compendium of the narrative and literary techniques that will be refined and exploited, if never as heterogeneously or at such length as in *Noticias*, in the historical novels written after its publication, including those still being written today. To some degree, all Mexican historical fiction written after *Noticias* is either a reflection of or a reaction to the challenges to historical fidelity, thematic exhaustion, and technical virtuosity posed by Del Paso's tour de force.²⁸

Such enthusiastic and far-reaching descriptions should suggest fertile grounds for analysis originating on a wide variety of fronts. Owing perhaps to the novel's colossal scope and penchant for self-contradiction, however, the criticism that *Noticias del Imperio* has generated over the last two and a half decades, though voluminous, tends curiously to shy away from close readings of the novel's literary techniques. Put another way, *Noticias del Imperio*'s critics, despite frequent nods to the overarching structure imposed on the novel by Carlota's delirious monologue as well as the internal tripartite structure of the "historical" chapters,

28. Stella Clark and Alfonso González, in a co-authored article, posit that "[l]a base histórica e historiográfica, [...] constituye un 'estudio' de las múltiples variaciones posibles sobre un mismo tema" (732), an assertion I disagree with except on the most basic level. Since the historiographic portions of the novel are strictly chronological and rarely repeat subject matter, it is misleading to characterize them as variations on a theme. It is unquestionable, however, that *Noticias del Imperio* comprises a set of historiographic variations on the theme of historical novels.

have made much of the work's status as *historical*, but relatively little of its qualities as a *novel*. Indeed, in the same way that the literary forms rehearsed by Del Paso in *Noticias* have become prototypical for the techniques deployed in later historical fiction, a tendency to deemphasize or underemphasize historical fiction's literary qualities in favor of describing each text's relatively superficial qualities (most often its admittedly remarkable historicity), has shown itself to be regrettably prototypical of the criticism that the genre generates.

Nevertheless, a number of intersecting patterns emerge from the extensive secondary literature on *Noticias del Imperio*. Broadly defined, they are: the relationship between history and fiction in the content of the novel; the multiplicity of diegetic narrators deployed as readers of the French Intervention, and the subsequent internal genre-shifting that occurs as a consequence of their adjacent narratives; Carlota's delirium as reflected in her narrative voice and her engagement with history; and, thematically, Del Paso's forceful rejection of European imperialism. In order to situate my analysis within a critical context and lexicon, I will note the appearances these themes make over the course of *Noticias del Imperio*'s critical history before investigating how the careful study of the deployment and trajectory of the human bodies in the novel can be brought to bear on the conclusions it proposes.

History and fiction

Even the most cursory reading of *Noticias del Imperio* belies a complex proposition with respect to the relationship between the notions of history, fiction, and the historiographic enterprise responsible for both (a relationship Juan Bruce-Novoa tersely describes as “problemática” [421]). Fernando Aínsa neatly describes the intricacy of this relationship—in

particular the triviality of the passage between the two narrative registers— in his discussion of intertextuality in historical novels. He writes

[...] Del Paso explica que los episodios reales y verídicos de su historia son tan surrealistas que se ha visto obligado a tratar de convencer al lector por todos los medios de que todo lo que cuenta fue cierto.²⁹ Esta veracidad (y no sólo verosimilitud) de lo relatado lo llevaron a temer que su novela fuera en realidad un libro de historia, lo que pudo evitar gracias a la estructura que decidió darle a la obra, especialmente a través del uso del monólogo interior. (92, emphasis added)

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that few critical discussions of *Noticias* escape at minimum a passing reference to the tremendous density of historiographic play that occurs in the novel and to the elaborate, postmodern epistemology it implies, to say nothing of the many articles that make of this play their central object.³⁰

Some critics, like Juan José Barrientos, take up the relationship between Del Paso's historical accounts and other historical accounts of note, calling attention to the likenesses the novel establishes between Maximiliano at the Cerro de las Campanas and Jesus at Golgotha, labeling the former a subversion of the latter (51).³¹ For Barrientos, Del Paso later subverts the legend of the Battle of Camarón by consigning its telling to a low-class street vendor more interested in hawking a spurious copy of French Captain D'Anjou's wooden hand than

29. The perennial Aristotelian trope of veracity in history and verisimilitude in literature, whose relevance to *Noticias* needs no explication, is elegantly borne out in this anecdote.

30. María Cristina Pons asserts that the critical focus on Del Paso's historiographic play begins with the novel's title: "Un título convencional como el de la novela de Del Paso, y las palabras preliminares, despiertan las expectativas convencionales del género. Es decir, se espera un cierto grado de fidelidad histórica y otro de invención, producto de la tensión entre ficción e historia inherente a toda novela histórica" ("Noticias del Imperio" 97).

31. Menton had noted, some years earlier and somewhat outlandishly given the relative importance of Maximiliano's similarity to Jesus in the novel, that the eleven chapters dedicated to history multiplied by three —the number of subchapters they contain— equals Jesus's age at the time of his death; Fiddian considers the comparison with Jesus an ironic demystification consistent with the novel's epistemological position.

in providing a faithful account of the infamous battle (52).³² In a section of his article bearing the heading “Algunas objeciones,” he joins the chorus of critics who find some of the novel’s more didactic historical sections “prescindibles,” noting in passing their status as literary *readymades*: faithful, unadorned historical accounts made literary only by their inclusion in a literary work rather than by the character of their composition. Ultimately, Barrientos concludes that “a *Noticias del Imperio* no le falta nada para ser una gran novela, pero tal vez sí le sobra” (55). In this respect, Barrientos’s opinion echoes that of Alberto Paredes, for whom *Noticias del Imperio* abandons verisimilitude in favor of excessive didacticism and, as a result, “[el libro] cansa como recorrer en una sola jornada de cabo a rabo el Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia de la ciudad de México o el reciente Museo del Templo Mayor o todo el British Museum o cualquier otro monstruo semejante...” (242, 246).³³

Nathalie Sagnes, who writes at length on the 33 sections that do not form part of Carlota’s extended monologue, appears implicitly (and several years earlier) to concur with Barrientos’s claim to the readymade status of the strictly historical sections, but comes to more sympathetic conclusions. She writes, “[o]nce son subcapítulos de síntesis histórica que, *tomados solos*, no pertenecerían al género ficción” (178, emphasis added), suggesting that their context perhaps permits them entry into the genre. Without explicitly saying so, she gener-

32. See page 68 for a discussion of this subchapter.

33. Paredes’s atypical assessment of the novel stands nearly alone in its unqualified frustration with *Noticias del Imperio*. While his assessment suffers many shortcomings, principle among them its insistence on the defective verisimilitude of the novel’s minor narrators, it is important insofar as it constitutes one of few articles that analyze *Noticias* in terms of its inherent literary qualities.

José Emilio Pacheco spins the novel’s “monstrous” length and erudition positively, in an opinion that recalls Roland Barthes “pleasurable” text; i.e. “the text [...] produces, in me, the best pleasure [...] if, reading it, I am led to look up often, to listen to something else. I am not necessarily *captivated* by the text of pleasure [...]” (Barthes 24). Pacheco writes, “*Noticias del Imperio* no está hecha nada más para ser leída: está hecha para ser habitada semanas o aun meses enteros” (Pacheco 123).

ates a scale between strict history and fiction on which each chapter (or subchapter) falls. She first notes that there exists a discursive relationship between history and fiction in the novel; that is, that different subchapters communicate with one another: “historical synthesis” subchapters tend to precede subchapters that confirm or call into question their conclusions, and vice-versa. Carlota’s monologues likewise tend to pick up and lend themes to and from the historical chapters that precede and follow them, reflecting Del Paso’s attempt to “tratar de conciliar lo verdadero que pueda tener la historia con lo exacto que pueda tener la invención” (188, qtd. in 182-83).

At times Del Paso nudges historical subchapters toward the fictional end of the scale, exceeding and subverting his role as impartial historian by introducing contradictory hypotheses regarding historical imprecisions, by calling attention to the shortcomings of previous historical accounts, or by giving what might be regarded as undue attention to events downplayed by traditional histories. (These often ironic interjections do not by any means go unnoticed by other critics) The 22 remaining subchapters in their turn fall “unambiguously” into the category of historical fiction, according to Sagnes, “ya que Fernando del Pasó inventa una serie de situaciones y algunos personajes, y procede así a una reconstrucción histórica ficticia” (179). “El novelista,” in these sections, “asume [las zonas desconocidas de la historia] y palia las carencias de la historiografía burlándolas mediante la imaginación,” but always restricting his fictional play within the bounds of historical authenticity (189).³⁴

34. Elizabeth Corral Peña even undertakes the painstaking task of confirming the authenticity of the author’s historical recreation by referring to the documents Del Paso cites in his text. She makes clear that her fact-checking “no tiene el objetivo de restarle mérito a la capacidad creadora de Del Paso, sino de señalar cómo la imaginación del autor caminó siempre de la mano de datos históricos verificables” (“Del Paso” 129).

Numerous critics (including Sagnes, to a degree) occupy themselves in interpreting the myriad narrative strategies that fall under the broad heading of “historical fiction” that Del Paso employs, though few explicitly note the connection between Del Paso’s novel and traditional historical fiction.³⁵ That is, these authors deal not with the relationship between fictional and historical chapters, but between fiction and history itself *within* chapters. Echoing Del Paso’s repetition of Borges’s privileging of the “symbolically true” over the “historically exact” —an epigram broadly adopted in the critical literature and by subsequent historical novels— Menton confidently asserts Del Paso’s supposed belief in one of the fundamental tenets of postmodern literature: the truth is inapprehensible and thus impossible to ascertain (86). Fiddian confirms that the answers *Noticias* provides are “largely consonant with post-structuralist and postmodernist thinking,” as famously laid out by Linda Hutcheon, in its ex-

35. Some go as far as to say, following Menton, that *Noticias del Imperio* is definitively *not* a traditional historical novel. As with Menton, the characteristics they cite in an attempt to separate how the “unconventional” *Noticias* differs from “conventional” historical fiction tend to be less essential than they are made out to be. They can generally be distilled down to the adoption by the historical novels of fairly standard postmodernist narrative techniques: the adoption of multiple narrative strategies within the same text and an engagement with metafiction. See, for example, Pons, for whom the explicit questioning of history from multiple narrative perspectives suggests something “radically” new in the historical novel:

Las novelas históricas contemporáneas, llamadas por algunos “nuevas novelas históricas”, difieren radicalmente de la novela histórica tradicional tanto por sus estrategias narrativas como por la posición que adoptan frente a la Historia y a la historiografía. En su distanciamiento del modelo tradicional, dada su configuración, y a partir de un encuentro entre lo convencional y no convencional del género, esta obra reflexiona sobre la conflictiva y a la vez complementaria relación entre la ficción y la Historia, lo cual da lugar, a su vez, a toda una serie de cuestionamientos que sirven para repensar y ampliar los supuestos teóricos de la novela histórica en general. (“Noticias del Imperio” 98)

Fiddian shows the error at the heart of readings that draw a “radical” demarcation between Del Paso’s novel and earlier historical novels by pointing out that there exists in *Noticias* a

residue of humanist and modernist elements [which] opens up a fissure in the apparently uniform texture of the novel and ultimately constitutes a major ground for distinguishing *Noticias* from the countless other postmodern historiographic metafiction produced by Latin American authors in the last quarter of the twentieth century. (*The novels* 128)

As we have seen already, Del Paso’s novel is a compendium of traditional and non-traditional historiographic techniques, and is at its most paradoxically postmodern when it rehearses those techniques in close succession and proximity to one another.

ploration of the precarious nature of writing history, which is inherently and problematically textual and ideological (i.e. “destined to become discourse”) (*The novels* 123, “Fernando del Paso y el arte” 150). In lieu of presenting a novelization of one particular truth, Del Paso delivers many “nondefinitive”³⁶ histories, adopting a variety of narrative perspectives, creating numerous fictional spokespeople through whom to convey his tale, and deploying nearly as many literary genres as he does characters.³⁷ Indeed, Del Paso creates in his characters a set of lenses through which to read a historical narrative, as if to underscore the notion that “el contenido de verdad histórica [...] no reside sólo en su posibilidad de ser comprobable mediante la documentación histórica, sino a través de la lectura que se haga de esa documentación” (Pons, “Noticias del Imperio” 104-05). If this is so, we must think of Del Paso’s text as already irreversibly filtered through two internal readers—first by the author and then by his characters—who silently organize and exclude elements of the narrative long before any external reader lays eyes on it.

The polyphonic nature of *Noticias* is the subject of much discussion in the secondary literature. Monique Plâa reasons that Del Paso selects from “una infinidad de voces” that might inhabit the gap between the reasoned voice of history found in the most historical chapters and that of Carlota’s unrestrained fantasy. She suggests that “[e]l efecto polifónico resulta tanto de la cantidad como de la densidad”—and the diversity—“de las voces” (141, 143). Guerrero refers to the multiplicity of voices as a celebration of postmodern fragmentation intended to question Mexico’s “great narratives” (104). Menton, for his part, goes so far

36. Menton’s word (84).

37. Francisco Cervantes hyperbolically writes, “sin excluir muchas y magníficas formas de narrar, todos los géneros de la creación literaria están involucrados [...]” (135).

as to erect his interpretation of *Noticias del Imperio* as “a Bakhtinian symphony” on the foundation of the heteroglossia implied by so rich a variety of diegetic discourses (86).

For Menton, the novel’s heteroglossia is complemented by equally rich examples of intertextuality. He identifies two separate forms of intertext, first making note of the Boom era texts that make appearances in the novel.³⁸ Adding these literary sources to the abundance of historical texts the novel appropriates, he proposes viewing *Noticias* as “a special form of palimpsest in which the allusions to historical and literary sources, present throughout the novel, multiply as the novel progresses” (91). A number of critics seek to devise some organizing authority for Menton’s palimpsest. Clark and González, for example, suggest that there exists in the novel a hierarchy of authoritative voices. Atop the hierarchy reigns an “almost imperceptible” “supernarrador” que escoge, encuadra e intercala la documentación histórica, y que al seleccionar transmite con eficacia la ‘historia oficial’.” Beneath the “super narrator” rests an “autor implícito” who evaluates, confirms, expands, parodies, and contradicts the texts the super narrator chooses to include, but who never speaks for himself in the first person. The implicit author undermines or recuses himself of his own authority by placing differing historical sources in dialogue and failing to resolve the conflicts that arise. Bridging the gap between “historical” and “fictional” narrators, Del Paso includes an “autor dramatizado” who does express opinions in the first person and address the reader, particularly in the final historical chapters, without intervening directly in the narrative (Clark and González 733).

38. Menton specifically mentions Rulfo and Borges, and shortly thereafter makes the unique suggestion that *Noticias* may have found inspiration in the monologues exchanged by Maximiliano and Carlota in Fuentes’s *Terra Nostra* (91). Fiddian later claims to find a template for the empress in la Dama Loca in Fuente’s novel.

Pons takes up the contrary stance, proposing that the fact of the novel's polyphony implies "[la] ausencia de un narrador omnisciente y objetivo a cuyo cargo esté todo el recuento del pasado, así como la mezcla de lo fantástico, lo imaginario e incoherente de los monólogos de Carlota" ("Noticias del Imperio" 98). Others allow for the existence of a "coordinating narrator" but collapse Clark and González's tripartite structure into a single figure who "stands outside the realm of mimesis [...] and makes various kinds of diegetic utterances which, as well as passing judgment on individuals and events also foreground the discursive conventions of narration and historiography" (Fiddian, *The novels* 107). This "narrador-historiador" strikes a relatively neutral tone but, despite any claims to the contrary, "no se trata [...] sino de una voz más" among the myriad official and popular voices that populate the novel (Corral Peña, "Del Paso" 128).

Once filtered through this multiplicity of voices, history inevitably begins to assume some of the qualities of fiction. Claude Fell asserts the compatibility of the two within a single textual space in a relationship of mutual enrichment (117) and cites the Mexican author himself in characterizing *Noticias* as "una especie de carrera entre la imaginación y la documentación" (qtd. in Fell 114). González suggests that *Noticias del Imperio* doesn't just mix history and fiction, but annihilates the distinction between the two.³⁹ The novel thus destroys the belief that written history should occupy a place of privilege over oral history, and subverts the notion that history constitutes the privileged medium for the reconstruction of the past at all, taking for granted that "nuestro conocimiento del pasado, de la historia [...] es, a final de cuentas, una creación" (230). He clarifies, in the article co-authored with Clark, that

39. Fiddian concurs: "The conventional distinction handed down from Aristotle between historical narratives and fictional narratives collapses [...]" (*The novels* 124).

by “filtering” the past through the processes of fictionalization and novelization Del Paso manages to subvert both fiction *and* history (731) without privileging either over the other. Fell agrees that historical discourse ends up subverted by the presence of fiction (115) while, as we have seen, Sagnes shows that fiction is bounded on all sides by historical accuracy.

A final point regarding history on which numerous critics come together in their judgment of *Noticias del Imperio* refers to its sheer density and display of prodigious erudition, which Elizabeth Corral Peña aptly refers to as the novel’s “apetito pantagruélico en relación con la información” (“Del Paso” 127). Such an appetite results not only in a great number of historical facts, “sino también la yuxtaposición al lado de éstos de un sinfín de sucesos que *podrían* haber pasado y que finalmente son exclusivos del mundo de *Noticias del Imperio*” (136).⁴⁰ Paredes likewise writes that “[a]cumulación es la clave del libro” (245). This observation tends to go hand in hand with the parallel observation that Del Paso does not serve but “se sirve de la historia.” Its ubiquity in *Noticias del Imperio*’s critical archive alone merits mention, though few critics develop the idea beyond mere observation. Menton, however, makes note of the paradox, critical to the postmodern poetics of the novel, that “the abundance of rigorous historical documentation perpetuates rather than clarifies certain doubts” (84); that is, that Del Paso’s “pantagruelic” accretion of information only obfuscates any notion of hierarchical History.

40. This is a clear allusion to the Borgesian “symbolically true” and to the Faulknerian “might-have-been that is more true than truth” (*Absalom, Absalom!* 115).

Carlota's delirium

After the complex interactions of fiction and history, Carlota's delirium merits the greatest critical attention. The late Maximiliano's wife, the ex-empress of Mexico and the novel's most frequent narrator, Carlota inhabits the halls of Bouchout Castle in Belgium sixty years after her husband's execution at the hands of President Benito Juárez, and sixty years after her tragic collapse into paranoia and insanity. In the days leading up to her death in 1927, Carlota undertakes the recounting of her long and tragic life,⁴¹ a project for which she enlists her long-dead husband's assistance, "porque me estoy volviendo tan olvidadiza y distraída que hay días en que me pregunto dónde dejé mi memoria, dónde quedaron mis recuerdos [...]" (24). While her memoirs will ostensibly take the form of a book, in practice they comprise an extended, delirious apostrophe intended for Maximiliano. The character that radiates through the pages of her narrative is "described variously as 'poetic,' 'oracular,' 'omnipotent,' and 'hallucinatory'" (Inés Sáenz, Roberto González Echevarría, Vicente Quirarte, and Claude Fell, all qtd. in Fiddian, *The novels* 117).

There is no denying the intimate connection between Carlota's and Del Paso's historiographic projects; indeed, Carlota's monologue not only represents the most sustained and significant challenge or provocation to authoritative historiography, but provides the most salient juxtaposition of discourses and registers in *Noticias del Imperio*. She to a greater extent than any other element of the novel problematizes "el concepto de la autoridad en la reconstrucción del pasado." "Su relato," write Clark and González, "afirma y niega simultáneamente la relatividad de los hechos ya que comprende lo verosímil, lógico, sistemáti-

41. "[M]e trajo un libro con las páginas en blanco y un frasco con tinta roja para que escriba yo la historia de mi vida."

co y accesible, así como lo dudoso, inventado e ilógico.” Del Paso (perhaps paradoxically) positively *affirms* this relativity, suggesting through a battery of counterposed voices “una abundancia de posibilidades de percepción para el lector” (732, 735, 732). The task of arranging these possibilities into a comprehensible and credible sequence of events, a task left to the reader, is paradoxically essential yet fundamentally proscribed by Carlota’s insistent lies, inventions, and challenges to the historical record.

Picking up on the truth/lie duality, many critics note the essential difference between the “historical” chapters, in which Del Paso’s literary aims find themselves bounded by historical fidelity, and Carlota’s monologue, in which history is a convenient starting point for unbounded invention. Given this procedural inversion, Carlota handily deposes the chronology established in the chapters ungoverned by her voice by leaping from one time frame to the next with no pattern or warning. Thomas underscores that the use of the “delirious first-person,” narratively antithetical to the demands of the traditional 19th-century historical novel, permits Del Paso “to accomplish his stated goal of placing history ‘al lado de la invención, de la alegoría, e incluso, también de la fantasía desbocada’” (171). Michael Rössner eloquently terms this technique “realismo loco,” which he considers a derivation of surrealism, a movement with which *Noticias* sustains an extended intertextual dialogue. He points out that insanity was considered a privileged space by the surrealists, and that beings who occupied the space of insanity were, so to speak, surrealist by nature (222-23).⁴²

42. The extension of Rössner’s analysis, that Del Paso inverts the exotic gaze by focusing it *from México onto* Europe merits further attention below (see page 48).

While it may be an overstatement to suggest that the process by which Carlota's constructs her narrative is strictly surrealist, many of the processes critics have identified as structurally significant to her monologue do hark back to surrealist practices. Such a claim to an implicit aesthetic structure in no way compromises previous claims to Carlota's insanity. Since, as Sagnes succinctly states, "[e]l discurso del loco es siempre ambivalente e inasible porque no hay frontera entre la verdad y la mentira en el loco" (210), Del Paso is made to create in Carlota the appearance of insanity within a discourse that still obeys logical and aesthetic norms.⁴³ By reading beyond the appearance, numerous critics have identified the specific techniques that underlie the architecture of Carlota's madness, the specific architecture by way of which she unhinges and makes literature out of hyper-documented reality.

According to Claude Fell, Carlota's discourse responds primarily to the surrealist logic of the analogy, in which "[l]o referencial sirve constantemente de trampolín a lo onírico," but makes use of a number of other elements as well:

Volvemos a encontrar en este texto las isotopías constitutivas del discurso alucinado de Carlota: el regreso, la reiteración, la circularidad, acentuados por una serie de paralelismos flagrantes entre el primer y el último soliloquio; la concatenación destrucción-renacimiento, la emergencia de un discurso que se construye sobre sus propias ruinas, el engendramiento inscrito, según el modelo surrealista, en el aniquilamiento; la reivindicación permanente del derecho a la fabulación, del ejercicio desenfrenado de la imaginación, del poder creador del sueño. (118-19)

Fell goes on to unify these diverse elements under the sign of a "paroxistic" and accumulative totality in which Carlota devours *everything*, whitewashes *everything*, and remembers *every-*

43. María Cristina Pons concurs with this assessment in a way that recalls the necessity for "readers" who can "translate" "lo imaginario, lo fantástico, lo incoherente o lo inverosímil en términos de un referente histórico que tenga sentido, o que sea comprensible a nuestra manera de conocer y entender la Historia; es decir, en base a una cierta coherencia y una racionalidad" ("Noticias del Imperio" 105).

thing in *every* verb tense “para engendrar una especie de presente eterno donde [...] el personaje accede a la universalidad del mito [...]” (120). As a mythic figure Carlota replaces history with fictions of her own creation, “sirviéndose de la historia” and submitting it to her transgressive delirium, rather than the opposite.⁴⁴

Principle among the techniques Fell alludes to (but does not always call by name) one finds an inventive admixture of non sequitur; the unbridled accumulation of often disconnected facts; the construction of extensive lists whose organizing principles are either esoteric or absent, but which lend themselves to the novel’s sense of totality;⁴⁵ explicit internal contradiction; frequent references to dreams as a historically valid medium; and extensive repetition both within and between chapters. Each of these mechanisms is put into practice to such an extreme that it becomes integral to the anatomy of the novel.

Among the most oft-cited section of Carlota’s extensive monologue is its opening onomastic catalogue, which in a single page launches and demonstrates to great effect many of the generative mechanisms mentioned thus far. The text, which I will refrain from citing in full, as we will have the opportunity to return to it later, begins as follows:

Yo soy María Carlota de Bélgica, Emperatriz de México y de América. Yo soy María Carlota Amelia, prima de la Reina Victoria de Inglaterra, Gran Maestre de la Cruz de San Carlos y Virreina de las provincias del Lombardovéneto acogidas por la piedad y la clemencia austriacas bajo las alas del águila bicéfala

44. Fell’s reading of Carlota is by no means the only acceptable reading, as one might expect in a novel characterized fundamentally by polyvalence and a rejection of authority. Another compelling reading put forth by Elisabeth Guerrero reads Carlota as a Bakhtinian fool or clown (116).

45. P. N. Thomas devotes several pages of his valuable article “Historiographic Metafiction and the Neo-Baroque in Del Paso’s *Noticias del Imperio*” to the totalizing effects that these “delirious catalogues” construct and deconstruct in the novel (179). It is worthwhile to note that in *Noticias del Imperio* Del Paso breaks from the totalizing impulses to which his earlier, modernist novels responded. Rather than abandoning the attempt at totalization, he parodies it by attempting, in a characteristically postmodern gesture, to catalogue the constitutively inexhaustible: history.

de la Casa de Habsburgo. Yo soy María Carlota Amelia Victoria, hija de Leopoldo Príncipe de Sajonia-Coburgo y Rey de Bélgica, a quien llamaban el Néstor de los Gobernantes y que me sentaba en sus piernas, acariciaba mis cabellos castaños y me decía que yo era la pequeña sílfide del palacio de Laeken. Yo soy María Carlota Amelia Clementina [...]. (13)

These lines exemplify Carlota's affinity for Borgesian "enumeración caótica," the dense and excessive accumulation of facts, the prevalence of internal textual repetition (here in the form of anaphora), and the reiterative circularity of her narration, as the paragraph contributes nothing to the forward motion of the novel, but merely circles around its own obsessive nature. As enumerations similar to these crop up several more times in the first chapter, throughout the text, and at length in the closing chapter, it furthermore exemplifies Carlota's tendency to repeat herself within and between chapters as well.⁴⁶

To put a final note on the construction of Carlota's delirium, let us turn to a brief example of her proclivity to contradict herself or, as some have suggested, merely to give equal credence to any and all theories about the etiology and extent of her insanity.⁴⁷ Carlota complicates reports of her insanity by addressing the topic at length in two conflicting ways. First, by addressing the reasons for her madness —usually directly or indirectly related to a hypothetical plot to poison her— without addressing whether she is, in fact, mad at all. After insisting that the only reason that her caretakers regard her as mad is her unwillingness to surrender her hold on a box that allegedly contains a portion of Maximiliano's heart and the bullet that killed him, she proffers and denies several other possibilities:

46. We will turn the thematic importance of Carlota's obsession with her lineage at the end of this chapter (see page 121).

47. Ultimately these amount to the same thing: unresolvable textual contradiction.

Pero si te dicen [...] que loca salí de México y que loca atravesé el mar [...], que en todo el viaje nunca salí de mi camarote porque estaba ya loca y lo estaba no porque me hubieran dado de beber toloache en Yucatán o porque supiera que Napoleón y el Papa nos iban a negar su ayuda [...], sino que lo estaba [...] porque en mi vientre crecía un hijo que no era tuyo sino del Coronel Van Der Smissen, [...] diles que no es verdad [...], que *si estoy loca* es de hambre y de sed, [...] desde ese día [...] en que el mismísimo diablo Napoleón y su mujer Eugenia de Montijo me ofrecieron un vaso de naranjada fría y yo supe y lo sabía todo el mundo que estaba envenenada [...]. (15-16, emphasis added)⁴⁸

Carlota acts as a repository for theories relating to the causes of her insanity, theories she summarily rejects. She later attributes accusations of madness to her refusal to eat any food she suspects to have been poisoned, to her desire to devour Maximiliano's remains instead (294) despite claiming earlier that his heart and blood were poisoned (18), to her belief that repairing a smashed mirror will enable her to see her entire life in a single image (494),⁴⁹ to her fascination with dressing her caretakers up as previous versions of herself (281), to the fact that she ordered that all the clocks in Bouchout Castle stopped and set to the exact time of Maximiliano's execution that she might forever live in the instant of his death (283), to her claims to her (dead) relatives that she is not in Bouchout but in Mexico (430-31). She furthermore narrates a short list of moments during her final voyage from Mexico to Europe when she did *not* begin her descent into madness (652-53). If denial of the reasons behind her insanity does not precisely constitute denial of insanity itself, Carlota will on numerous

48. The alternating success and failure of this alleged plot, attributed alternately to Carlota's obsessive or inadequate diligence in evading it, represents another example of her capacity for and inclination toward self-contradiction.

49. Another clearly Borgesian image.

later occasions explicitly deny the truth of her madness.⁵⁰ She will also deny accounts of her lucidity, and even accuse her accusers of madness themselves.

As the foregoing examples demonstrate, Carlota eschews blatant contradiction by never once explicitly affirming her supposed insanity. Contradiction in such simple terms would plot her attitude toward madness as a simple binary: true or false. In spite of its inherent potential for contradiction, such a simplistic perspective on so central a question would run contrary to the poetics of historiography Carlota establishes throughout the novel, which is based fundamentally on the coexistence of multiple equally plausible but mutually exclusive options. Instead, the ex-Empress eliminates one term of the binary and explodes the other. She presents, without prejudice, *all* of the theories found in history books along with several that she herself, in her paranoia, has invented. She offers the explanations non-hierarchically, without privileging any one possibility over the next, and consistently decries the falsehood of them all. She constantly reiterates: if I am mad, *this* is not the cause. Each denial carries immanent within it the suggestion that, while these are not the reasons, there *is* a reason, and *ipso facto* that there is also madness. The irresolvable contradiction arises when she flatly denies that the insanity that any of the etiologies would produce is itself utterly false, and that if these are not the reasons it is simply because there is no reason, because *there is no in insanity*. Faced with another denial of madness among denials from the lips of a woman overwhelmingly presumed mad, in the absence of an authoritative voice to organize

50. Indeed, if obsessive denial rings more of tacit admission of insanity.

and harmonize the contradictions, the novel forces the reader to choose between a plethora of equally (im)plausible competing possibilities.⁵¹

Critique of imperialism

To the extent that critics comment at all on the larger thematic issues raised by *Noticias del Imperio* (beyond the scope of its own status, structure, and historiographic practices), the prevailing consensus is that Del Paso's novel represents at bottom a harsh critique of imperialism, both of the late 20th-century American imperialism that troubled Mexico at the time of the novel's composition, as well as the European dynastic imperialism that constitutes its historical substance (Fiddian, "Fernando del Paso y el arte" 149). A number of analyses — in particular those of Fiddian and Menton— demonstrate positively how the features of the novel we have discussed thus far function to support this critique; many of Del Paso's own comments likewise substantiate the authorial intention behind this aspect of the novel.

It is curious, however, to note how eagerly the same critics who celebrate *Noticias del Imperio*'s unseizable vastness, undecidability, and essentially nonhierarchical polyvalence, grant this interpretation alone a place of privilege and canonical status. If this privilege does not expressly forbid competing interpretations, it does assign them a lesser stature and, perhaps more importantly, leaves them open to the same doubt that permeates the novel, a doubt from which Del Paso's anti-imperialist message is uniquely insulated. Menton ascribes the critique of imperialism a role subordinate to Del Paso's aesthetic concerns, but still main-

51. As Fiddian writes,

at the end of the narrative investigation of the story of Maximilian and Carlota, the only conclusion available to the narrator is, paradoxically, that the story of Maximilian and Carlota admits of no conclusion: the most that can be asserted about it is that it remains open to continuing interpretation and, in some particularly intractable areas, locked into a chain of unending speculation. (*The novels* 122)

tains its privileged status with respect to other large-scale interpretations. Fiddian, quick to note that *Noticias* comprises a novel of histories and not of History, is equally quick to prioritize its critique of imperialism above all its other possible—and at times contradictory—meanings.⁵² Likewise, if as Fell suggests it is immediately clear that Del Paso denounces French imperialism (115), the possibility that he in the same gesture *also* intends to recuperate a shred of Mexican-ness that has its roots in the French Intervention is by no means excluded, but never acknowledged. As with Carlota's denials, these denunciations allude to the same tension that operates through the novel: denunciation and the concurrent impossibility erasure. To denounce imperialism tacitly concedes that Mexico has been the victim of imperialism—an admission that Del Paso makes the moment he chooses to write about the French Intervention—but cannot erase imperialism's historical reality; it instead concedes, again tacitly, that Mexico is forever after formed, transformed, and determined by the imperial act, however strongly it is denounced. My contribution to the analysis of *Noticias del Imperio* inhabits the space opened by this problematic denunciation.

Del Paso's condemnation of European imperialism decidedly does not translate into a desire to erase the imperial, exoticist gaze of which Mexico has so often found itself the object. On the contrary, *Noticias del Imperio* demonstrates a persistent interest in *reversing* the imperial gaze and focusing it back on Europe. This reversal takes numerous forms. Most conspicuously, the continent and its major political figures are consistently portrayed, both by

52. Fiddian refers to anti-imperialism as *Noticias del Imperio*'s "thesis," a curious notion in the context of the postmodern episteme Del Paso advances (*The novels* 116). His prioritization of the theme of imperialism distorts his reading in particular of Carlota as a profoundly complex character who cannot properly be said to espouse or embody any ideology without also espousing, at a different point and just as fervently, its inverse.

Carlota and by the more “objective” historical voices, as dirty, petty, corrupt, degenerate slaves of baser instincts playing at history, sully the memory of their more glorious predecessors.⁵³ Carlota recites litanies of European leaders who met their ends in compromising positions; the fates of nations are discussed and decided at decadent costume parties while the snow-laden streets of Paris run foul with excrement;⁵⁴ historical projects are manufactured on a whim and abandoned when circumstances take an unfavorable turn without regard for the lives implicated in the project.⁵⁵

As a final example, Del Paso’s proposed repatriation of Maximiliano and Carlota’s bodies in Mexico, as unequivocally Mexican figures, is certainly the clearest and most abundantly commented inversion of Mexico and Europe he describes. Francisco Cervantes calls attention to Del Paso’s integration of the well-known song, “Adiós Mamá Carlota,” which for all its “official” irony explicitly adopts Carlota as the “mother” of the Mexican nation, and draws a connection between Carlota, “La Gran Madre Mexicana” and the traditional figure of La Malinche (136, 138).⁵⁶ Ultimately the analyst is superfluous in identifying this theme, as the author has no qualms about making it quite explicit, dedicating a lengthy passage near

53. It bears remembering, however, that Carlota’s critical eye regards Mexican and other American figures just as severely as it does Europeans.

54. The passage in the novel —“El excremento chorreaba entre los tablones y dejaba una huella oscura sobre la nieve. A veces, la nieve seguía cayendo y lo cubría. Esa mañana no sucedió así: dejó de nevar en París, bajó la temperatura y la huella oscura del excremento quedó congelada” (65)— frames Paris, the heart of Old World, as a grotesque space *par excellence*.

55. Napoleon III becomes nervous when the Civil War in the United States ends in 1865, and pulls the French army out of Mexico, breaking his promise to assist in the occupation until the Empire can establish its own standing army. The Empire collapses and Maximiliano is executed two years later.

56. This relationship itself describes an important reversal: whereas La Malinche is traditionally read as a Mexican who betrays Mexico to foreigners, Carlota, at least in *Noticias del Imperio*, is a foreigner who Del Paso attempts to recuperate for Mexico.

the end of the novel to its explication, and which I take the opportunity to quote at length (as so many critics already have):

Y parecería que así es, que esa muerte y esa locura, por magníficas, merecen algo más de México y de quienes hacen y escriben su historia y su literatura: merecen, más que nada, ser consideradas como los atenuantes de mayor peso en el juicio particular que cada autor se atreva y se vea obligado a hacer de los personajes de la tragedia.

A favor de Carlota, qué duda cabe, está su locura: sesenta años parecerían un castigo, un purgatorio más que suficiente para hacerle pagar sus ambiciones y su soberbia. También, pobre Carlota, su espantoso fracaso. Y a favor de Maximiliano está su muerte, están las gotas de sangre que se mezclaron con la tierra del Cerro de las Campanas y están sus últimas palabras, su *¡Viva México!*: al enfrentarse a su fin como lo hizo, lo transformó en una muerte noble y oportuna, en una muerte valiente y, en resumidas cuentas, en una muerte muy mexicana.

Pero “es la historia, en fin, la que nos dice”, anota también [Rodolfo Usigli], “que sólo México tiene derecho a matar a sus muertos y que sus muertos son siempre mexicanos”. Y así es: el problema no es que en México hayamos matado a Maximiliano, que en México, tal vez, hayamos vuelto loca a Carlota: *el problema es que a ninguno de los dos los enterramos en México*. Es decir, [...] ninguno de los dos, ni él ni ella, quedaron integrados a esta tierra fertilizada al parejo con los restos de todos nuestros héroes y todos nuestros traidores [...].

Y como tales tendríamos que aceptarlos: ya que no mexicanos de nacimiento, mexicanos de muerte. De muerte y de locura.

Y quizás nos conviene hacerlo así, para que no nos sigan espantando: las almas de los insepultos reclaman siempre su abandono. Como lo reclama y nos espanta, todavía, la sombra de Hernán Cortés. Darles el lugar que les correspondería en nuestro panteón, por otra parte, no implicaría la necesidad de justificar nada: ni las ambiciones desmesuradas ni todo lo que de imperialistas y arrogantes tuvieron las aventuras de nuestro primero y nuestros últimos conquistadores europeos, de la misma manera que lo traidor a nuestros traidores, y lo dictador a nuestros dictadores, no les quita lo mexicano. (771-773, final emphasis added)

We shall allow this quotation to speak for itself for the time being, but shall return to aspects of it later in our analysis to illustrate the complex relationship Del Paso establishes between Europe and Mexico by way of these problematic bodies (see page 108).

I have dedicated an unusually long section of this dissertation to the words of others because I do not wish for this chapter to merely repeat what others have already established; I have for the same reasons, with this admittedly lengthy exception, largely avoided Del Paso's words, which are numerous and explicit, in favor of the conclusions critics have drawn from them. Without such an introduction to the longitudinal readings that draw connections between congruent superficial elements of the text, any attempt to delve deeper and read closely will ultimately find itself impeded by the obligation to linger on the superficial; I hope that the relative comprehensiveness of the foregoing summary will allow me to dispense with that obligation. I wish instead to take these notes as the jumping off point for a deeper exploration of one of the novel's fundamental images: the human body.

THE GROTESQUE BODY IN *NOTICIAS DEL IMPERIO*

For Del Paso, the narrative of the French Intervention is populated with troubling and troublesome bodies. Our interest lies specifically with bodies found in states of transition, in the process of becoming something other than what they are. For Bakhtin, the clearest articulation of the grotesque occurs in such transitional moments when objects exist between two states, or when an object's natural or conventional status is temporarily inverted. These moments tend to be highly ambivalent —etymologically understood as having two (contradictory) values— whose essential organizing principle is degradation. Bodily degradation for Bakhtin does not imply a value judgment, but describes an essentially topographical conception of the body in which each grotesque element is imbued with both positive *and* negative values. Bakhtin understands bodily degradation as a “deeply positive” downward movement, and image of earthly abundance that has “not only a destructive, negative aspect,

but also a regenerating one” (19, 21). The grotesque body emphasizes the places through which the body transgresses its limits and consumes or spills over into the world (the genitals, the mouth, the bowels) and the moments at which the body establishes a new relationship with the world (e.g. birth and death). Through these emphases the grotesque body maintains borders with diametrically opposed yet profoundly interconnected conditions; as Bakhtin writes, “One of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born” (26). All bodily acts share in the binary of degradation and regeneration: the organs of procreation are topographically unified with the bowels, the “bodily grave”; what the body takes from the world through the mouth it returns to the world through the bowels, fertilizing new growth; death is immanent to birth: the passage from the womb into the world is paralleled by the passage from the world to the grave, the womb of the earth.

The other essential trait of the ambivalent, grotesque body is its unfinished character. Bakhtin implicitly delineates the characteristics of the unfinished body by describing the processes that transformed the grotesque, ambivalent medieval body to the complete, integral, finished body of the Renaissance:

As conceived by these [Renaissance] canons, the body was first of all a strictly completed, finished product. Furthermore, it was isolated, alone, fenced off from all other bodies. All signs of its unfinished character, of its growth and proliferation were eliminated; its protuberances and offshoots were removed, its convexities (signs of new sprouts and buds) smoothed out, its apertures closed. The ever unfinished nature of the body was hidden, kept secret; conception, pregnancy, childbirth, death throes, were almost never shown. The age represented was as far removed from the mother’s womb as from the grave, the age most distant from either threshold of individual life. The accent was placed on the completed, self-sufficient individuality of the given body. Corpor[e]al acts were shown only when the borderlines dividing the body

from the outside world were sharply defined. The inner processes of absorbing and ejecting were not revealed. (29)

By contrast, we may conceive of the grotesque body as incomplete in itself, constantly intermeshed with other bodies. Its convexities and concavities denote a fundamental tendency toward the generative and regenerative, sexual or otherwise. The grotesque body inclines toward the extremes of life nearest to birth and death,⁵⁷ and emphasizes degrading corporeal acts, in which bodies engage their essential openness to the world and to each other by merging with other bodies and by ejecting excesses, as during sexual intercourse and defecation.

The bodies we will consider in the following sections fulfill these requirements in a variety of ways. Del Paso's bodies are conspicuously incomplete, degraded, and full of problematic holes, natural and otherwise. We will first consider bodies in *Noticias* in general in order to establish the human body as one of the many recurring images in the novel, worthy of consideration. We will then turn to two bodies in particular. First, that of Maximiliano, whose historical body is systematically debased and travestied in paradigmatic fashion over the course of the novel, and whose creative potential Carlota recovers and recreates as an imaginary body. Finally, we will analyze Carlota's own body as an exemplary grotesque body as conceived by Bakhtin: broken down and near death and yet —indeed, consequently— profoundly sexual and procreative. The sum of these bodies will be sufficient to skew traditional narratives of the French Intervention in surprising ways that force a reconsideration of its importance in Mexico's historical memory.

57. In the context of *Noticias del Imperio* we understand proximity to death not strictly as old age or advanced illness, but also as the subjection to battle and torture.

BODIES IN *NOTICIAS DEL IMPERIO*

Even ignoring Carlota's quarter of the novel, *Noticias del Imperio* wastes no time calling attention to the bodies that inhabit its pages. Perhaps the most immediately conspicuous body, despite its absence throughout the larger part of the novel, is that of Benito Juárez.⁵⁸ A measure of focus on the figure of Juárez is unsurprising given his centrality to the story of the French Intervention and to the narrative of 19th-century Mexican history in general. In *Noticias del Imperio* he appears only twice as a character capable of speaking for himself (in chapters VI.2 and XII.1); here Del Paso portrays the hero of the Intervention with the utmost respect, allotting him the opportunity to demonstrate his thoughtful erudition and respect for the rule of law in his extended dialogues with his Secretary.⁵⁹ While Juárez belies in these chapters a poignant awareness of the problematic nature of his body as compared to that of Maximiliano with respect to the question of race, our interest in Juárez resides in situations in which, in his absence, others invoke his body as a prop on which to indicate his (bodily) defects as means to justify an illegal occupation.

We shall only consider one specific use to which the novel puts the body of Benito Juárez, which occurs in the first subchapter of the first "historical" chapter. The first invocations of Juárez's body in actuality take place toward the end of Carlota's opening monologic chapter. In Chapter 2, Del Paso takes advantage of the occasion of a preparatory historical overview —titled "Juárez y Mostachú"—⁶⁰ to significantly dress and undress Juárez's body as

58. Juárez does, however, makes his appearances at significant structural moments: the beginning, the middle, and the end of the novel.

59. Juárez's two dialogic chapters run in sharp contrast to Carlota's extended monologue.

60. Del Paso's use of "Mostachú," Napoleon III's pejorative nickname, already indicates his attitude toward the respective figures.

a means of grounding Napoleon III's claim to Mexican territory in historically accurate racial terms. Both clothed and undressed, Juárez does not measure up to European standards for the rulers of nations.

Despite his legitimate legal claim to the Mexican presidency, his cultural refinement, and lofty ideals, Juárez must have seemed an impostor to many Mexicans. Not only was he Mexico's first indigenous President, he also assumed the presidential seat not by popular mandate but, after the sudden abdication of his predecessor, through legal channels defined by a constitution less than a year old. Del Paso, via his narrator and an abundance of historical sources, corroborates the existence of this sentiment. Our interest, however, lies not in the confirmation of the existence of this attitude toward the indigenous president, but rather in the way Del Paso chooses to give it expression through his historical narrator. He does not describe Juárez directly as an impostor, but rather as someone who has literally *dressed himself up* with a country that does not belong to him in an century to which he is ill-suited, both of which consequently "fit" him poorly:

Pero para otros, para muchos, Benito Juárez se había puesto una patria como se puso el levitón: como algo ajeno que no le pertenecía, aunque con una diferencia: si la levita estaba cortada a la medida, la patria, en cambio, le quedaba grande y se le desparramaba mucho más allá de Oaxaca y mucho más allá también del siglo en que había nacido. (32)

Clothed in the nation, Juárez reveals himself as unworthy, literally *unfit* to lead a priori, by his very nature.⁶¹

61. Twenty years later, in his 2008 novel *Juárez: El rostro de piedra*, which owes a great deal to *Noticias del Imperio*, Eduardo Antonio Parra has Juárez symbolically clothe himself in the constitution that thrust him into the presidency.

Found wanting while clothed in the Mexican nation, Juárez's inadequacy shows all the more clearly when he is undressed. His indigenous skin, the indelible mark of his Otherness in the eyes of Europe, classifies him in the hierarchy of human races well beneath the station that he had democratically inherited in Mexico:

Y por no ser blanco y de origen europeo, por no ser ario y rubio, que era el arquetipo de la humanidad superior según lo confirmaba el Conde de Gobineau en su *Ensayo sobre la desigualdad de las razas humanas* [...], por no ser, en fin, siquiera un mestizo de media casta, Juárez, el indio ladino, en opinión de los monarcas y adalides del Viejo Mundo era incapaz de gobernar a un país que de por sí parecía ingobernable. (35)

Thus, without making reference to the legal basis for Juárez's presidency, the relevant qualifications that would allow him to adequately perform his duties, or the quality of the policy decisions he implemented, Del Paso doubly disqualifies him as an appropriate candidate to occupy the presidential seat, and founds this disqualification exclusively on the basis of his body.⁶²

A stroke of subtle irony links the subchapter that points out Juárez's suitability to rule Mexico with the subchapter that discusses at length the suitability of Europeans for the same task. The subchapter, titled "Del baile de anoche, en las Tullerías," takes place at a costume party at the Tuileries Palace and features an extended conversation between Napoleon III and the Austrian Prince Metternich, both hidden behind masks, their identities only revealed to the reader at the conclusion of the discussion. While the topic of discussion —the unreadiness of countries in Latin America for Republicanism,⁶³ the facility (or difficulty) with which

62. Given Mexico's innate "ungovernability," he is in fact triply disqualified.

63. This despite the fact that Mexico had been a republic for more than 40 years already. When this is pointed out to him, Napoleon III replies that, more than a republic, "México tiene muchos años de ser un desastre" (56).

one might install and maintain a European prince as emperor in Mexico, the defeatism that has allegedly infected the character of the Mexican people,⁶⁴ the likelihood that the United States would threaten an empire on its southern border once its Civil War concluded— is historically fascinating, our focus on the representation of the human body demands that we turn our attention elsewhere.

One has the sense that Del Paso is winking at the reader by juxtaposing the serious Juárez, “dressed up” in the Mexican nation, with Napoleon III at a decadent costume party disguised as a Venetian senator. On the surface, the contrast between the two figures is suggestive because, for all their similarities —both are rulers of men, both wear disguises when first we meet them— the austere, scrupulous Mexican could scarcely be ideologically more at odds with the decadent and ultimately deceitful emperor.⁶⁵ However, a closer consideration of this juxtaposition, one that focuses on the treatment of the disguised bodies, reveals the possibility for a more insidious reading. I propose that the differing treatments that the two bodies receive constitutes the tacit declaration of a double standard that inhabits the relationship Europe maintains with the Americas. Whereas the act of donning the Mexican nation does not change Juárez in any essential way —he is, despite his garb, still an Indian, still inherently unfit to rule—, Napoleon III insists that, so long as he is behind his mask, he ought

64. The statements made by Napoleon III —“El pueblo mexicano ya perdió toda su antigua grandeza [...]. [S]on razas conquistadas [...] que nada tienen ya que ver con la civilización de sus antecesores” (55)— reveal a profound ignorance or complete misunderstanding of the racial makeup of the Mexican nation, only a small percentage of which descends fully from the “razas conquistadas” to which the emperor refers.

65. History, as well as the novel, seems to bear this contrast out, as Juárez is still remembered as the honest and upright hero of the French Intervention (despite his failings), whereas Napoleon III is most famously immortalized by Victor Hugo and Karl Marx, as *Napoleon le Petit*, an ineffective, farcical incarnation of his namesake Napoleon I.

not be treated as an emperor, but as an equal, imploring that Metternich think of him as “su-
igual” (52); that is, although Europeans can be whoever they wish to be, Mexicans can only
be who they are. While it would be an error to read too much significance into the scene and
the reading I am suggesting, we must also remember that, for many, *Noticias del Imperio*
amounts to an extended protest against European imperialist practice, a practice explicitly le-
gitimated by the beliefs Del Paso seems to illustrate here. Such a reading further demon-
strates the fruitful potential of examining *Noticias* through the lens of the human body.

Del Paso’s abuse of the bodies of his characters in grotesque ways is by no means lim-
ited to the novel’s main characters. Indeed, Del Paso seems to appreciate the grotesque poten-
tial of the bodies of many, if not most, of his secondary characters as well. The bodies of both
real and fictional historical actors offer themselves up as ripe for mistreatment. References to
bodies abound in the even-numbered chapters in passing and as structural elements. The pair
of subchapters featuring the incomplete correspondence between two brothers, one in Mexi-
co (IV.3) and the other in France (XIV.3), calls explicit attention to the abuse the human
body has suffered in times of war. In an attempt to hide her swelling belly, a pregnant Euge-
nia dresses up in crinolines so large and multi-layered that she can scarcely fit through the
doors of Tuileries Castle, inspiring a farcical fashion trend that spreads from Paris to all of
Europe and long outlasts the Empress’s pregnancy (93). Blasio, Maximiliano’s scribe, contin-
uously stains his teeth, lips, and tongue purple by wetting his “lápiz-tinta” with saliva to
transcribe his Emperor’s every passing fancy, prompting the latter to remark to himself that
the poor Mexican “parecía un cadáver sonriente” (342, 509). A French soldier meets his
demise, in one of the novel’s most felicitous chapters, when a self-proclaimed “hombre de le-

tras” spills the contents of his type case from a height sufficient to lodge several typographic components in various of the soldier’s bodily orifices, proving that the pen is mightier than the sword “no tanto literariamente como literalmente” (403). A soldier on the jury that will condemn Maximiliano and his generals unsuccessfully attempts to focus on his examination of the evidence before him, repeatedly distracted by the body of his lover in various stages of undress, and nearly misses the trial when he can no longer resist the temptation to mix work and pleasure (641). Apart from the undeniable physicality of her own body, the world and worlds that Carlota remembers and invents revolve similarly around the physical, inhabited by the debauched bodies of dissolute, degenerate European royalty and Mexicans whose bodies can be dismantled and reassembled in new hybrid configurations.

In order to further substantiate the claim that bodies represent important images in the novel, we shall examine at length the degradation of three bodies in particular before moving on to the principal actors in *Noticias*. The progression of the three examples will consist of a move from the complicated correlation between physical and moral depravity to intentional and malicious corporeal decomposition. The first example occurs in the subchapter titled “Seducciones: (I) ‘Ni con mil avemarías’” (XIV.2) and consists of the titillating confession of an adulteress, which accomplishes both less and much more than it intends; the second occurs in the subchapter titled “Camarón, camarón” (VIII.2), in which an enterprising swindler and storyteller attempts to peddle the disembodied wooden hand of a French Captain, embellishing his story with his product and his product with his story; and the third occurs in the subchapter titled “Con el corazón atravesado por una flecha” (X.2), and deals with the consequences and implications bound up in the torture of a human body.

“[Y] yo lo que hago lo hago con la conciencia limpia”

The chapter titled “Ni con mil avemarías” consists in fact of a confession within a confession. The frame confession is that of a priest who seeks a bishop’s absolution after having heard and been intrigued by the salacious confession of what begins as a local adulteress’s affair with a French Colonel. The woman’s confession balloons quickly into a confession of multiple affairs that implicate her political affiliations as much as her body and soul. Each affair involves a different member of the French army, each of whom confesses military secrets that she passes on to a Juarista contact, with whom she is also presumed to be having an affair. Her connection to Juárez, whom the priest considers to be the Anti-Christ (based on his reforms stripping the Church of many of its former rights and privileges), signifies for her confessor that she has compromised her soul as well as her body.

Each affair abuses of her body in different ways. The priest reports to his confessor his congregant’s illicit physical affair with a pseudonymous Colonel Dumaurier, whom she permits to urinate on her genitals while both are naked, but with whom she does not consummate her relationship because “no se le ponía duro” (460). She goes on to confess: that she detests the “gabacho” whom she married, not because he is French and she a Juarista, but because his strong odor offends her corporeal sensibilities; that she allowed an also pseudonymous Lieutenant Gallifet to suck on her breast while masturbating; that she permitted a Captain Desnois to sodomize her; that she fornicated with a Captain Dubois; that she committed *ménage-à-trois* with another Captain and Lieutenant; that another soldier poured cider between her legs in order to suck it up after; and that she once had relations with the a

General's wife, who promised to reveal many secrets but after the deed was done revealed nothing.⁶⁶

Though he considers himself dirtied by her confession, to the point that he must later seek absolution for himself, the priest insists that she continue to narrate her encounters.⁶⁷ It soon becomes clear that the confessant's is not the only body implicated in the confession. The woman's account plainly excites her confessor bodily at the same time as it disgusts him spiritually; indeed, he denounces her as unfit for salvation almost immediately, and repeats his judgment after hearing of each new affair, but entreats her just as emphatically and continuously to continue her verbal seduction, to proceed with her confession and to not spare him the details:⁶⁸

[E]lla me contestó «ay, de veras quieres usted que le cuente los detalles», y yo le dije «sí, si no me los cuentos completos, ¿cómo te los voy a perdonar?», y ella me dijo, «entonces sí me vas a perdonar», y yo le contesté «no hija, qué va, ni con toda la penitencia del mundo» [...] «entonces ya me voy, si no me va usted a perdonar no sé qué hago aquí contándole todo esto, me voy», me

66. Note that these episodes engage not just the sexual organs, but all the organs located in Bakhtin's "bodily lower stratum." To quote Bakhtin, "[...] grotesque debasement always had in mind the material bodily lower stratum, the zone of the genital organs. Therefore debasement did not besmirch with mud but with excrement and urine" (147).

67. Monique Plâa describes the subchapter as a series of boxes that contain other boxes, suggesting that just as the adulteress "sells" her confession in exchange for absolution, the priest who confesses her sells his own seduction at the hands of his confessant in exchange for the absolution of *his* soul:

Y como en todo existe competencia, el cura narrador de '¿Ni con mil avemarías?' se propone vender su confesión, el relato de su propia seducción mientras confesaba a una joven de palabras empalagosas, a cambio de la salvación de su alma. No tiene éxito, pero consigue entrapar al obispo que lo confiesa, quien pierde también su alma en el relato de este relato. (144).

While I contend that there is little evidence to support the assertion that the priest looks to sell his story to the Bishop or that the Bishop ends up "trapped" by the account of the priest's seduction, the image she conjures to illustrate her reading is an appropriate one for the novel, and establishes appealing economic parallels with the subchapter "Camarón, camarón," which we shall turn to shortly.

68. Throughout the chapter the priest speaks in the first person, addresses both the woman he confesses and the Bishop who confesses him in the second person, but refers to the former in the third person. For the sake of clarity, I have elected to add supplementary angle quotes around the remarks made between the priest and his confessant to distinguish them from remarks made directly to the Bishop

dijo, [pero] no se fue, Señor Obispo, ojalá se hubiera ido, ojalá, no estaría yo aquí con usted, contándole todo esto, arrepentido, no, no se fue, le dije «vamos a ver primero qué es lo que hacías con el teniente y el capitán» [...]. (469)

This quotation illustrates a number of important points. First, the priest struggles discernibly with two opposing motivations. In one gesture, he emphatically denies the possibility of absolution for the adulteress; in the next, he openly contradicts himself by tempting her with the hope of absolution in an effort to keep her narration going at all costs. Second, it positively demonstrates the capacity of bodies to disrupt the other bodies with which they come into contact. The communicability of sin from one body to another appears visibly in the above quotation in the priest's striking parroting of the adulteress's words: "si no me va usted a perdonar no sé qué hago *aquí contándole todo esto*" becomes in the priest's mouth "[si] se hubiera ido [...] no estaría yo *aquí, contándole todo esto*, arrepentido." As we shall see, this corporeal transmission from confessant to confessor turns out to be her confession's only lasting achievement.

The verbal sully of the priest's body describes a vexed binary that oscillates between clean and dirty, and that operates as a structuring element of the evolving conversation between confessor, confessant, and the various bodies that inhabit the confession. The priest's attempts to convince his confessant of her wrongdoing are in vain; the adulteress responds to each of his claims with simple—but not for that simplistic or inaccurate—counterclaims. The above quotation establishes an opposition between the "clean" priest and the "dirty" adulteress—terms that are by no means static or uncontested—and tracks how the priest's body slips from clean to dirty. This binary appears in its simplest form at the beginning of the chapter:

«¿[E]ntonces a tu marido no lo quieres?», y me dijo «no, Padre, huele muy feo», hágame usted el favor, señor Obispo, «yo que soy tan limpia me baño todos los días», me dijo y yo le dije «te preocupes por la limpieza de tu cuerpo, ¿y qué de la limpieza de tu alma?», ay, señor Obispo, me siento tan sucio, «pero si las dos cosas no se oponen», me arguyó, «y yo lo que hago lo hago con la conciencia limpia», «debes estar loca», le dije [...]. (461-62)

The disaffection the adulteress feels for her husband is not regulated by emotion, but by the condition of his body: the former does not care for the latter simply because he smells bad, whereas she keeps her own body impeccably clean, going so far as to bathe every day. Indeed, her husband's uncleanliness constitutes stronger justification for her deception than does the conspicuous opposition of their political inclinations. When the priest calls attention to the disparity between her clean body and her unclean soul, the adulteress brushes his objection aside and collapses the binary by introducing a third term: the cleanliness of her conscience. If her conscience is as clean as her body, she seems to imply, on what grounds can she be called unclean? We shall return to the terms and complications of the adulteress's clear conscience in a moment. First, we must note that the language of the above quotation demonstrates again the manner in which the adulteress's actions corrupt primarily the *body* of the priest who confesses her: "ay, señor Obispo, *me siento tan sucio*" (emphasis added). These oppositions —and in particular the ironic opposition between the adulteress who considers herself clean and the priest who finds himself defiled by her— constitute a particularly poignant facet of this peculiar confession.

The priest's protestations regarding the soul of his congregant continue to fall on deaf ears. Indeed, as the conversation progresses it becomes increasingly clear that the adulteress's confession, like her Catholicism, is essentially *pro forma*, or at least profoundly contradictory. The absolution she seeks does not appear to be motivated by the desire for absolution so

much as by the desire to be given a penance to carry out. Her suggestions of suitable penance far outweigh her requests for forgiveness; though she concedes that she requires the forgiveness of the Church, she focuses her attention almost exclusively on the formal *performance* of contrition and atonement rather than on actually atoning or feeling contrite. She does not, as we have seen, consider herself unclean because of her sins: her conscience, at the very least, is clean and clear. She pays lip service to the notion that regret should be the motivating force behind confession by proclaiming to repent for what she has done —“soy una católica verdadera y me arrepiento de mis pecados” (467)—, and for having enjoyed some of it, but there is no evidence that she truly feels any remorse for the sins the priest identifies in her confession, or indeed that she feels that she has done anything wrong at all. She appears to know that she has committed acts that one is expected to confess, adultery being principal among the sins that jeopardize one’s mortal soul, but insists all the while insisting on the fundamental innocence of her intentions. The disconnect between an active confession of guilt and a mere ritual to be performed after committing certain acts reveals itself most clearly and ironically when the adulteress endeavors to tempt the priest with the same sexual favors she is confessing, if only he will assign her a penance that will allow her to dispense with the formalities that will finally put her right with the Church (470).

Unable to convince her of the wickedness of her ways, the priest reveals on several occasions his true objection to his confessant’s actions, an objection he refers to as her “spiritual sin,” but which is political rather than spiritual or corporeal in nature. In his own confession, the priest reports saying to her “[T]ú hija no quieres entender, ya te lo he dicho hasta el cansancio que no es por los pecados de la carne [...] sino por las pecados del espíritu: porque

eres una hereje, una aliada de las fuerzas del mal, *una espía de los juaristas*, de los rojos [...]" (463, emphasis added). The unclean body of the sinner might be forgiven, he suggests, were it not for her pernicious affiliation with the Juaristas. Degrading her body for the pleasure of the French soldiers does not constitute an unforgivable sin; her real transgression consists of degrading her body in exchange for information that she delivers to the opposing faction or, more accurately, to the faction against which her confessor aligns himself.⁶⁹ Here again the priest cannot seem to find a foothold. This conversational thread, which is interspersed throughout the confession, also operates along the lines of a series of oppositions into which the adulteress injects a third term that invalidates her confessor's binary logic. When he asserts the sinful nature of supporting Juárez by claiming that one can either be Republican (i.e. Juarista) or Catholic, she counters with examples of priests who support Juárez's vision of a Mexican republic. He argues that Maximiliano is the lesser of two evils not because he is better for Mexico, but rather in the hopes that he will return to the Church's embrace when the French army leaves; she remains unconvinced, having already cited Maximiliano's decidedly liberal streak.⁷⁰ Returning at last to the effects that her sins of the flesh bring to bear on the Mexican reality, he claims that he cannot absolve her because her work as a Juarista informant has led directly to the death of countless French soldiers: "porque sobre tu conciencia cargas muchas muertes" (467). The surprised confessant demands clarification, asserting that,

69. The priest —whose origin is Basque— is not an emphatic supporter of the French either; rather, he views them as the lesser of two evils. Maximiliano represents, both for Mexico and the Church, a phase that must be endured. Juárez, on the other hand, is seen as the Anti-Christ who stripped the Church of its historic rights and privileges.

70. The priest must indeed overlook several historical problems with his belief that Maximiliano has any investment in the well-being of the Church. It bears noting that the emperor continues to be remembered for upholding many of the Juárez-era reforms, including the right to religious freedom, and enforced land and tax reforms that acted against the Church's interests.

by exchanging her body for privileged information, she in fact saved the lives of countless “chinacos” in Tacámbaro and enabled them to defeat the imperialist invaders. When the priest counters by positing, “esos pobres muchachos belgas [...] que [los Juaristas] fusilaron allí [...], ¿esos no eran seres humanos?”, the woman responds sorrowfully that the invaders had come to Mexico expressly to fight, whereas “nosotros [los mexicanos] no fuimos a su país a provocarlos” (467-68). Having committed her sins not for carnal pleasure but precisely *to save other bodies*, the confessant’s conscience is clear, her actions more akin to those of a martyr than the harlot the priest would prefer to see in her. “[Y] yo lo que hago lo hago con la conciencia limpia.”

Defeated, the priest retreats to safer ground, asserting that the mission of the Church, after all, is to safeguard the faith it keeps and to restore the rights to which it had grown accustomed, both of which Juárez had directly attacked during his brief reign as President. He turns back to the particulars of the confession only to learn that his confessant not only sacrificed her body to extract information from the French, but also to cleverly provide them with false information about the Juaristas (468), a display of intelligence that only confirms for the priest her relationship with the devil, renowned for his shrewdness. Faced with repeated refusals to grant her the absolution she desires, the adulteress threatens to leave; the priest, who has plainly lost control of the situation, nearly begs her to remain and continue narrating her sins. He attempts one final time to marshal evidence in an indictment of the Juaristas, contending that for each Juarista body executed they had claimed ten or twenty of their enemies; his confessant bluntly contradicts him by citing several occasions that demonstrate the contrary. Unable to obtain the path to absolution she sought, the woman makes one final but

vain attempt to secure a path to divine forgiveness by seducing her confessor. When this fails, it becomes evident that her confession accomplishes nothing save to transmit her corporeal uncleanness to her confessor, who must thereafter seek absolution for himself, an absolution that he does not believe he deserves, “ni con mil avemarías.”

The artfulness of “Ni con mil avemarías” resides in Del Paso’s capacity to convert an adulteress’s debased body into a stage not for vulgar moralization, but for examining the relationship between two archetypal characters whom we can cast in various metonymic roles with respect to the French Intervention. As “the clergy” and “the people,” the confession brings into play the attitudes of ordinary Mexicans toward the political drama ravaging the country, and the minor—but still important and even decisive—contributions they make to affect the outcome. At the same time, it provides a space to play out the complexities that opposing factions must navigate in their daily interactions. The heterotopia of the confession booth illustrates both how quotidian acts such as confession must still occur, but also the extent to which different groups exert and abuse the power they hold over one another on the basis of political affiliation. More broadly and more essentially, by casting confessor and confessant as “Maximilianistas” and “Juaristas” and transforming the confession into a political and historical debate, it shines a spotlight on and rectify misconceptions and falsehoods about the Intervention that plague the minor players in the unfolding national drama. Del Paso’s reveals his bias and his deft command of irony by subverting the traditional roles that prevail inside the confession booth: the Juarista adulteress spy who permits her body to be repeatedly defiled in exchange for information commands the moral high ground in a fundamentally ethical discussion of the French Intervention, and departs from her confession un-

absolved, but clean; her interlocutor, a priest, abuses his power to withhold the absolution she seeks based on a political difference of opinion, and leaves the confession booth sullied, forced to seek his own absolution from a higher power.

“Al que me pague mejor, se la enseño”

Though less immediately ripe for broad interpretation, the chapter titled “Camarón, camarón” is equally, if not more symptomatic of *Noticias del Imperio*’s fascination with de-based bodies. The Battle of Camarón, an episode in the (ultimately successful) French siege of the city of Puebla, consists of the resounding defeat of 62 legionaries from the French Foreign Legion at the hands of a Mexican battery more than thirty times its size. Del Paso’s version of the Battle is narrated from the perspective of a figure who, like the adulteress from “Ni con mil avemarías,” is also a spy, but a spy of a different sort. His job, unlike that of an adulteress, consists of observing scenes, remaining invisible, and reporting what he sees for the benefit of the Juaristas who pay him. At the Battle of Camarón, he carries out his duties in exemplary fashion, going unnoticed while counting and accurately reporting the number of French legionaries that the Mexicans will face, and witnessing the ensuing battle from a variety of vantage points.

The narrator’s description of the battle alone sufficiently justifies its inclusion as an example of the irreverence with which bodies are treated in *Noticias del Imperio*. Throats penetrated by bullets gush blood, and bladders explode with urine (261-62); the narrator amuses himself first by counting down the number of remaining French bodies and describing the ways they die (260), and later by trying to throw capulin pits into the open mouth of a dead Mexican soldier (261). The nature of the siege provides a stage ripe for the consideration of

the grotesque biological needs of the bodies of its participants, for the outcome of the battle depends at least partially on these needs. The siege of Camarón occurs so quickly, thanks to the narrator's timely and accurate information, that the legionaries do not have time to fill their canteens with water, and are left with only a single bottle of wine to divide between a company of 62 soldiers (256). These circumstances give the narrator the occasion to make certain corporeal observations on how the French might provide themselves a measure of sustenance by drinking their own urine. Shortly after the firefight begins, a pair of mules carrying the French supply of food and munitions gallop off, as they are trained to do, on the heels of a horse whose rider had been killed or wounded, leaving the legionaries without water, food, or ammunition (257).

By this time, the battle is well under way, and the possibility of allowing the siege to play out exclusively on the basis of bodily functions and needs has slipped away; Del Paso does not, however, squander the opportunity to debase the bodies of the French soldiers, who begin to heed the narrator's nauseating advice: "Y luego la calor comenzó a amainar, pero ya para entonces los legionarios estaban muertos de sed, y se lamían el sudor unos a otros, y se arrastraban para beber la sangre de los heridos y se orinaban en sus cantimploras sin ganas de orinar para beberse sus propios meados" (260). Ultimately, the battle is still decided as a function of bodies, but more in terms of their numbers than of their biology: "Aquí, en Camarón, los vamos a matar a todos si lo números no mienten, porque allá de ese lado son sesenta y aquí de este lado somos mil" (257). The Mexican colonel arrives with 1,000 soldiers —whose numbers eventually swell to close to 2,000— to do battle with a fac-

tion of French legionaries less than one-tenth their size. Despite lopsided casualties, the Mexican troops prevail, and the narrator lives to recount the action.

The narrator does not, however, limit himself strictly to his professional duties. Noting his adeptness for slithering about unnoticed even in the middle of a battle, he occasionally forsakes his observatory role in favor of relieving corpses of the possessions that they no longer require in the hopes that he might hawk them for a handsome sum, a bottle of *aguardiente*, or a story he might “tell and sell” at his next destination. He even sets goals for himself, listing the items he would like to find at each battle; those pertaining to the Battle of Camarón are literally corporeal and particularly irreverent: “Del sitio de Camarón, lo que yo quería de verdad [...] era la mano del Capitán D’Anjou” (260).

The narrator of “Camarón, camarón” moonlights as the vendor of the souvenirs he collects from the battles he witnesses, but primarily as the seller of stories. I suggest that storytelling may constitute his primary occupation simply because, even though he has nothing of intrinsic value to sell after the Battle of Camarón—not, he says, because he didn’t look for them, but because the bodies had already been looted before he got to them—he manages to fetishize and impose value upon the objects he does recover. “Authentic” capulin seeds, flowers from the tree from whose branches he watched part of the battle, and feathers from the hummingbird killed by a stray bullet before his very eyes all acquire an obscure exchange-value through his dramatic recounting of the battle. The principal item of interest, for the purposes of this analysis, is also the item whose acquisition most interested the narrator: the hand of D’Anjou. For the narrator, the wooden hand of Captain D’Anjou possesses all the same commercial qualities as the silk handkerchiefs and golden teeth he typically sells, only

differing in that the hand's worth stems from shock value and name recognition rather than from any inherent qualities. In the narrator's hands it transforms into a commodity item. He continues: "Al que me pague mejor, se la enseño. La tengo aquí en esta bolsa."

To a greater extent even than the sundry items whose value is derived directly from the narrator's account of the Battle at Camarón, D'Anjou's hand both complements and benefits from his storytelling abilities. Were it not for the hand, the narrator's description of the battle would have little appeal in that nothing would set it apart from any other of the many battles in the War of the French Intervention. On the contrary, the presence of the hand amid the dead bodies on the battlefield of Camarón lends drama to the narrator's recounting by giving him a personal investment in the outcome. It provides structure to the story: every so often the narrator reasserts the hand's importance as the axis about which the story revolves. Captain D'Anjou is initially identified more faithfully by hand than by name; the narrator believes him to be called "D'Anjou," but is quite certain of his wooden hand. He is the only personage at Camarón to be identified by name, and the narrator invokes him as a character distinct from the legionaries he commands throughout his story, always accompanied by his "mano de madera." However, the narration does not acquire a real sense of poetry and drama—given especially that the narrator's audience may already know, as Del Paso's surely does, the outcome of the battle—until a bullet separates Captain d'Anjou from his hand. Note the passion with which the narrator recounts the scene, insisting both on his role as a witness who can personally attest to his version of events, as well as his treatment of the hand as a living thing separate from its owner:

No tuve que arrancársela al Capitán d'Anjou ni cuando estaba vivo ni cuando estaba muerto. La mano saltó cuando una bala le pegó en el pecho al capitán,

y él se cayó por un lado y la mano se cayó por otro. Yo la vi saltar a la mano, la vi pegar también brinco como si fuera un pájaro, y como si fuera un pájaro herido la vi caer en el polvo y como si fuera un pájaro muriéndose la vi temblar en el suelo, y todavía otra bala perdida le pasó rozando y le hizo pegar otro brinco cuando ya el capitán estaba muerto. (260)

The sudden availability of the coveted hand prompts the narrator to quit his protected hideaway and venture into the thick of the battle in pursuit of his prize. By putting his own body in jeopardy he manages again to heighten the tension of his account (though the only harm he incurs results from his attempt to defecate while he hides amid the hawthorns). The story reaches its apex and abruptly concludes not when the final French legionaries surrender, but long after when the narrator locates and extracts the hand, “quieta y todavía caliente por así decirlo,” from beneath the cadavers that have hidden it from view (263).

At this moment the focus of the narrator’s attention shifts dramatically. From the perspective of our interest in the bodily images featured in *Noticias del Imperio*, the real appeal of this episode lies in the benefits that the hand, as a fascinatingly morbid commercial object, derive from the narrative. Rather than heightening the tension of the story by exploiting the hand, the peddler’s focus in the remainder of this subchapter is on increasing the value of the hand by capitalizing on the story. In the interest of heading off possible objections, the narrator begins by admitting that tales of the prior sale of Captain d’Anjou’s hand are both true and false: true because he has sold the hand several times, but false because the hands he sold were mere copies of the original, a deception he justifies by claiming the impossibility of making a living telling stories. The ensuing list of former customers, which dubiously includes d’Anjou’s widow, belies the acute irreverence the narrator feels for the object he claims to cherish, but also reveals the remarkable fascination he manages to inspire with his words.

Having fragmented d'Anjou's dead body and adulterated the one piece of it that remained by making and selling copies as authentic, the narrator returns to the power of his words and of the story he has told in order to once again deceive his audience. He puts the hand on display for his potential buyers, recalling the dramatic scenes it had witnessed before ever arriving on Mexican soil; he points out the details —the blood stains left by its former owner, the damage inflicted by the bullets that severed it from d'Anjou's body— that certify it as authentic; and, should any doubt remain, he claims to have had it authenticated by the Mayor of Chiquihuite, by a Polish deserter who fled to California in search of a fortune in gold, and by d'Anjou himself, who with his dying breath was considerate enough to have signed it with his good hand (263-64).

Del Paso's treatment of the Battle of Camarón has received ample consideration by critics in terms of its subversion of the Camarón legend, which traditionally highlights the bravery and unwillingness to surrender of the legionaries even when hopelessly outnumbered. Del Paso upends this narrative by appealing instead to the degrading bodily acts committed by the legendary combatants on both sides, eliding entirely the astonishing nature of the legionaries' resistance and the ultimate triumph of the French siege of Puebla. Nathalie Sagnes proposes that “en los dos casos” —the siege of Puebla and the affaire of Camarón— “el propósito de Del Paso es el mismo: destruir el mito y restablecer la verdad histórica para lo cual se tratan los acontecimientos mediante el humor” (206). Portions of this proposal are unquestionably true: Del Paso explicitly intended to topple the myth that sprang up around the event, and humor figures among his favored tools for breaking down rigid historical narratives. There is little evidence, however, that Del Paso is attempting to *rectify* the historical

record by replacing a legend with a “historical truth.” The narrator of “Camarón, camarón” decidedly *avoids* deposing one ossified, monolithic narrative with a fresher, but equally monolithic narrative; indeed, even disregarding that such an operation would flatly contradict the postmodern aesthetics that structures *Noticias del Imperio*, the reader has reason enough to believe that the narrator is deeply invested in selling a particular and personal account of the battle in the service of his economic interests.

We can qualify Sagnes’s contention to align it with our analysis by asserting that Del Paso’s intent instead consists in deposing the mythic account of the Battle of Camarón from its hierarchically superior position by confronting it with a different and opposing truth. This opposition of mutually exclusive histories opens a space where myriad other narratives can posit themselves in horizontal relationships with tradition, the contradictory accumulation of these narratives borders on truth. It is no accident that the opposing truth the author contrives is thick with grotesque bodies committing vulgar corporeal acts; as Bakhtin suggests, these bodies possess tremendous disruptive creative potential. Del Paso brings his comic instinct to bear on that potential, transforming the human body into a material mechanism powerful enough to puncture the autocratic structure that supports institutionalized notions of History and carve out a site for the democratic dialogue of histories.

“Las cosas se esconden en carne propia”

The subchapter titled “Con el corazón atravesado por una flecha” is surely among the most inspired in *Noticias del Imperio*. The subchapter, whose “brutal realism” critic Vicente Quirarte likens to Esteban Echeverría’s “El matadero” (132), describes the interrogation and torture of an indigenous Mexican soldier named Juan Carbajal at the hands of the famously

brutal Colonel Charles Du Pin. The two characters interact by way of a translator, sustaining a meandering dialogue that frequently returns to the subject of an encrypted message. Carbajal demonstrates considerable endurance and refuses to break, responding laconically only to questions of little significance. Its value does not derive from this fruitless dialogue, which accomplishes nothing in the way of moving the plot of the novel forward. Neither party reveals anything pertaining to the large-scale plot, and the reader never learns anything of import from or about the prisoner (whom Du Pin presumably kills in the end), nor the content of the message, nor the consequences of his interrogation. We must search elsewhere for the reasons for its inclusion.

Quirarte goes on to describe the scene and to suggest that the importance of the subchapter lies in the perspective it brings to round out the novel: that of the (indigenous) Mexican soldier. “La contraguerrilla extranjera al mando del tristemente célebre coronel Du Pin y la tortura de un chinaco indomable son los protagonistas de un texto con el que Del Paso compensa la carencia casi total de páginas mexicanas sobre las operaciones militares en Tierra Caliente” (132). Menton correctly points out that, more urgently than “Camarón, camarón” subverts the legend surrounding the Battle of Camarón and the siege of Puebla, “Con el corazón atravesado por una flecha” “further subverts the justification of the French intervention on the basis of their being the purveyors of civilization” (89), starkly confirming the barbarism described in the two subchapters titled “De la correspondencia —incompleta— entre dos hermanos” (VIII.3 and XIV.3). I would like to interrogate the intersection of these two conclusions, at the heart of which lies the Mexican body. Given its status as the only chapter to present a close-up of the experience of a Mexican soldier, we cannot ignore the savagery

with which Du Pin tortures and mutilates Carbajal's body. Indeed, the chapter organizes itself quite explicitly around the various roles that bodies play in wartime, and the attributes they take on: those of messengers and messages, of torturers and tortured, of the living and the dead, and of integral and fragmented.

Del Paso calls attention to bodies from the outset of the chapter, describing both Colonel Du Pin's somewhat ridiculous dress—he sports a Mexican sombrero adorned with gold ornaments and other fineries, and a mosquito net draped over and covering his whole body like a bridal veil—and the captured soldier's relative state of undress, topless and tied to a cross as though crucified. The scene opens on Du Pin comparing the size of his ornamented hat and his mustache favorably with those of his prisoner, a structurally unimportant gesture that nevertheless serves as a prelude for the importance that bodily images take on shortly thereafter.⁷¹ The ensuing conversation crescendos slowly from the niceties of small talk, to the veiled threats underlying Du Pin's observations on other Mexican's he had killed, to Carbajal asking the Colonel how he plans to kill him, to its climax when Du Pin loses his composure and begins to shout, calms down, and begins the process anew. This slow build up and release of tension repeats throughout the chapter, but is encapsulated by a continual escalation of the bodily abuse the prisoner suffers. We shall focus the bulk of our analysis on the latter process, but make occasional references to the former.

71. Though they undeniably contribute to the subchapter's obsession with bodies, I must consign to a footnote the grotesque, bodily nature of the flatulent dog who briefly interrupts the interrogation and enrages the Colonel (322), as well as the body of the legendary "Barragana," whose breasts Du Pin imagines cutting off so that she may more closely resemble a man, unless he decides to forgive her in memory of Joan of Arc (327).

The opening conversation between Du Pin and his prisoner primes the scene for what amounts to an obsession with decorating and disfiguring the human body. In his rambling pseudo-monologue, Du Pin good-naturedly highlights the strategies he employs for dealing with “los juaristas y los enemigos del Imperio” —hanging them from trees and poles, leaving them for the dogs to tear to pieces, drowning or poisoning them in wells the Mexicans had allegedly contaminated with arsenic and mule corpses (319)— but is no more interested in these than he is in the odds and ends he has collected from different campaigns. He only reveals his genuine interest in Juan Carbajal to the reader when of a sudden he demands, “Y ahora dime, cabrón, qué carajos es lo que dice el papelito que tenías escondido en la carne” (320).⁷² Del Paso immediately subverts the reader’s expectations —that Carbajal hid a message in his own flesh— by signaling a chunk of cow meat in which the message had in fact been concealed.

After calming himself, the Colonel takes the opportunity afforded by this subverted expectation to teach a lesson and recall an anecdote regarding the art of concealment. He tells of the theft of the Orloff diamond, which a French soldier secreted out of India sewn inside a wound in his calf, and pronounces the following moral: “Las cosas se esconden en carne propia y no en un pedazo de carne de res, donde cualquiera las puede encontrar [...]” (321). In Du Pin’s estimation, Carbajal goes astray in failing to understand one of the basic functions of the body, a function he himself understands with the utmost clarity, as he demonstrates each time he hangs a Juarista body from a tree for all to see. The first lesson of “Con el

72. The humor latent in this gruesome subchapter lies in the fact that the Colonel’s nuanced speeches and the prisoner’s laconic replies must pass through a translator in order to be understood. It is easy to imagine how both messages lose much of their effectiveness as a consequence of this mediated transmission.

corazón atravesado por una flecha” is that bodies ought not be messengers, but the messages themselves.

In this subchapter, bodies act as messages in two distinct ways. The messages transmitted by Du Pin’s victims’ bodies are fully externalized and explicit: the medium is literally the message and leaves no room for misinterpretation. The living body of Juan Carbajal constitutes a significantly more complex and frustrating message for the colonel. Carbajal’s primary error, as Du Pin points out, consists in externalizing a portion of his message in a place that “anyone can find it” when he ought to have internalized it by burying it in his flesh. Nevertheless, key parts of the soldier’s message remain internal—insofar as Du Pin cannot physically take possession of them, concealed, as it were, “within” his skin—and thus inaccessible to the colonel; these are the details that render Carbajal for Du Pin as much a message as a messenger. What is the key to reading the message? How large is the faction of Juaristas that sent the message? Who was to receive it? Where are they hidden? When Carbajal denies knowledge of the answers or simply refuses to respond Du Pin, in a fortuitous analogy of the Spanish language, threatens to literally “extract” —*sacar*— the truth from him, and to do so by torturing his flesh.⁷³

The second and more enduring lesson—in both physical and thematic terms—offered by “Con el corazón atravesado por una flecha” concerns the decoration of the body. Just as a body can become a message in one of two ways, and just as the body can be either dressed or undressed (as we saw with Benito Juárez), so can the body be dressed in two differ-

73. It is entirely possible that Carbajal is telling the truth when he claims no knowledge of the key or the details of the Juarista factions for whom he is acting as go between. The truth in this case is entirely immaterial; Carbajal functions like a message so long as Du Pin believes that he knows more than he admits.

ent ways. The subchapter that begins by ornamenting Colonel Du Pin's body with a Mexican hat and mosquito net turned bridal veil ends by ornamenting the Mexican soldier's body with the pins with which he had ornamented his own hat. In order to extract the information he desires from within Carbajal, he must first break his flesh apart. He accomplishes this first step by removing the decorations, one by one, from Carbajal's hat and thrusting their rusty pointed ends into his body. Blood immediately begins leaking from Carbajal, but the information that he allegedly guards remains obstinately inside:

“¿Y ahora me vas a decir cuántos son ustedes?”, preguntó el coronel.

“No. No lo sé. A mí sólo me encargaron que llevara el mensaje.”

“¿A quiénes?”

Juan Carbajal no contestó.

“¿A quiénes? ¿Adónde?”

El coronel se acarició la barba.

“¿Por qué eres tan terco? ¿Te gusta sufrir?” (321-22)

The Colonel continues to “decorate” Carbajal's body with pins in significantly grotesque places, that is, those places where the body meets the world: first in his bare chest, but later in his mouth (“para que aprenda a no decir más blasfemias” [322]), in his buttocks (322-23), in his foreskin (323), in his testicle (upon becoming enraged when Carbajal reminds him that Napoleon I was not French [323-24]),⁷⁴ in his nipple, and finally in his eyelid (“para que aunque sea con un ojo me mire el cabrón éste” [326]). When these measures, which appear nearly to kill Carbajal, fail to produce acceptable results, Du Pin instructs his subordinates to tear the pins out of his body without first opening their clasps. The tearing of Carbajal's flesh likewise produces no results other than the shedding of blood; neither he nor

74. I refrain from discussing Del Paso's numerous implicit and explicit indictments of Napoleon III as an unworthy and illegitimate successor to Napoleon I, as Karl Marx had so poignantly done more than 100 years prior in “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Luis Napoleon” (1852).

his body disclose anything useful for Du Pin. At the subchapter's conclusion Du Pin at last decides that he will kill his prisoner, who in the end yields no intelligence of consequence, with a method never previously employed, based on one of the pins he tore out of his skin not moments before. Admiring a pin depicting a silver heart pierced by an arrow, he announces "*Faites venir l'Indio Mayo et qu'il apporte son arc et ses fleches*" — "Que venga el Indio Mayo y que traiga su arco y sus flechas" (329).

The transformation that the Mexican prisoner's body undergoes over the course of "Con el corazón atravesado por una flecha" essentially traces Bakhtin's description of the process that transforms the medieval body into a Renaissance body in reverse. Du Pin's objective is to break down the integrity of his body by tearing apart what was whole and finished in order to access what he believes he will find inside. Unable to understand Carbajal as a mere messenger whose value lies outside his physical form, he instead reads him as a message as indecipherable as the one he carried in a slab of meat. Torture exploits the latent incompleteness of the body by abusing those areas where bodies merge —the penis, the scrotum and, to a lesser extent, the nipple — and where the world enters the body —the buttocks and the mouth, which is also capable of emitting blasphemy—, but also by poking the body with sharp objects in order to literally open new holes from which the internal might become external, to tear at the flesh and fragment what was formerly integral. Del Paso presents the prisoner not at the extremes of his natural life when the body is constitutively unfinished, but exposes the methodical, purposeful breakdown of a body in a process that just as inexorably approaches death. Rather than respecting the sacred division of bodies into discrete units sealed off from each other and the world, Du Pin violates and compromises the limits of the

prisoner's body, allowing the vulgar interpenetration of inside and outside. One cannot help but read Carbajal's body as a relatively transparent metaphor for the violation of Mexico's integrity by the French imperial forces.

“GROTESQUE-ING” MAXIMILIANO

The purpose of the foregoing examples has been to demonstrate positively that the body constitutes one of the central, but oft-overlooked images in *Noticias del Imperio*. I have also attempted to indicate how bodies support many of the overarching themes that critics have identified, and have suggested others that have received little attention. In the sections that follow, we will turn our attention to Del Paso's sustained abuse of the two bodies that run consistently throughout the novel: Maximiliano's and Carlota's.

The persistent reappearance of these figures presents a potential complication in our analysis of bodies that I wish to acknowledge and address here. Whereas the foregrounding of the body in the preceding analyses has been both conspicuous and continuous, the sheer volume of pages dedicated to the Emperor and Empress precludes such a single-minded focus on their bodies; after all, they have specific and well-known historical acts to carry out. One could further object that for any interpretation of Maximiliano or Carlota's body that I propose in the pages that follow, ample evidence exists to suggest a competing and mutually exclusive interpretation. I wish to reiterate that these mutually exclusive interpretations constitute the tension around which the novel organizes itself, the foundation for the novel's interpretive richness, and its very claim to its own postmodern ideology. Were it not for this tension running continuously throughout the novel, *Noticias del Imperio* would bring about what the narrator of “Camarón, camarón” makes impossible. Instead of dismantling the no-

tion of authoritative historical narratives, the novel would simply describe the replacement of one inadequate authoritative narrative with another. The mutual exclusivity of his simultaneous counternarratives epitomizes the essence of Del Paso's historiographical and narrative project. Consequently, while I believe that the analysis of the body in *Noticias del Imperio* offers a particularly rich reading of the novel that makes great strides in moving beyond a superficial analysis of Del Paso's manipulations of the historical record, my reading unavoidably represents a single interpretation among many.

An analysis of Maximiliano's status as a central figure in *Noticias* must begin by acknowledging that there are, in fact, two separate Maximilianos in the novel. The first, whom I have elected to refer to as the historical Maximiliano, is the personage whose deeds and misfortunes in Mexico are well-documented in historical literature. Little disagreement exists with respect to his historical trajectory, and what doubt or disagreement does exist would do little to alter the course of events in Mexico or our judgment of his role in those events. The historical Maximilian is continuously the subject of ridicule at the hands of Del Paso, his narrators, his European contemporaries, and numerous of the fictional characters Del Paso creates. On the surface, the ridicule he endures typically serves to diminish his virility, to mock his physical processes, to threaten his bodily integrity, and to call attention to the incongruity of his European body in Mexico. Our analysis will trace several specific examples of Del Paso's degrading treatment of Maximiliano's body at the hands of Mexico and Mexicans in order to establish its grotesque character; that is, as a foreign body brought down to the earth, mistreated, and left full of unrealized creative potential.

Alongside this debased Maximiliano, the reader encounters the realization of his grotesque potential woven throughout the novel. Carlota exercises with particular intensity her singular capacity to recover the dishonored and degraded remains of her beloved and re-fashion them into something new, vigorous, unified (even if made up of disparate parts), and quintessentially Mexican. I have elected to call this product of Carlota's delirious invention the imaginary Maximiliano. We shall call attention to a number of significant details in the fashioning and refashioning of this imaginary figure, both as it bears on the overarching themes of *Noticias del Imperio* and as a material testament to Carlota's powerful re- and pro-creative capacity.

"The second time as low farce"

As is well known, Marx observes (paraphrasing Hegel) that "all the great events and characters of world history occur twice [...]: the first time as high tragedy, the second time as low farce" (*Marx: Later Political Writings* 31).⁷⁵ Had it occurred before the writing of the Eighteenth Brumaire, he might very well have referred to the rise and fall of the Second Mexican Empire (he would only have erred insofar as the First Mexican Empire was equally farcical in nature). Maximiliano came to Mexico under false pretenses of universal popular support, upheld many of the disliked policies put in place by the man he deposed, espoused political platforms in direct contradiction to the conservatives he was meant to represent and who were to be his loyal supporters, and seems genuinely to have believed that Mexico would welcome his enlightened despotism, which only lasted as long as it did by virtue of the French troops that kept his enemies at bay until the end of the U.S. Civil War. Perhaps most

75. The statement was made, perhaps not coincidentally, about Louis Napoleon, who plays more than a minor role in the "farce" of the Second Mexican Empire.

farcically of all, Maximiliano believed himself to be one of his people, a Mexican by inheritance if not by birth, adopting many “quaint” local foods and customs—he famously observed and participated in the Grito de Dolores in 1865—⁷⁶ while at the same time transplanting countless European traditions, practices, and objects incongruous to the land and people he ruled.

Del Paso represents the absurdities of the Second Mexican Empire largely in muted fashion, allowing historical events and documents to mock the emperors for themselves. Maximiliano and Carlota’s Spanish lessons present the monarchs as idle, frivolous dandies with delusional notions of the nascent Mexican-ness they expect to inherit along with the nation. Maximiliano badly mismanages Imperial finances with his detailed but absurd fidelity to European Imperial protocol, publishing a thick volume of policies and procedures, whose composition—rather than the customs or the complex prevailing state of affairs in Mexico—occupies his attention on the voyage from Austria to Veracruz and exceeds 500 pages in length. Benito Juárez and his secretary converse at length about Maximiliano’s numerous missteps, establishing a fruitful contrast between the inadequacies of the Emperor and the competence of the President.

Noticias del Imperio does not, however, merely allow Maximiliano to simmer in its historical humiliation, but sets to work early on degrading his body as well. As we shall discover, the debasement of the body in large part serves to humiliate and lower the historical Maximiliano’s status in preparation for his recovery and rehabilitation in Carlota’s imagina-

76. Carlota recounts, “Con tu sarape de Saltillo sobre los hombros diste el grito de Independencia en Dolores mientras yo gobernaba México y firmaba decretos y ofrecía saraos” (28).

tion. The different acts that degrade the Emperor's body do not respect the delimitations between inside and outside, and these boundaries are continually crossed. In the following sections we will consider some of the ways in which Del Paso debases Maximiliano at the bodily level.

“¿Pero no será de verdad estéril...?”

One of Maximiliano's first acts upon his arrival as Emperor of Mexico is to quit the bed he shares with Carlota “cuando las chinches los devoraron y [...] tuvo que levantarse para ir a dormir a una mesa de billar.” Abandoning his matrimonial bed carries certain unintended consequences for Maximiliano with respect to his subjects' public speculation regarding his sexual activity and the correct operation of his sexual facilities. Carlota suggests that Maximiliano never returns to their shared bed after spending the first night on the billiards table. She asks, “¿O lo que tú quieres es que todo el mundo sepa que Maximiliano y Carlota nunca hicieron el amor en México y que jamás volvieron a acostarse en el mismo lecho [...]?” (131). Despite Carlota's apparent concern for safeguarding their secret —a secret widely reported in historical sources but impossible to confirm— it seems that everybody *does* know the particulars of their intimate relationship, and not just in Mexico. The futility of the Empress's apprehension is corroborated on multiple occasions over the course of the novel; we shall focus our attention on a particularly rich section of the novel, titled “Crónicas de la corte.”

The chapter describes the trivialities of life at court in the Mexican Empire, interspersing both frivolous and significant conversations of citizens with excerpts from Maximiliano's *Ceremonial*, which sets out in extreme detail the formalities to be observed on different cer-

emonial occasions. Among other things, citizens wonder and hypothesize in their conversations about the apparent incapacity of the Imperial couple to conceive an heir. They float three (not mutually exclusive) theories: “¿pero no será de verdad estéril la Emperatriz?”; “¿o no será, mejor dicho, que el Emperador y la Emperatriz ya no duermen juntos desde que llegaron a México?”; and “¿pero no será que Maximiliano como dicen es impotente?” this final theory resting on “el escándalo del Abate Alleau que conmovió a la alta sociedad mexicana al afirmar que el Emperador había contraído una enfermedad venérea en un *Brazilian bagnio*” (442-44). Some years earlier, the Viscount Palmerston referred to these same theories while musing over the question of Mexican succession with Queen Victoria, confirming that the oddities of the intimate lives of Maximiliano and Carlota constitute fertile topics for gossip outside as well as inside Mexico:

si Maximiliano tenía o no amante o amantes, si no era estéril o si sí lo era, como afirmaba el pasquín de un tal Abate Alleau [...], o si era o no impotente como sospechaban otros, el caso es que Maximiliano y Carlota no tenía relaciones maritales, y que esto los llevó a planear la adopción de un niño [...que era] el nieto del Emperador Iturbide. (337)

Without any diegetic evidence to support these theories, the reader must turn to Carlota for rather inadequate and often indirect confirmation or denial of each of them in turn. Regarding the first, that she is herself infertile, her monologue constitutes a resounding denial, as she describes herself as having gestated during the sixty years of her forced incarceration some primogenital offspring to whom she will give birth at any moment. As she reports having been impregnated by any number of people, animals, and objects, her denial must be read as essentially symbolic, but as a denial nevertheless. With respect to the theory regarding Maximiliano’s impotence, Carlota equivocates, claiming first “Y dicen, pero eso también es

sólo un chisme, *me imagino*, que en Brasil le contagió a Maximiliano una enfermedad venérea que lo volvió estéril y que por eso no han tenido hijos” (191, emphasis added), but later affirming repeatedly that she had refrained from sexual intimacy with her husband since his return from Brazil, where he would have contracted his disease, prior to their arrival in Mexico: “No volví nunca a acostarme contigo, y por eso no me contagiaste los chancros que trajiste de Brasil” (647). As this quotation demonstrates, Carlota does *not* equivocate with respect to the *existence* of the venereal disease Maximiliano’s allegedly contracted in Brazil — “bajo sus pantalones y en su sangre el estigma de una enfermedad venérea incurable que te pegó una negra brasileña” (133)—; nor does she equivocate with respect to the existence of at least one of his long-terms lovers, a woman in Cuernavaca by the name of Concepción Sedano (91).

One may read a variety of grotesque bodily intentions in these theories and conclusions. Most conspicuously, Del Paso’s characters deal with Maximiliano’s sexual organs, whose procreative functions are intimately connected to Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque. Del Paso, however, fundamentally debases Maximiliano by robbing his organs of their procreative function, even if he does so only in theory. In psychoanalytic terms, the father — Maximiliano— loses his phallus, representative of the power and procreativity necessary to produce a strong Mexican Empire, and gains a mere penis in its place. The organ with which he is left is furthermore covered in chancres indicative of the early stages of syphilis, and quite probably incapable of producing so much as a literal heir to his empire, to say nothing of fulfilling its symbolic functions. Unwilling or unable to perform the sexual act with Carlota, Maximiliano lowers himself by seeking sexual gratification with a peasant woman, the

daughter of a gardener. That all of this constitutes an apparent *secreto a voces* further lowers the Emperor in the eyes of those whom he would someday rule.⁷⁷

“Ahora me permitiré examinar el pasaje rectal de Su Majestad”

The same chapter later offers the reader a more intimate portrait of the degeneration of Maximiliano’s body. After his citizens have their opportunity to speculate about his procreative ineptitude, and after the interspersed ceremonial instructions have concluded, the reader encounters Maximiliano engaged in a “ceremony” of an altogether different nature that indicates degeneration in a different, if equally grotesque region of his body. Here the reader finds Maximiliano engaged in conversation with his personal physician, who is in the process of giving him a full examination. By his account, Maximiliano suffers from three health problems, potentially (but not necessarily) owing to the high altitude in Mexico to which his body is ill-accustomed.

The difficulty in analyzing this segment of *Noticias del Imperio* —the reason, perhaps, that it has failed to merit attention in many of the published analyses of the novel— lies in the fact that much of the physician’s monologue is entirely dispensable from an analytical standpoint.⁷⁸ Indeed, it would be considerably shorter, and the novelistic qualities of *Noticias*

77. Another *secreto a voces* is that Maximiliano may have been the product of a union between his mother and Napoleon II, most often referred to in the novel as “El Rey de Roma.” Though most historians dismiss this as highly improbable, it does appear throughout *Noticias* in Carlota’s monologue and in idle gossip, always leaving the status of Maximiliano’s lineage in question. A single example will suffice as indicative of the treatment that questions of Maximiliano’s lineage receive, positing him as the son either of an unfaithful woman or of an idiot: “[...] le voy a dar a palos por mentirosa a tu madre Sofía que juró que ella jamás se casaría con el Archiduque Francisco Carlos, al que llamó un imbécil porque eso era, un retardado mental, y sin embargo se hizo su esposa y de él concibió a tu hermano y quizás a ti también, si es que no fuiste hijo del Rey de Roma” (418).

78. I do not wish to join the ranks of critics who suggest that Del Paso’s novel would be much improved if one were to eliminate its so-called superfluous elements. Nor do I wish to suggest that the physician’s monologue is entirely superfluous, only that portions of it are superfluous from the standpoint of this in-

in no way diminished, if one were to eliminate the physician's commands to inhale and exhale, and shorter still were one to eliminate his rambling digressions on topics of scarce interest or relevance. Much as with the remainder of the novel, the reader's task consists of teasing out the elements of the monologue that merit its inclusion in the first place. While the suggestion that the Emperor's body is subject to the same ills as those he governs may justify its inclusion under the heading "humanizing the (anti-)hero," frequently alluded to in the literature on historical fiction, I propose that Del Paso's reasons are somewhat more insidious.

The first ailment that the physician diagnoses seems an unusual starting point for our discussion, as it does not immediately suggest the grotesque, but constitutes a natural response to the particular climatic conditions one encounters in Mexico: the Emperor's lungs are somewhat congested. The physician's response to his diagnosis, however, begins the process of systematically debasing Maximiliano's body, carried out over the following several pages, by expelling out of the body what belongs inside, and inserting into the body what belongs outside, through various orifices. The doctor prescribes Maximiliano an expectorant — an act that already lowers somewhat the majesty of his patient — that will like produce the expulsion of more than phlegm. Its side effects include nausea — "le recomendaré a Su Majestad inspirar y expirar con fuerza varias veces para eliminar[la]" — and vomiting — "si Su Majestad se ve precisada a devolver el estómago, no debe preocuparse" —, as it has also been used, the doctor notes, as an emetic in the treatment of chronic diarrhea (451).

terpretation. While *Noticias del Imperio* contains many sections that are tedious, it contains few that bring nothing whatsoever to the experience of the novel.

The doctor's reference to diarrhea is not casual, for he believes Maximiliano to suffer from dysentery, and begins to probe him —verbally, for now— for details regarding the mucus content of his “evacuations,” of which he has had between six and eight that day. He queries the Emperor as to whether he had observed mucus or blood in his feces during his *other* bouts of dysentery, which he has suffered on at least three previous occasions. Given the evidence at his disposal and having inspected his patient's most recent “deposición,” he rules out a certain forms of diarrhea. An examination of Maximiliano's abdomen reveals a distended, painful stomach caused by an excess of gas in the digestive tract, a symptom apparently confirmed by the Emperor: “¿Gases, Su Majestad? ¿Gases por la vía rectal? ¿Muy abundantes? ¿Sí?” (454). In order to complete his examination, the doctor invades his patient's body with his finger via the rectal passage. The examination ends with another evaluation of the Emperor's feces, followed by an enema, with instructions to administer another after each future bowel movement.

Maximiliano's grotesque nature in this section of “Crónicas de la corte” rests in the emphasis on a body that resists, even inverts the natural separation between inside and outside. Moreover, much of what is inside comes out through the mouth, an opening meant to draw the outside inward; likewise, in order to set right what is wrong with his body, objects from the outside must be inserted into his rectal passage, an opening intended to expel the inside outward. While none of these procedures are uncommon for a patient suffering from chronic diarrhea, the reader must wonder why Del Paso chose to invent this scene if not to degrade and humiliate the Emperor's body. Indeed, in his rare appearances in *Noticias* Maximiliano never exhibits the strength of character, determination, or masculinity charac-

teristic or expected of a strong ruler. Rather, in a broader inversion of roles, he busies himself with the niceties of clothing and ceremony and frequently leaves the governance of Mexico to Carlota.

It bears noting, albeit in passing, that this subchapter occurs within a chapter unusually rich in grotesque imagery. “Crónicas de la corte” appears immediately adjacent to “Ni con mil avemarías,” a subchapter we considered previously in our discussion of *Noticias del Imperio* (see page 60). Taken together, Del Paso creates a striking counterpoint between Maximiliano’s broken body, which refuses to work as it should; the adulteress’s body, equally grotesque but that functions exactly as she intends; and the priest’s body, which acts precisely as one would expect but contrary to his wishes. While the subchapter that rounds out the triptych, the second of the letters comprising the “De la correspondencia —incompleta— entre dos hermanos,” does not follow in the bodily manner of its predecessors, it is not wholly bereft of bodies, mentioning in passing some of the atrocities committed by Du Pin before Maximiliano ordered him out of Mexico, as well as the treatment of bodies in the military. Even given the paucity of the grotesque in the letter, this chapter unquestionably constitutes one of the richest chapters in- or outside of Carlota’s monologue in terms of bodily imagery.

The first execution

For the third and final example of Maximiliano’s bodily degradation, we must quit “Crónicas de la corte” and turn our attention to the end of the *Noticias del Imperio*. If the monarch of the second Mexican empire endures in the Mexican historical imaginary, it is certainly thanks to the fate he met at the hands of Benito Juárez on the Cerro de las Campanas on June 19, 1867. Indeed, history —or perhaps History, which Juárez famously claimed

would ultimately judge the actions of monarch and president alike⁷⁹ — has deemed Maximiliano more worthy of remembrance in his failure than in any success he may have to his credit.⁸⁰ Having thoroughly discredited Manet's rendering of the morning that sealed the fate of the Empire, Fernando Del Paso, in a manner worthy of *Noticias del Imperio's* postmodern poetics, delivers to his readers not one, but two separate accounts of the execution, each of which occupies a different rhetorical register (or registers). Both deserve careful consideration.

The first of these accounts begins in the factual historical register, but predominantly alternates between the imaginative and the verisimilar before concluding in the historical. The subchapter in which Maximiliano's march to the Cerro de las Campanas begins, Del Paso deploys one final time a strategy widely recognized throughout the novel: he diminishes the importance of a major historical event by diverting the reader's attention to a vigorous interrogation of the circumstances obscured in the shadow of that event or underemphasized in the official history of the French Intervention.⁸¹ The author recounts the final days of the siege of Querétaro in the interest not of deriving the inexorability of Maximiliano's defeat, but rather of determining whether he was in fact betrayed by one of his Colonels or not. As is typical for *Noticias*, Del Paso does not come to any authoritative conclusion, but does succeed in problematically juxtaposing all of the available sources and their often mutually ex-

79. *JUÁREZ LETTER TO MAX*

80. I credit this observation regarding the value of failure to Brian Price's indispensable book.

81. The most oft-cited example of this strategy is the contraposition of the Battle of Puebla (1862) and the Siege of Puebla (1863). In official histories, the stress falls on the former, which constitutes one of the resistance's early military victories against the invading French; the latter, in which the French emerge victorious, tends to be overlooked. Del Paso inverts this relationship, subordinating the minor victory to the major defeat.

clusive claims. The historical telling of Maximiliano's execution occupies only the final three paragraphs of the subchapter, and ends before the squadron escorting the prisoner reaches the execution site.

Del Paso entrusts the remainder of the execution to the two subsequent subchapters. The first is narrated by one of the fictional members of the firing squad interspersed with a *corrido* of the author's invention. While often cited as an example of genre-mixing in *Noticias*, "Corrido del tiro de gracia" also constitutes a crucial historiographical moment. Del Paso leverages the fact that no single member of the firing squad (save for the one who fired the coup de grâce) can know whether his was the gun loaded with a blank or whether his was the bullet that killed the prisoner in order to spin out multiple intersecting mini-histories. In these mini-histories the soldier, who both claims and denies having fired the coup de grâce, mixes what occurred, what might as well have occurred, what could have occurred, and what he would have invented had it been necessary, to the point that it becomes unclear which version the reader can reliably believe, if he can believe any of them at all.⁸² In a passage representative of the subchapter, the soldier writes "Sí me tocó la bala de salva, *no* me tocó la bala de salva: pueden ustedes creer lo que quieran, que al cabo me da lo mismo" (693), and later "El capitán no dijo apunten. Yo apunté. El capitán no dijo fuego. Yo disparé" (694).

The final subchapter, "Los ojos negros de Santa Úrsula," registers the historically verifiable facts surrounding Maximiliano's execution, "[un] cúmulo de anécdotas y sucedidos, grotescos algunos, increíbles otros y muchos de ellos truculentos, que le otorgaron una mag-

82. Indeed, the subchapter occupies several levels of narrative unreliability, recording not what occurred but rather what the soldier would say to those who would hypothetically doubt the role he played in Maximiliano's execution if for some unknown reason he had forgotten about it himself, but had coincidentally reinvented is precisely as it occurred at the behest of his guilty conscience.

nitud aún más melodramática a la tragedia de Querétaro” (698). Among the more grotesque of these facts we find the following: the subchapter’s title refers to the eyes that were purportedly removed from a life-sized statue of Saint Ursula in order to fill the holes left in the recently embalmed corpse of the former Emperor; the three coffins made for his remains failed to take into account Maximiliano’s unusual stature to the extent that his feet extended well beyond the bottom wall. The former emperor makes a comical figure on the scene of his execution as well. Having distributed a coin to each member of the firing squad as anticipatory recompense for not damaging his face, Maximiliano “se apartó la barba con las manos hacia los lado, para señalarse el corazón, aunque este gesto [...] tuvo quizás también el objeto de evitar que la barba se incendiara” (701-02). Del Paso then registers Maximiliano’s last words, farcical given his status as invader, yet utterly tragic taking into account his belief in his own mexican-ness; surprisingly lucid in either case: “Voy a morir por una causa justa: la causa de la Independencia y la Libertad de México. Ojalá que mi sangre ponga término a las desdichas de mi nueva Patria. ¡Viva México!” (701), followed comically by exclamations (in Spanish) of “¡Hombre!” when the first round of shots fails to end his life. The coup de grâce, fired from point blank range —literally “a quemarropa”— sets his coat on fire; the flame must be smothered by the Emperor’s faithful cook Tüdös. The autopsy report indicates that Maximiliano’s bodily death was thereafter swift, though, as with most aspects of the French Intervention, there is some disagreement on that point.

Unfortunately, in a gesture common to all of the grotesque bodies featured in this dissertation, the “life” of Maximiliano’s body does not end along with the shot that dooms his Empire, but endures as an object of intentional and unintentional abuse. The indignities

he must suffer abound, both grotesque and gruesome, beginning with his embalming in Querétaro. The doctors who handle Maximiliano's corpse immediately deprive him of the facial hair that he took such pains to avoid mutilating during the execution, replace the beard and mustache with fakes, and sell the originals as souvenirs. Rather than sending it to Europe to be buried with his wife, whom Maximiliano thought dead at the time, his heart was chopped into four pieces, preserved in formaldehyde, and sold as well. When his body began decomposing en route to Mexico City it became clear that he would have to be embalmed a second time, an operation which required that he be bathed in arsenic, that new incisions be made in his veins and arteries, and that he be hung, nauseating and still decomposing, upside down from the dome of the Capilla de San Andrés for seven days and nights in order to drain his body of the first round of embalming liquids. After the second embalming is completed, Maximiliano is sent back to Vienna, rotting and dismembered, "si no con sus vísceras intactas, al menos completas" (706).

Though the assiduous reader may confirm these facts in multiple accounts of Maximiliano's death, Del Paso's "historical" presentation of the execution does not lack in imaginative elements. To offer one bodily example, while under siege in Querétaro, when defeat and death seem imminent, the Emperor spends considerably more time preening and perfecting his magnificent facial hair than he does participating in the plot to secret him out of the country or considering the probable ramifications should that plot fail. He stubbornly refuses to cooperate with any scheme that requires him to go clean-shaven, a condition as worthy of protest as the suggestion that he disguise himself as a delinquent: "¿Yo, Señores míos, sin barba? [...] ¿yo afeitarme la barba y el bigote y salir de Querétaro a escondidas, disfrazado como

un delincuente? ¡Por Dios, Señores!” (617). Later, while under house arrest awaiting execution, he toughens his resolve, refusing even to temporarily cover his “*hermosa barba*,” which would metonymically be tantamount to an admission that *he*, Emperor of Mexico, had something he needed to hide. Del Paso’s final caricature of Maximiliano scarcely troubles itself with subtlety; the words *barba* or *bigote* appear multiple times on nearly every page of the subchapter titled “*Cimex domesticus queretari*” (616-32). Fernando Maximiliano de Habsburgo will never be afforded the narrative opportunity to speak for himself after this scene; he only reappears in order to die at the hands of a firing squad with as little absurdity as he can muster. His body, on the other hand, reappears repeatedly throughout the remaining pages, silently insisting on its mistreatment, highlighting its grotesque disproportion, and demanding acknowledgment of the dehumanizing treatment it received after his execution.

Two chapters later, in some of the most famous passages in *Noticias del Imperio*, after recounting the multitude of figures whom Carlota outlived (along with the gruesome details of their respective demises), Del Paso turns his interrogative eye on the novel’s ideological stance toward the French Intervention in order to speak, for the first and only time in *Noticias*, in the first person. For Del Paso, Mexico remains troubled by Maximiliano and Carlota, haunted by ghosts that, in the context of the construction of Mexican identity, belong to a historical parenthesis largely forgotten.⁸³ Taking his cue from Rodolfo Usigli, the only other Mexican author to have written an enduring literary work on the French Intervention, the

83. Carlota offers up the following lament, along these lines:

Ay, Maximiliano, si pudieras venir a Querétaro verías que de esa tu sangre, la que tú querías que fuera la última que se derramara en tu nueva patria, no quedó huella, nada quedó en el polvo o en las piedras, nada fecundó tu sangre, a la sombra eterna de Benito Juárez, en la ladera del Cerro de las Campanas: se la llevó el viento, la barrió la historia, la olvidó México. (659)

author writes the following widely quoted passage, which I permit myself the liberty of copying here, in part, for a second time:

Y así es: el problema *no* es que en México hayamos matado a Maximiliano, que en México, tal vez, hayamos vuelto loca a Carlota: el problema es que a ninguno de los dos los enterramos en México [...] ninguno de los dos, ni él ni ella, quedaron integrados a esta tierra fertilizada al parejo con los restos de todos nuestros héroes y todos nuestros traidores. (772)

At first glance, Del Paso's sudden respect for and sense of kinship toward the figure that he has mercilessly mocked and systematically debased over the course of hundreds of pages represents a shocking ideological reversal, but one that closer examination exposes as quite consistent with *Noticias del Imperio*'s fidelity to narrative and interpretative polyphony. To be sure, the prolonged abuse of Maximiliano's body in *Noticias del Imperio* serves in part to enhance the impact felt at the end of the novel when the author intervenes with the foregoing, incongruous conclusion. However, were it the author's intention to render Maximiliano's body grotesque merely in order to counterpose it with a final gesture of respectful affect, or even just to demonstrate two disparate and contradictory modes of approaching the villains of the French Intervention, his novel would be too long by half. Not surprisingly, there exists significant cause to believe that this unexpected gesture represents something more essential than a mere nod to postmodernity.

Del Paso sustains and intensifies his reading of the Imperial couple as belonging fundamentally to Mexico —justifying the possessive “nuestro” in the above quotation— by stating in no uncertain terms that “Maximiliano y Carlota se mexicanizaron: uno, hasta la muerte, como dice Usigli, la otra —digo yo— hasta la locura. Y como tales tendríamos que aceptarlos: ya que no mexicanos de nacimiento, mexicanos de muerte. De muerte y de

locura” (772). In the remainder of this chapter, I would like to suggest that this reversal is not so shocking as it might seem, that in fact it has been systematically prepared from the opening pages of the novel, in order to contest the supposedly unproblematic and unequivocal nature of *Noticias del Imperio*’s denunciation of Maximiliano and Carlota as historical figures and as metonyms for imperialism. In order to demonstrate Del Paso’s contradictory desire to recuperate Maximiliano *even while condemning him*, we will at last turn to Carlota’s significant contribution to the novel.

MAXIMILIANO’S IMAGINARY BODY

The constant emphasis on the Emperor’s body as a grotesque object transforms it into a source of profound, regenerative creativity. Bakhtin insists on a relationship to incompleteness and continual transformation as one of the central characteristics of the grotesque body: “The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon *in transformation*, an as yet *unfinished metamorphosis*, of death and birth, *growth and becoming*”; and again, “The grotesque body [...] is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; *it is continually built, created*, and builds and creates another body” (24, 317, emphasis added). Carlota, whose words we have left aside in these pages, unlocks the creativity latent in Maximiliano’s body by continually refashioning it in startling ways, writing and rewriting with it and with her words her own compensatory and contestatory history of the French Intervention.

Just as the the story of Maximiliano’s body does not end with his execution, but includes numerous post-mortem indignities, neither does it conclude with his embalming and return to Europe. Carlota, in her turn, does not allow her husband’s body to rest, but implicates it in her ludic, corporeal reconstruction of history in two distinct manners. Amid accu-

sations leveled at disparate parties involved in the Maximiliano drama, including at Maximiliano himself, and laments about the Emperor's estrangement from his organs, the delirious Empress both reconstitutes Maximiliano's body in a variety of forms with diverse materials, and absorbs his body into her own to the point that they become indistinguishable. We will investigate the mechanisms and repercussions that these processes presuppose in the remainder of this chapter, pausing only to revisit the implications of Maximiliano's second execution when it becomes useful to do so. As I noted in the Introduction, one consequence of the chaotic structure of *Noticias del Imperio*, and in particular of Carlota's monologue, is the impracticality of respecting the novel's sequence. I will therefore present the examples that follow in the order that best befits the analysis at hand. In order to avoid imposing a logical or sequential structure on Carlota's disorderly ramblings, I will avoid the use of referring to "earlier" or "later" developments in her judgments..

Inventing Maximiliano

Carlota's obsession with Maximiliano's body manifests and morphs continuously throughout the novel, including in the recriminations she levels against the portrait of him that hangs in the halls of Bouchout, which staunchly refuses to age as she does:

Y mientras tanto, tú, ¿qué has hecho tú de tu vida todos estos años [...], qué has hecho tú sino quedarte colgado en las galerías, alto, rubio, impasible, sin que una sola arruga más empañe tu rostro ni una sola cana más blanquee tu cabello, congelado en tus treinta y cinco años [...]? Dime, Maximiliano, ¿qué has hecho de tu vida desde que moriste en Querétaro como un héroe y como un perro [...]? ¿[Q]ué has hecho, Maximiliano, mientras yo me he vuelto cada día más vieja y loca? ¿Qué has hecho tú, dime, aparte de morirte en México? (24)⁸⁴

84. From a psychoanalytical perspective, Maximiliano corresponds to the Father who, murdered by his children, occupies the empty place of authority from which, according to the analysis I am proposing, Mexican identity is dictated. That Mexicans prefer to repress and forget than to acknowledge the importance

Carlota's expectation that Maximiliano's body will not only age, but will *act* as well, defines her attitude toward the latter's grotesque corpse. She takes stock of Maximiliano's dismembered body as though by uniting the missing pieces she might be excused from the responsibility of constantly reinventing it (though we will see shortly that her reasons for seeking his body parts are more personal and more in keeping with her delirium). On occasion she challenges Maximiliano to dare to re-form himself: "Ándale, Maximiliano, átrévete tú también a volver a ser todos los Maximilianos que fuiste alguna vez" (209); on others, the challenge takes on the quality of a mournful apostrophe to her lover's dead body, bidding him to shed the trappings of a corpse and to return to life:

Quítate, Maximiliano, la laca con la que barnizaron tu cara [...], quítate los algodones que tienes en los oídos [...], ábrete las venas para que se te salga el formol con el que te embalsamaron, y todo el oporto que bebiste en Gibraltar, y ábrete el estómago para que se te salga el aserrín rociado con espliego y la pechuga de pollo que nunca acabaste de digerir [...]. Y quítate esos ojos de pasta y ponte tus ojos azules, los ojos que me dejaron de ver cuando tú tenías treinta y cinco años y yo tenía veintiséis, porque si no te los pones, Maximiliano [...], no me volverás a ver como era cuando yo tenía veintiséis años, [cuando] la piel de mi rostro era lisa y suave y fresca, y mis trenzas eran todavía negras [...]. Ándale, Maximiliano, levántate y ponte tus ojos y péinate y sacúdete de la frente y las mejillas el caliche que te dejó en la piel la máscara mortuoria [...], y cepíllate los dientes, haz buchets con champaña para quitarte ese aliento a cloruro de zinc, Maximiliano, báñate en tu tina de granito y lapislázuli para que te quites ese olor a muerto que se te pegó en el mausoleo [...]. Ándale, Maximiliano, quítate la esponja empapada en vinos egipcios y sangre de drago con la que te rellenaron la boca y diles [...] que te pongan de nuevo la lengua y la campanilla para que vuelvas a hablar conmigo y me cuentes tus secretos y me digas que todavía me quieres. (209-11)

of his status only increases the appropriateness of the comparison.

Let us note, further, two essential aspects of Carlota's belief system: first, her belief that Maximiliano died the death of a "hero" and a "dog" in Mexico, two terms irreconcilably at odds with one another; and second, her experience of Maximiliano's death as belonging grammatically to the proximate or perfect past, that is, something that occurred concomitantly with the Carlota's progressive aging and loss of sanity over the course of sixty years.

Carlota makes clear, however, that she is not without certain tools that will grant her access to Maximiliano, even if he will not heed her calls himself, forcing her to content herself with “lo único que me han dejado: con mi imaginación” (370). Her ludic posture toward his grotesque body permits her to resurrect Maximiliano not only as he was, but as he might have been and how she might have wanted him to be. A thousand times, she claims, she has brought him back to life by playing time backwards: “he desandado el tiempo y he visto cómo se abren de nuevo tus ojos y vuelves a la vida y te levantas” (221). Because she can imagine her husband, she can “resuscitate” him; the very act of naming him causes him to appear long enough for them to make love throughout Bouchout Castle (372). They also make love, sometimes violently, in the Empress’s dreams (e.g. 134, in which Maximiliano’s member is replaced with a pool cue and nearly ruptures her uterus and intestines).

Decrepit and approaching death, her mental and physical faculties failing, to say nothing of her at times dangerous sexual insatiability, Carlota’s body is exemplary in its Bakhtinian grotesqueness. While the reader bears witness to her slow degradation, her sixty-year remove from the narrative she critiques, all of whose players are long dead, places strict temporal boundaries on the ways in which the regenerative dimension of her condition manifests. That is, she is incapable of intervening directly in the history she recounts, but only in her present and future. Inexhaustibly creative, Carlota implements her capabilities in a variety of ways that bear on the very reality she inhabits.

We have already explored Carlota’s capacity to recreate (or resuscitate) Maximiliano in her dreams; however, her attempts to regain access to her husband do not cease in the Empress’s purely speculative dreamscape. When Carlota claims that “[...] nadie hay en el mun-

do, Maximiliano, como yo, para hacerte y deshacerte” (139), she does not place limits on the contexts or materials in which she performs her creative act.⁸⁵ Carlota sees and recreates Maximiliano wherever she can: in her dreams, in her memory of a doll at the International Exposition in Paris,⁸⁶ or “en chiquito” out of celluloid.⁸⁷ She casts Maximiliano into myriad forms with little regard for the separation between the material and the imaginary, but intermingles the two as though they were the uniform substance of her reality.⁸⁸

One of her more radical contributions to Maximiliano’s afterlife projects his existence into a hypothetical future of her own invention, wherein Maximiliano will return to a larger-than-life existence, one more congruous with the immensity of his lineage and his tragedy:

[...] y esas brutas piensan que porque me tienen encerrada y porque estoy siempre sola no me entero de nada, cuando que soy yo la que cada día invento de nuevo el mundo. ¿Y sabes a lo que más le tienen miedo, Maximiliano? A que te invente a ti de nuevo. A que de tu fantasma [...], que de ese espectro haga yo un príncipe más alto aún de lo que fuiste en tu vida, más alto que tu tragedia y que tu sangre. (90)

This quasi-prophetic pronouncement occurs quite early in the chronology of the novel and may, along with her later assertions that Maximiliano managed to escape his execution, sug-

85. The full quotation offers several further examples of Maximiliano’s reinvention, and reads:

[...] nadie hay en el mundo, Maximiliano, como yo, para hacerte y deshacerte. Nadie como yo para modelarte con mis propias manos, para esculpirte de cera y que con el calor de mi cuerpo te derritas de amor, para hacer tus huesos de dulce de almendra y devorarlos a mordiscos, o para hacerte todo de jabón y bañarme contigo y restregar mi cuerpo con tu cuerpo y lamerte hasta que nos volvamos los dos una sola lengua, una sola piel amarga y perfumada. Nadie como yo, tampoco, si se me da la gana, para hacerte chiquito, para hacerte un niño de pecho y enterrarte en una caja de zapatos, para volverte un feto de quince días y enterrarte en una caja de cerillas. Para hacer que no hayas nacido y un día de estos enterrarte, vivo, en mi vientre.

86. “[...] tiene tus ojos y tiene tu cara, tiene tu pelo, tiene los primeros pañales que te puso tu madre Sofía, tiene la leche de tu nodriza en los labios [...]” (143).

87. “Inventaron el celuloide, y de celuloide te hice, yo misma, en chiquito [...]” (145).

88. Which, if we take seriously Carlota’s repeated claims to live in a dream, they are.

gest a principle by which we may on certain occasions read Carlota's remembrances, and on others, understand her recriminations. For example, these fabrications supply a structure in which to interpret Carlota's apostrophe (directed at Maximiliano as though he were still alive), Carlota's belief that he will appear in the flesh at any moment, or her baffled assertion that Maximiliano has not continued to perform acts despite having died in Mexico nearly sixty years prior.

But Carlota's most sustained attempt to bring Maximiliano back to life entails fashioning tangible, life-sized models of the Emperor out of whatever materials she has at hand. The following passages are worth quoting at length as evidence first of the sincerity and creativity with which Carlota carries out her task, followed by the insatiability of her desire to commune sexually with her lost lover:

Porque me dejaron tenerte. Como creen que estoy loca, me dejaron hacer un maniquí de tu tamaño y guardarlo en el ropero. Hubiera querido enviar al mensajero [a reunir una peluca y tu máscara mortuoria]. Pero tuve que arreglármelas sola. Sólo Dios sabe cómo te hice, con medias viejas que rellené de trapos para formar tus piernas y tus brazos, y con cojines y almohadas con los que hice tu pecho y tu vientre, y con hilos y cordón y alfileres y las ballenas de mis corsés para amarrarte, para coserte bien y que no te me fueras a desbaratar. Con los flecos dorados de una cortina improvisé tu barba. (369-70)

Lo que ellos no saben, porque piensan que cuando me desvisten y me ponen mi camisón y me meten a la cama y apagan la luz me olvido que tú quedaste guardado en el ropero y que ya no volveré a hablar contigo sino hasta el día siguiente, lo que ellos no saben es que apenas me dejan sola me levanto, y voy a verte. Abro el ropero y te llevo a mi lecho y me quito el camisón y hago el amor contigo. Hago el amor con el palo que te puse entre las piernas. Una noche comencé a sangrar: casi me atravesé la matriz, casi me rasgué el útero, pero seguí haciendo el amor contigo hasta el amanecer, hasta caer rendida de sueño, a tu lado. (371)

Only thus, by substituting his missing parts with suitable replacements, is Carlota capable of reassembling her husband as whole and fully functional. The mannequin-Maximiliano, a reified translation of Carlota's oneiric manifestation of her dead husband, represents the most fully-realized fusion of the material and the imaginary in her creative play with Maximiliano's body. It constitutes the rendering of her delirious creativity in a form that exceeds her imagination and impinges on the reality she inhabits, as well as the actualization of her threat to "invent" Maximiliano again and of her voracious longing to make love to him. Significantly, though Carlota replaces his mislaid member with a pole, Maximiliano cannot escape the degradation of his body even sixty years after his death and burial: upon discovering Carlota *in flagrante* with her fabricated husband, her caretakers divest the once-and-future Emperor of the emblem of his power: "Me quitaron el palo. Se lo llevaron. Te mutilaron, Maximiliano, Dios sabe qué fue de tu miembro" (371). Unfazed by the loss of Maximiliano's phallus, Carlota successively substitutes the seemingly infinite other phallic objects she has at her disposal, suggesting at once the former's unbounded potential to reclaim the life and power due him, and the latter's limitless fertility to invent the future they require.

It is worth noting that Carlota never explains the root cause for her persistent desire to make love to Maximiliano. Ultimately, the evidence for selecting any one motivation over another, like much in the novel, is complex, contradictory, and almost entirely hypothetical. Reading *Noticias del Imperio* through the lens of Freud's seminal "Mourning and Melancholia," Elizabeth Guerrero interprets Carlota's insistence on making love to Maximiliano as an example of the unhealthy psychoanalytic process of "introjection," wherein the subject literally incorporates a lost libidinal object into his or her own body rather than coming to terms

with its loss in a healthy manner.⁸⁹ At the same time, she proposes that it represents “the regenerative possibilities for a future existence, one that is possible only in fantasy” (108). She gives no clear indication as to what a potential “future existence” might consist of, but we can speculate with some certainty that she is referring to Carlota’s desire to bring Maximiliano back to life, lending some credence to her theory that she is not properly mourning the loss of her lover.⁹⁰ Building on Guerrero’s reading, I would also suggest that the act of lovemaking in *Noticias del Imperio* may represent, in its propensity to draw blood as though through menstruation, a regenerative possibility for Carlota (who claims to be on the verge of giving birth) and, in its frenzied frequency, a reconciliatory gesture for a couple that, as we have previously seen, famously refrained from sexual relations while in Mexico.⁹¹ In the end, we might best interpret her desire as an amalgam of all these motivations: as reconciliatory to make up for a contentious past; as reaffirming her resistance to acknowledging and properly mourning Maximiliano’s loss; and as regenerative to allow for a different future.

Let us return to one final, pivotal example of Carlota’s invention of Maximiliano, one that builds on her wish to bring him back to life in order that he reclaim once and for all the empire that rejected him sixty years prior. Amid her chaotic catalog of Maximiliano’s stolen parts and protests against the Mexican people for the post-mortem butchering of his body,

89. “Incorporation” and “identification” are sometimes used as cognate terms for “introjection.” For Freud, all of these terms described a narcissistic or cannibalistic object-choice, which he links to “the predisposition to fall ill of melancholia” (“Mourning and Melancholia” 250). While cannibalism certainly has analogies in the sexual act, we will consider Carlota’s acts of true cannibalism shortly (see page 114).

90. While the sexual metaphor for introjection is appealing, Guerrero curiously refrains from developing her theory more fully by pointing out the numerous occasions when Carlota quite literally appropriates and consumes parts of Maximiliano’s body.

91. Indeed, one session of lovemaking takes place before the eyes of the entire Mexican nation, perhaps as a rejoinder to the rumors recorded in “Crónicas de la corte”: “Pero yo dije qué importa que todo México vea a Mamá Carlota haciendo el amor con Papá Maximiliano [...]” (428).

the Empress makes her most radical and unorthodox proposal, both in terms of biology and of the ideological construction of Mexico. Rather than contenting herself with putting her husband back together with his original parts, or concocting another inanimate mannequin, Carlota's creative project anticipates Del Paso's "surprising" affirmation of Maximiliano's undeniable Mexican-ness by completing the task of dismembering his "grotesqued" body and reassembling it with fully Mexican parts:

[P]uedo, si quiero, pegarte con engrudo las barbas negras de Sediano y Lagui-
zanos y cortarte una pierna y ponerte la de Santa Anna, y cortarte la otra y
coserte la de Uruga, y vestirte con la piel oscura de Juárez y cambalachear tus
ojos azules por los ojos de Zapata para que nadie, nunca más, se atreva a decir
que tú, Fernando Maximiliano Juárez, no eres; que tú, Fernando Emiliano
Uruga y Leguizano no fuiste; que tú, Maximiliano López de Santa Anna, no
serás nunca un mexicano hasta la médula de tus huesos. (138-39)⁹²

If we accept the traditional belief that the roots of Mexican identity, at the moment of *Noticias del Imperio*'s publication, largely discard figures dead or forgotten long before the onset of the Mexican revolution—with the notable (though not exclusive) exception of La Malinche— Carlota's proposal for the reconstruction of the once-and-future Emperor is nothing short of revolutionary. Del Paso's novel, written in the period when the chinks in the PRI's armor first begin to reveal themselves and the myths of the revolution begin to crumble, here suggests the possibility of a different narrative. With Carlota's assistance, he grounds his new, nonexclusive narrative in a formerly irrelevant parenthesis in Mexican history, and rehabilitates the protagonists—as heroes *and* villains—as complex figures worthy both of abuse and respect, and as quintessentially Mexican.

92. On a parallel but opposite and equally significant occasion, Carlota proposes that Benito Juárez may have sewed Maximiliano's tongue onto his own, "para adornarse con ella, para hablarles con tu voz a los mexicanos de la patria y la libertad, la igualdad y la justicia?" positing Maximiliano as *part* of his successor in the most literal way possible (83).

The second execution

The foregoing dramatically prepares and in large part anticipates Maximiliano's second execution at the hands of Fernando Del Paso, an execution that goes beyond the abstraction of language and self-consciously *enacts* the conciliatory tone that the author strikes with respect to the former Emperor. This final subchapter precedes the conclusion of Carlota's monologue, and is introduced thus:

“Si pudiéramos, también, inventar para Maximiliano una muerte más poética y más imperial. Si tuviéramos un poco de compasión [!] hacia el Emperador y no lo dejáramos morir así, tan abandonado, en un cerro polvoriento y lleno de nopales, en un cerro gris y yermo, lleno de piedras. Si lo matáramos, en cambio, en la plaza más hermosa y más grande de México... si nos pusiéramos por un momento en su lugar, y nos metiéramos en sus zapatos y en su cuerpo y su cabeza, y a sabiendas de que somos un Príncipe y un Soberano, y que nunca nos ha faltado ni el humor ni la valentía, ni el ingenio ni la elegancia y que hemos amado siempre el orden y el boato, la pompa y la circunstancia, el espectáculo, si pudiéramos escribir, de puño y letra de Maximiliano y para asombro y advertencia, recuerdo y ejemplo de cuanto monarca futuro pierda la vida a manos de su propios súbditos —o de quienes él cree que son sus súbditos— y dé su sangre por ellos, el Ceremonial para el fusilamiento de un Emperador...” (774)

In what is at once the most ritualistic and the most purely performative chapter of *Noticias del Imperio*, Del Paso turns to a unusual genre and rhetorical register to stage his second execution: the ceremonial. As I have noted previously in this chapter, Maximiliano's obsession with ceremonies is well-documented; it is not gratuitous, therefore, that when Del Paso elects to afford his subject “una muerte más poética y más imperial” —to at last offer a gesture of deep empathy and earnest compassion for the body he has systematically debased over the course of his extensive novel— he resorts to the Emperor's own favored genre. Sparse and official, “Ceremonial para el fusilamiento de un Emperador” details the procedures for carrying out an execution worthy of Maximiliano's stature and importance, making al-

lowances for all possible contingencies —such as the need for a coup de grâce—, and even ritualizing the act of turning coins over to the members of the firing squad.

In this short subchapter, the last of all thirty-three found in *Noticias del Imperio*, Del Paso performs for his people the ceremony Maximiliano should have received at their hands, perhaps even the ceremony Maximiliano, so fond of pomp and circumstance, would have wanted.⁹³ It constitutes a profound call for compassion toward a figure vilified when not forgotten outright, an appeal to remember that, for all that he was denied a “proper” burial as part of the pantheon of Mexico’s villains and heroes, Maximiliano still haunts the land he claimed for his *patria*, counting himself among the “almas insepultos [que] reclaman su abandono” (772-73) of which Del Paso writes in a previously cited passage (see page 50). Del Paso seems intent on suggesting that Maximiliano does not merely haunt as a historical curiosity, a ghost to be unceremoniously shunted to the margins and forgotten, but in a fashion that bears on Mexico’s constitution as a nation full of citizens whose identity as Mexicans owes as much to the “parenthesis” of the French Intervention as it does to what preceded it, what created a climate apt for invasion, and what came about as a consequence of Juárez’s ultimate victory.

My selection of the verb “to haunt” is not casual, and we must not ignore its unique connotations which allude both to that which operates invisibly, behind the scenes but from the inside, and that which, repressed, cannot but continuously bear witness to itself in the

93. For example, the novel registers on at least one occasion Maximiliano’s desire to die “en una colina asoleada” (699).

symptoms it produces. In his brilliant *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida lays out the complex, aporetic associations and consequences of haunting:⁹⁴

First suggestion: haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not *dated*, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of a calendar. Untimely, it does not come to, it does not happen to, it does not befall, one day, [Mexico], as if the latter, at a certain moment of its history, had begun to suffer from a certain evil, to let itself be *inhabited* in its inside, that is, haunted by a foreign guest. Not that the guest is any less a stranger for having always occupied the domesticity of [Mexico]. But there was no inside, there was nothing inside before it. The ghostly would displace itself like the movement of this history. Haunting would mark the very existence of [Mexico]. (3)

Let us unpack this quotation in an attempt to recognize its relevance to a Mexican emperor, a foreigner who, once executed, continues to haunt the land he ruled. Derrida first qualifies haunting as bound to history, but not historical itself; that is, that which haunts is located in the past, but cannot be shackled to a specific historical moment or frame. It exceeds its own historical and temporal bounds—it is “un-timely” in the sense that it sustains no relationship with time—and therefore cannot be said to “occur” or “happen” to the object of its haunting, or even to invade from outside; it merely *is* inside, as though it had always already been there. It inhabits the inside as a foreign element, paradoxically constituting its host while remaining alien to it, but inhabits a space that had previously not been identified or even existed at all. The presence of the foreign element, that inside-space it makes for itself and from which it haunts, “marks” the very existence of its host.

One can immediately apprehend the extent to which these notions are germane to our present discussion. Del Paso must recuperate Maximiliano’s body, the foreign element that haunts and “marks” Mexico, through fiction; compensate for the mistreatment it en-

94. I have replaced all instances of “Europe” with “Mexico” in the following quotation.

dured by offering it, albeit briefly, the respect it warranted; and acknowledge its valence as one among infinite elements that determine and transform the meaning of modern Mexico. Ironically, he must bring the Emperor back to life only in order to at last properly put his body to rest where it belongs: in Mexico. Note that Del Paso explicitly repudiates any equivalency between assigning Maximiliano and Carlota “el lugar que les correspondería en nuestro panteón” and *justifying* their conduct on the historical stage; he relinquishes responsibility for vindicating the authors of the past, merely pointing out that “ni las ambiciones desmesuradas ni todo lo que de imperialistas y arrogantes tuvieron las aventuras de nuestro primero y nuestros últimos conquistadores europeos, de la misma manera que lo traidor a nuestros traidores, y lo dictador a nuestros dictadores, no les quita lo mexicano.” (773). By thus rehabilitating Maximiliano and Carlota and recognizing them *as Mexican*, Del Paso negates their foreignness, thereby drawing them out of and erasing the inside-outside aporia from which they haunted and granting them to access to the shared space out of which Mexico is continuously defined, permitting their quiet, subterranean operation in the Mexican unconscious. Only by drudging them up from their repression and by rendering them visible can Del Paso hope to recognize and account for the symptoms they produce; that is, the influence they continue to exert in the Mexican imaginary. Only through this act of remembrance can Maximiliano and Carlota properly be forgotten.

CARLOTA’S CREATIVE BODY AND THE BIRTH OF MEXICO

How, then, to remember (and forget) Carlota? The examples cited thus far, coupled with Carlota’s description of her project as the writing of the “historia trivial de mi locura y mi soledad, las memorias vacías de sesenta años de olvido” (588), posit Carlota’s memory and

imagination —the dream in which she has “chosen to stay” (138)⁹⁵— as the uncontested masters of her monologue; nearly all of the existing secondary literature corroborates this perspective. I would like, however, to dispute this mastery by suggesting that, though critical to the production of the novel (which constitutes the registry of her memory and delirious imaginings), her imagination cedes sovereignty to the body, omnipresent at the scenes of narration both real and imagined. Up to this point we have focused on Carlota’s body almost exclusively as an medium for the expression of her voracious sexual longing for Maximiliano — the images that I have already referred to above comprise but a fraction of the abundant examples contained in the pages of *Noticias del Imperio*—; we must now appreciate Carlota’s body as a grotesque object par excellence and the source of her unbounded creativity.

Carlota is our only diegetic source for commentary on her body, but her frank, explicit portrayal of her person, and accounts of the actions that she performs with it, should dispel any concern that our analysis will suffer from its dependence on self-description. Indeed Carlota, like many historians who have wondered at her longevity, is impressed with the sheer persistence of the body that she inhabits, and impresses its surprising durability on the reader. She calls attention to its endurance by repeatedly stating the astonishing length of her survival in Bouchout Castle after Maximiliano’s death: in the novel’s opening paragraph she reports, “Tengo ochenta y seis años de edad y sesenta de beber, loca de sed, en las fuentes de Roma” (13-14); for “[s]esenta veces trescientos sesenta y cinco días” she has tried convincing herself that they never went to Mexico, surrounded by those who for just as long have attem-

95. Carlota writes, “Yo me propuse no olvidarte nunca y que nadie, jamás, te olvide de nuevo. Es por eso que decidí quedarme en un sueño con los ojos abiertos” and again, later, “[...] yo elegí soñar y quedarme en mi sueño” (137-38, 583).

pted to convince her of her insanity and old age (23); the child she carries in her womb gestates “durante nueve meses y sesenta años” (85); she insists that “no fue hace sesenta años” that Maximiliano was executed (138); for sixty years she has refused to eat, awaiting Maximiliano’s arrival at Bouchout Castle, where it has been 7:00am, the moment of Maximiliano’s execution, for equally as long (294); her memories comprise nothing more than “sesenta años de olvido” (588). She likewise compares her ancient body with the one depicted in the aforementioned portrait of Maximiliano’s eternally youthful figure (24), laments the state of her wasted, flabby breasts (87), runs through litanies of well-known public figures who died of old age during her lifetime, and casually acknowledges that she is “viva, sí, viva pero muy vieja,” drooling, incontinent, and forgetful (75, 590-91).

The Empress’s extreme age —made to appear all the more extreme by this improbable longevity, sequestered from the world in Bouchout Castle, quietly outliving all of her contemporaries— and attendant bodily breakdown grant her the status of a grotesque body, but scarcely account for all of the grotesqueries of her character. Carlota’s insanity, by virtue of which she can rend the world apart and reintegrate it as an object of play, with no *actual* effect, falls under the umbrella of the grotesque as well. “[T]he theme of madness,” Bakhtin writes, “is inherent to all grotesque forms, because madness makes men look at the world with different eyes not dimmed by ‘normal,’ that is by commonplace ideas and judgments.” The mad are able to free themselves from “the false ‘truth of this world’ in order to look at the world with eyes free from this ‘truth’” (39, 49). Since, following Marx, the truths of the world inevitably posit themselves as self-evident, Carlota’s madness becomes an asset, granting her the freedom to advance multiple heterodox and mutually exclusive narratives to correct

the inadequacies of the historical record. Like Maximiliano before her, Carlota inverts the function of the orifices that populate her body, violates the space between her body and the world, and imbues everyday objects with procreative potential: she claims to have eaten the bullet that killed Maximiliano, and to have eaten her own feces, either because she is hungry, as she maintains, or to prevent her caretakers from finding it (296); she (famously) dips her hands into the Pope's chocolate (16); she derives sexual pleasure from animals and makes love to inanimate objects (throughout); she is penetrated by words, and gives birth to the world (498).

We shall trace the creative potential that Carlota's degenerate body produces along two different but intimately interwoven narrative threads. First, as she devours Maximiliano's body and integrates it into her own, she both replaces the Emperor and obviates the necessity for his existence as the motor of her creativity. Finally, she avails herself of her newly self-perpetuating creative potential to seize her status as "Mamá Carlota," the true historical mother of Mexico and, indeed, of the world. The former of these threads will lead us inexorably to the latter, with which we will conclude our analysis of the body in *Noticias del Imperio*.

"Con tu lengua y con tus ojos, tú y yo juntos vamos a inventar de nuevo la historia"

Carlota registers an obsession with bodies and principally with the grotesque nature of her own body near continuously throughout the pages of her monologue, and it is immediately clear that the boundaries of her person are fluid. Indeed, little of the bodily degeneration that Carlota recounts over the course of her monologue derives directly from the deleterious effects of old age or any specific damage to her person, but rather from the mutilation and disfiguration of Maximiliano's body sixty years prior. In addition to believing her insane,

she insists that an unidentified, malevolent “they”⁹⁶ also wish her deaf, blind, mute, and crippled, bored, preoccupied and so do not inform her of the affairs of the world or the passage of time (87). Carlota confesses, however, that if she is blind, it is not because they deprived her of her eyes or tongue (or even because they cloister her in Bouchout Castle and refuse to keep her apprised of the outside world), but because they deprived her of Maximiliano’s: “Lo que no saben ellos es que, si estoy ciega, es porque me quitaron tus ojos. Cuando me los quitaron, Maximiliano, me quitaron todo” (80). She claims to have learned to see through her husband’s eyes; likewise, she claims to have learned to “invent the world” with Maximiliano’s tongue —a notion we will investigate further—, and protests in similar fashion: “Desde me quitaron tu lengua, Maximiliano, me quitaron todo, porque fuiste tú quien me enseñaste a inventar el mundo con palabras” (83).

But even while lamenting the loss of Maximiliano’s body, Carlota seeks to further integrate her husband into herself by consuming his remains. She dreams of devouring his heart and drinking his blood —both of which she believes to be poisoned— in the opening chapter of the novel (18), but expresses her devouring impulse most fully thus:

Dicen que estoy loca porque quisiera devorar las sobras que de ti me dejaron, porque quiero ir a Viena a la cripta de los capuchinos y devorar tu caja, devorar tus ojos de vidrio aunque me corte los labios y me desgarre la garganta. Quiero comerme tus huesos, tu hígado y tus intestinos, quiero que los cocinen en mi presencia, quiero que los pruebe el gato para estar segura que no están envenenados, quiero devorar tu lengua y tus testículos, quiero llenarme la boca con tus venas. (294)

96. Probably a reference to her caretakers.

By ingesting and infecting herself with Maximiliano —by devouring his body both literally and sexually—, Carlota puts into play a process of radical transformation of the structure of reality and her place in the historical narrative.

Initially, Carlota urges Maximiliano to revive himself, coaxing him with her dreams of together rewriting history, obliterating the line dividing what was and what will have been, uniting her crazed narratives with his ability to create the world by way of what he sees and says.⁹⁷ “Con tu lengua y con tus ojos, tú y yo juntos vamos a inventar de nuevo la historia. Lo que no quieren ellas, lo que no quiere nadie, es verte vivo de nuevo, es que volvamos a ser jóvenes, mientras ellas y todos están enterrados desde hace tiempo.” When he fails to comply, she puts to him a more personal and more radical scheme: to erase their foreignness, their European heritage, and to refashion themselves as legitimately Mexican, children of Mexican soil: “Levántate, Maximiliano y dime qué es lo que deseas, qué es lo que prefieres. ¿Te gustaría no haber nacido en Schönbrunn, sino en México?” (88). Neither the prospect of rewriting history nor that of retroactively instating himself as autochthonous to the nation he ruled is sufficient to rouse the expired Emperor. Carlota largely abandons her attempts to summon Maximiliano back to life, contenting herself instead with encountering him in dreams.

Nevertheless, the contagion of Maximiliano continues to operate in Carlota’s dreams through her memories and the consumption of his body. Concomitantly with this operation, Carlota slowly acquires and grows into the capacity to create without Maximiliano’s explicit

97. Carlota’s confusion between past and future perfect resonates with the psychoanalytic concept of the repetition of repressed or traumatic psychic experiences. If we accept that Maximiliano and Carlota indeed haunt Mexico as repressed elements in the present formulation of mexicanness, the Second Mexican Empire will continue to repeat until it is properly worked through. In this sense, Carlota is not rewriting the past, but performing *future* repetitions of a past that will produce different results.

support. While she initially claims that the world, history, and Mexico had been created *for* her —“el mundo que había sido hecho para mí”; “toda esa historia [...] había sido inventada para mí, para mi placer o mis lágrimas[...]”; “Tú, [Maximiliano], también inventaste a México para mí. [...] Tú que con tus palabras inventaste el aroma de sus calles y el fuego de sus volcanes” (81-82)— she gains greater creative agency as the novel progresses. Some chapters later, she asserts the power and the procreative self-sufficiency of her own words: “Porque si de alguien voy a tener un hijo alguna vez, Maximiliano, [...] será de mí misma. De mí misma y mis palabras” (146), but subverts this self-sufficiency by later revealing that Maximiliano, while he was Emperor of Mexico, had “impregnated” her with his words, transforming her into “la madre del Divino Verbo” (498). She learns that Maximiliano comes to life for her through the act of naming him: “Tú vuelves a vivir cada vez que te nombro, cada vez que digo tu nombre: Maximiliano” (372).

By the end of the novel, however, Carlota’s assimilation of Maximiliano —or Maximiliano’s infection of Carlota— is complete. Emperor and Empress fuse together, the former imbibed by and subsumed into the latter, becoming a single unit: “voy a meter la cabeza en la tina porque estoy muerta de sed y quiero [...] emborracharme de ti, beberte hasta que tu amor y mi amor sean un solo amor, y yo sea tú” (796).⁹⁸ By assimilating Maximiliano’s body into her own, Carlota compensates for the loss of his eyes and tongue, supplementing them with her own and restoring for herself his capacity to fashion the universe after his own designs. She takes immediate advantage of these capabilities to radically rewrite a future history

98. This gesture is replicated doubly when Carlota expresses to Maximiliano, in a passage already quoted in an earlier footnote, her desire to “lamerte hasta que nos volvamos los dos una sola lengua, una sola piel amarga y perfumada [...], para hacerte un niño de pecho [...], para volverte un feto de quince días [...] y un día de estos enterrarte, vivo, en mi vientre” (139).

of the Second Mexican Empire in which she will take Maximiliano's place as the prisoner executed on the Cerro de las Campanas. Maximiliano will no longer split his beard in two to indicate his heart; instead, "cuando [la] lleven al Cerro de las Campanas para matar[la]," Carlota will open her blouse and display the breasts at which Mexicans will continue to nurse, and lift her skirt to show her own beard, a "barba negra y rizada y el lugar por donde los parí a todos y los voy a seguir pariendo" (796-97). Acknowledging her new identity as the mother of Mexico, Carlota substitutes Maximiliano's lost phallus, a transient symbol of the power he failed to maintain, with her own fertile womb and nourishing breasts, sustained (and sustaining) symbols of her ineradicable ancestral relationship with the Mexican people. She thus literalizes and appropriates the epithet "Mamá Carlota" and reveals the full extent of her creative—or more properly procreative—powers.

"Yo soy Mamá Carlota"

In her transformation into Mamá Carlota and recognition of her procreative potential, Carlota confirms her status as an exemplary grotesque body; as Bakhtin notes, "Death and death throes, labor, and childbirth are intimately interwoven" (151). Carlota's "labors," however, are not limited to the act of childbirth; her "motherhood" extends well beyond the literal sense. Her embrace of her new role fundamentally rewrites many of her prior claims with respect to the creation of the reality that she inhabits. The Empress confesses, in fact, that she is the source not just of Mexicans and Mexican identity, but of Mexico itself. In a surprising reversal of roles, she confirms her former assertions that Maximiliano "invented Mexico," but removes herself as the recipient of his invention and in the process subverts Maximiliano's agency as creator: "¿Te dije algún día, Maximiliano, que tú inventaste México

y el mundo para mí? Eso también fue mentira: yo te inventé a ti para que tú los inventaras” (788).

By positing herself as the inventor of the inventor, Carlota negates the need for much of our prior analysis, but only retroactively, and only by completing the steps that make our analysis both possible and necessary. Paradoxically, by reinventing and devouring Maximiliano’s body, Carlota acquires the creative power necessary to position herself as prior to Maximiliano, eliminating the need to reinvent and devour him. Since time is cyclical for Carlota—that is, since the past endlessly repeats itself for her in the future perfect—this is not so paradoxical as it seems: Carlota had to invent Maximiliano in the past, but will no longer have had to invent him in the future. She continues to invert the terms of her relationship with Maximiliano in the manner rehearsed above. She announces to Maximiliano that “[...] me voy a casar de nuevo contigo, y a quienes no quieran que me case para que me lleves a México, *diles que yo soy quien te llevo* [...],” (emphasis added) and that she will provide, as dowry, precisely what Maximiliano gave her when they first married: “Te voy a dar México. Te voy a dar América” (798). More provocative than the content of the dowry, however, is Carlota’s right to give it away: “Diles que lo tengo [a México] en las manos, porque cada día lo invento, Maximiliano, y los invento también a todos. Les doy y les quito la vida. Los visto y los desvisto. Los entierro y los desentierro. Les quito el alma y les presto mi aliento. Les quito su risa y les doy mis lágrimas. Vivo y muero por ellos” (796).

Carlota’s appropriation of the “Mamá” epithet implies more far-reaching, thematic consequences for *Noticias del Imperio*. Because, as creator, “[...] yo soy todas las voces, todas las lenguas. Porque yo invento cada día la historia” (792), Carlota assumes full command of

the Mexican historical narrative, and immediately permeates the entirety of Mexican history as far back as the conquest and as far forward as the Mexican revolution. By mutual agreement, she asserts, Mexicans made of her a mother, and she made children of Mexicans, including all of the figures who traditionally lay claim to the construction of modern Mexican identity, thereby inscribing herself as *a priori* to the notion of Mexicanness:

Ellos, los mexicanos, me hicieron su madre, y yo los hice mis hijos. Yo soy Mamá Carlota, madre de todos los indios y todos los mestizos, madre de todos los blancos y los cambujos, los negros y los saltapatrases. Yo soy Mamá Carlota, madre de Cuauhtémoc y La Malinche, de Manuel Hidalgo y Benito Juárez, de Sor Juana y de Emiliano Zapata. Porque soy tan mexicana, ya te lo dije, Maximiliano, como todos ellos.

As universal mother to Mexico, she sheds her status as a foreign, imperialist invader —“Yo no soy francesa, ni belga, ni italiana: soy mexicana porque me cambiaron la sangre en México” (797)— and adopts her new identity as always already Mexican and, in perhaps the most surprising moment of the novel, as unequivocally insane:

Y soy la madre de todos ellos porque yo, Maximiliano, soy su historia y *estoy loca*. Y cómo no voy a estarlo si no fue con una jícara de agua de toloache con la que me quisieron enloquecer, no fue con el agua del cenote sagrado, ni con el ololiuque que me dieron [...], no, *fue con México, y lo lograron*. Fueron sus cielos, sus orquídeas, sus colores, los que me enloquecieron. (797-798, emphasis added)

In these final pages the aporias I have identified as structural to the novel —the concurrent truth and falsity of Carlota’s insanity, the denunciation of imperialism and the confession that such a denunciation is inescapably determined by the imperial act, the tension between the past and its repetitions in the future perfect— collapse, superseded in an instant by the undeniability of her fertile insanity, the erasure of the reality of imperialism, and the perfect consonance between the rewritten past and the future that Carlota describes.

In fact, Carlota's identity as the mother of Mexico does not end with her assumption of the title "mother," nor does it derive entirely from her assumed status as the creator of nation, history, and the universe. Her claim to be the progenitor of Mexico runs much deeper and pulls at the threads of something more fundamentally associated with the way Mexicans have chosen to define themselves for centuries: *la chingada*. For the length of the novel Carlota speaks of a pregnancy, a child she has gestated for nine months and sixty years and to whom she will soon give birth. Although Carlota suggests that she carries a number of things in her womb —among them "desgracias y calamidades" (429), "un enjambre de mariposas negras" (503), and Maximiliano himself (139)— she refuses to confirm any of them one way or another. We may speculate that the product of her pregnancy consists of those she defines as her children: Mexico and its inhabitants. This speculation seems to be confirmed by Carlota herself when she imagines replacing Maximiliano on the Cerro de las Campanas, but her willingness to define the identity of her progeny only extends far enough to call it "un hijo, Maximiliano, del peyote, un hijo del cacomixtle, un hijo del tepezcuintle, un hijo de la mariguana, un hijo de la chingada" (790); that is, an archetypal Mexican.

One mystery that she does reveal at the conclusion of her monologue, however, is that of her child's questionably paternity. She repeatedly suggests that she alone engendered her child, claiming to masturbate all night long while drooling white saliva like Maximiliano's seed (75). We have already seen that her body is self-sufficiently procreative, a condition that her caretakers recognize, prompting them to insist repeatedly that she close her creative portals —her mouth and her legs—: "Cierre bien la boca, Doña Carlota. Cierre bien las piernas, Señora Emperatriz" (76). Later, she briefly entertains and ultimately rejects the Bel-

gian Colonel Van Der Smissen, Saint Michael the Archangel, and Maximiliano himself as potential fathers. Apart from these intimations, she prefers, as we have seen previously regarding other questions, only to indicate who the father is *not*. Nevertheless, if we are to believe that her children are “hijos de la chingada,” Carlota cannot have fathered them herself. For this reason, the catalog she offers of men and beasts who violated her is far from superfluous, and must be quoted at length:

Pero puta yo, no, Maximiliano, porque nunca te fui infiel. Porque si el hijo que voy a tener no lo engendraste tú, tampoco, escúchame bien, tampoco lo engendró el Coronel Van Der Smissen, ni Léonce Détroyat, ni el Coronel Feliciano Rodríguez. El hijo que voy a tener no será jefe de Estado Mayor del Mariscal Foch, ni venderá truchas y rodaballos en el East End de Londres, *porque no será hijo de nadie sino de todos: a mí todos me embarazaron*, sin que yo me enterara, cuando estaba soñando con los ojos abiertos. Me embarazó el Mariscal Aquiles Bazaine con su bastón de mariscal. Me embarazó Napoleón con el pomo de su espada. Me embarazó el General Tomás Mejía con un acto largo y lleno de espinas. Me embarazó un ángel con unas alas de plumas de quetzal que tenía, entre las piernas, una serpiente forrada con plumas de colibrí. Y quedé preñada de viento y de vacíos, de quimeras y de ausencias. (790, emphasis added)

The meaning of this passage is clear: the archetypal Mexican is not only the descendant of a violated woman —el hijo de la chingada— but of a woman violated by potent symbols of Mexican *and* European heritage and tradition. The long onomastic catalogs that bookend the novel, in which Carlota identifies herself by the names that her lineage and inheritance entitle her to, fulfill the same function. By forging genetic, genealogical connections between “Mamá Carlota,” her European ancestors and lovers, and her American progeny, she defines the paternity and patrimony of the Mexican nation as deriving equally from Europe as it does from the Americas, demolishing both diegetic claims of the imperial invasion of Mexico

and the hierarchically superior status granted to Del Paso's supposedly univocal condemnation of the Second Mexican Empire.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate the status of the grotesque body, as defined by Bakhtin, as one of the central images in *Noticias del Imperio*. As such, it can and should be brought to bear on the existing analyses of the novel, both to confirm their relevance and to correct their inadequacies. Through these analyses the body has shown itself to be a productive lens through which to consider a number of sections of *Noticias del Imperio* that have until now received insufficient attention, and to reappraise others that often unjustly have been regarded as superfluous. I have also sought to subvert the notion that Fernando Del Paso intended that his novel be read as an unequivocal condemnation of the figures whose influence and actions in late 19th-century Mexico inform and condition modern Mexican realities.

Most importantly, I have shown how Fernando Del Paso takes advantage of grotesque bodies —primarily, but by no means exclusively those of the Emperor and Empress— in order to open a literary space in which to question the Mexican construction of identity by reviving and advancing figure whose relevance Mexicans have ignored or forgotten, but who continue to haunt the Mexican imaginary. The constitutive ambivalence of these bodies requires that my conclusions be provisional at best; no single reading is strictly authorized. Like Carlota, who by forgetting may replace her memories with new narratives without changing the details of the story, the readers of Del Paso's monumental novel —and those novels that appear in the following chapters— are responsible for tirelessly seeking new

angles and points of entry for the reconsideration and radical reinterpretation of Mexico's troubled history, the inadequate narratives that have been institutionalized and handed down over the last century, and the national troubles it faces as it negotiates its new democracy.

CHAPTER 2.
**“PERO NO TE OLVIDES QUE TU CUERPO ESTÁ AHÍ”: THE GAZING BODY OF
FRANCISCO MADERO AND THE BREAKDOWN OF IDENTITY IN IGNACIO
SOLARES’S *MADERO, EL OTRO***

*“[Fantasy space] is a fictional space, ‘another scene,’ where alone the
truth of our desire can be articulated—which is why, according to
Lacan, truth ‘is structured like fiction.’”*
—Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry*

*“[T]he fascinating object that drives the interpretive movement is
ultimately the gaze itself.”*
—Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry*

In the previous chapter I demonstrated how Fernando del Paso establishes a typology of the grotesque body in Mexican historical literature. This typology describes the relationships dying narrators establish with the stories they leave behind, and *Noticias del Imperio* rehearses a dazzling array of techniques appropriate for staging those relationships. Most notably in *Noticias del Imperio*, the dying Carlota deliriously rewrites the legacy of her short-lived and ill-fated empire, highlighting the extraordinary *presence* of the past, and projecting it into the future. Del Paso’s contradictory reverence and irreverence for the national historical record, illustrated by his playful combination of histories as a counterpoint to the post-modern inadequacy of official History, play themselves out on the bodies of his protagonists. The resulting histories boldly extend the trope of using the body as a stage for the examination of national desires and realities by destabilizing and rejecting the conclusions reached in earlier ideological artifacts and disseminated throughout the Mexican imaginary.

In the chapters that follow I would like to expand the typology of the grotesque body in Mexican historical literature in two directions. First, I would like to show that bodies need not be strictly alive to be grotesque or significant. Let us recall that Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque states that bodies *approaching* death are grotesque bodies *par excellence*, as a consequence both of their non-static character of "becoming" and of the notion that bodily degradation is necessary to fertilize new birth. In the interest of maintaining the integrity of this definition, I will suggest that the dead body that inhabits this chapter will not have fully died but, to anticipate a phrase of Slavoj Žižek's, will inhabit a space "between two deaths." According to Žižek, a dead body does not truly die until its death can be integrated into a coherent narrative; I would likewise contend that we may not consider a body's grotesque potential fully extinguished until it has died this second, symbolic death. By extension, we may conclude that the destabilizing ambivalence of the grotesque continues to operate until symbolic death is achieved. Second, I would like in this dissertation's final chapter to demonstrate that the power the grotesque body has to situate significant questions of nation is not limited to the status of the legacies left by recognizable historical figures, but also to broader questions of existing sociopolitical realities.

In this chapter I will discuss Ignacio Solares's first and best foray into the genre of the historical novel proper: *Madero, el otro* (1989). Since *Madero, el otro* is largely concerned with Francisco Madero's revolutionary legacy, it will serve to begin expanding our classification of the body in historiographic metafiction in the ways enumerated above, and also act as a conceptual bridge between the dying bodies of the previous chapters and the dead bodies of the final chapter. It will furthermore introduce the effects of the intrusion of the Lacanian real on

both the imaginary and symbolic orders, the latter of which will be extended and developed in the final chapter. While we shall not ignore the crisis of the symbolic order in *Madero, el otro*, our primary focus lies in following the progressive degeneration of the protagonist's imaginary identity, providing fertile ground for a radical reconceptualization of his historical significance.

As our critical approach to these novels will be predominantly psychoanalytic, it is worth clarifying at the outset the ambiguities from which the concept of psychoanalytic reading suffers. Per Shoshana Felmen, psychoanalysis informs literature not by providing the reader with new “psychoanalytic” content to explore, but with an entirely new way of approaching the text:

It should be noted that the expression “Freudian reading” is *itself* an ambiguous expression [...]: a reading can be called “Freudian” with respect to *what it reads* (the *meaning* or thematic *content* it derives from a text) or with respect to *how it reads* (its interpretative *procedures*, the techniques or *methods* of analysis it uses). While it is almost exclusively in the first of these two senses that the concept “Freudian reading” is understood and used in the American cultural context, in France, it is on the contrary rather in the second sense that a new reading of Freud has been elaborated by Jacques Lacan. For Lacan, indeed, the unconscious is not only *that which must be read*, but also, and primarily, *that which reads*. [...] The gist of Freud's discovery [of the unconscious], for Lacan, thus consists not simply of the revelation of a new *meaning* —the unconscious— but of the discovery of a *new way of reading*. (117-18)

For our purposes, the crux of Felman's proposition lies in the suggestion that the performance of psychoanalytic readings on the texts examined in the chapters that follow does not imply the exploration of the unconscious of the characters in the texts, but of the readings suggested or performed by what we should understand as the “unconscious” of the texts themselves. That is, a true psychoanalytic reading will not attend to what the novel explicitly

says or means, but to the gaps in its utterance and the places, in Felman's words, where it "fails to mean" (112). Our focus will consequently attend to those details which the texts explicitly marginalize, and in particular the things they fail to say at all, the absences that loudly announce themselves, the gaps between what is *intended* and what is in fact *said*. As Freud and Lacan constantly repeat (as early as *The Interpretation of Dreams*), these repressed details will inevitably return, unbidden and unwanted, as symptoms: repression, whether of trauma or of elements of the real, creates a lack that makes itself known through the symptoms it engenders in order to hide itself. These symptoms, however, simultaneously act as pointers that indicate and announce the very absences that they are intended to conceal. Our readings of bodies in these chapters may thus be called *symptomatic*, in that they will attend to the ways in which characters read and misread bodies as *symptoms* of the real that seem to suggest readings that the novels wish to repress.

IGNACIO SOLARES, NOVELIST OF THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

Though it may seem an anachronism, Ignacio Solares's literary production beginning with *Madero, el otro* (1989) places him among the most important and most modern proponents of the Novel of the Mexican Revolution. Two of his subsequent popular novels revolve around the figures of Felipe Ángeles (*La noche de Ángeles*, 1991) and Pancho Villa (*Columbus*, 1996); as of this writing, his most recent work is a collection of literary-historical intellectual exercises in the form of short stories about the Mexican Revolution (*Ficciones de la Revolución Mexicana*, 2009). In addition to his contributions to revolutionary literature, Solares is without question the most prolific author of historical novels to grace the Mexican stage since the most recent wave of historical literature has begun.

Published only two years after Del Paso's *Noticias del Imperio*, Solares's *Madero, el otro* may similarly be considered a creative counterpoint to the historical enterprise of the Miguel de la Madrid administration, though its implicit critiques of "neoliberal policies [...] not dissimilar from Díaz's promotion of European investment" (Guerrero 31) and the fall of a regime in decay that has failed to make good on its promises to the Mexican people resonate strongly with the promises and policies of the subsequent administration of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), who occupied the presidency at the time of the novel's publication. The novel has been widely included in studies that deal with Mexican historical novels and has produced more critical literature than most of the other works discussed in this dissertation. It does not, however, appear to be canonized outside of Mexico, and the breadth of its critical impact accordingly pales in comparison to *Noticias del Imperio*. It is nevertheless unsurprising that it should be so widely considered, as it is the first major example of historiographic metafiction to fall under the heading "New Historical Novel" published after Del Paso's tour de force and one of the finest specimens of its kind.⁹⁹ These previous studies have successfully identified many of the novel's salient characteristics in terms of its particular historical content and the revisionist historiographical impulses that drive the novelistic manipulation of that content.

The most sustained analysis of *Madero, el otro* can be found in Elisabeth Guerrero's recent book *Confronting History and Modernity in Mexican Narrative* (2008). According to Guerrero, *Madero, el otro* seeks, through focused spiritual and psychological examination, to

99. Refer to the introduction (page 11) for a discussion of Seymour Menton's term "New Historical Novel." While the term is widespread in the secondary literature and therefore appropriate for a discussion of *Madero, el otro*'s critical reception, I will be avoiding it throughout my own analysis of the novel.

“humanize the hero,” an expression she borrows from Fernando Aínsa. “In death,” she writes, “Madero is at his most human and vulnerable, belying any possibility of heroic immortality” (13). The narrative purpose of his examination is ultimately to release the protagonist from the guilt he feels, “to release his sense of responsibility for [the] bloodshed and suffering” unleashed during the Mexican Revolution (15-16); for the reader, on the other hand, the detailed review of Madero’s life prompts a critical reassessment of the legacy handed down as “revolutionary culture” by heroes such as Madero, taken up by the ruling political party and disseminated to Mexico in general. Guerrero meticulously documents what she correctly perceives as two principal mistakes Madero makes, which reappear throughout the novel: perennially misplacing his trust in the wrong people and conversely betraying those whom he should have most trusted, and launching a political, public life in the first place (18). Her thorough examination of the narrative tools that Solares employs to examine Madero’s legacy is harmonized by the human frailty indicated by these errors. The configuration of characters present to the narration of Madero’s life —Madero’s body, Madero’s mute spirit, and the narrator— does not have any appreciable bearing on her analysis, and is therefore scarcely considered in her reading. For our analysis, on the other hand, the narrative configuration and its consequences will constitute the main thrust for electing to read the text through a Lacanian lens.

Solares stages his novel at the site of the assassination of President Francisco Madero and Vice-President José María Pino Suárez during the *Decena Trágica*. What follows is a brief overview of the events leading up to their assassination which, in essence, constitute the raw

material of *Madero, el otro*.¹⁰⁰ The first phase of the Mexican Revolution culminates in Francisco Madero's triumphant entry into Mexico City to claim the presidential seat. His victory over Porfirio Díaz, who had ruled for the previous 36 years, can be attributed to the tenacity with which Madero pursued his goals through revolutionary activity after losing a fraudulent election in 1910. Under pressure from revolutionary forces, Díaz and his vice-president Ramón Corral resigned in 1911; however, Madero's faithfulness to democratic ideals prevented him from immediately claiming the presidency for himself. Díaz was instead succeeded provisionally by Francisco León de la Barra until Madero was overwhelmingly elected a few months later. Thanks to his sincere belief in the righteousness of his goals to restore democracy to Mexico, Madero made for a compelling leader onto whom Mexicans could project their hopes for solutions to their own local grievances. Once in office, however, Madero favored the pursuit of his largely *political* objectives of "fair suffrage, no re-election," over the social and agricultural demands of large contingents of his supporters. He maintained largely intact the basic fabric of Porfirian government, an institution viewed by many as rotten, intending to effect change from the top down in an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary fashion. His failure to proactively dismantle ineffective, unjust, and outdated Porfirian structures, to replace those in command of those structures with supporters faithful to him, to adjust the

100. Nearly a century after its conclusion, the Mexican Revolution continues to prove itself a fertile stage for the exploration of contemporary problems, regardless of their explicit or implicit connectedness to the revolution itself. The publication of Max Parra's *Writing Pancho Villa's Revolution: Rebels in the Literary Imagination of Mexico* (2005) and the subsequent publication of a number of novels—among them Pedro Ángel Palou's *Zapata* (2006), Paco Ignacio Taibo II's *Pancho Villa: una biografía narrativa*, Solares's own *Ficciones de la Revolución Mexicana* (2009), and Benito Taibo's *Polvo* (2010, a detective novel set during the Cristero War)—suggest that it has lost neither its cultural currency nor its analytical potential.

scope and nature of his reforms to address pressing social and agricultural issues, quickly alienated him from his base and potential supporters.¹⁰¹

Amid the resurgence of revolutionary violence, a wave of strikes in Mexico's urban centers, and the perception that its leader was "weak," "vacillating," and "absolutely impotent," the Madero administration rapidly weakened and found itself forced to turn its back on many of its guiding principles. In February of 1913 Victoriano Huerta led a coup that toppled the shaky Madero government. Huerta installed himself as dictator, and made the mistake of having Madero and Pino Suárez killed. Madero, however, does not fade into the fabric of history quietly, as Huerta perhaps expected: his assassination instead restores and redoubles his power as a symbol for change, a rallying point for resistance to tyranny, and a spark for a new, more intense phase of the Revolution. Madero becomes a martyr powerfully linked to a Revolution that has since become institutionalized in Mexican social and political life, and from which he remains inextricable to this day. This is the stage upon which Solares develops his novel.

MADERO'S EMPTY BODY

The first step in our analysis must be positively demonstrate the importance of Francisco Madero's body in *Madero, el otro*. His body is conspicuously inert, dead or at best in the final stages of agony. There is little question, nevertheless, that the body's death sets the novel in motion by conjuring the narrator who guides Madero's non-corporeal self through his recollection of the events that led to his tragic end in order to achieve the redemptive ascension

101. Most notably Emiliano Zapata, whom Madero repeatedly slighted despite his vital role in the campaign against Díaz.

that awaits his spirit. Once the narration is initiated, however, critics tend to agree that the narrative focus shifts to “a highly visible narrator who interrogates the memory and conscience of an individual obsessed with his role in the Revolution” (Weatherford 74-75).¹⁰² Indeed, the novel lends considerable importance to the communion of spirits implicated in the act of remembering: these two aspects of Solares’s storytelling make up the bulk of the novel.¹⁰³ Indeed, by all accounts *Madero, el otro* positions itself, like the majority of Solares’s work, not in the material or psychological, but the *spiritual* or *parapsychological* plane.¹⁰⁴ I propose that Madero’s body is in fact a great deal more important than it seems at first

102. The identity of the narrator has been commented on by several critics. The general consensus—which is by no means unanimous—strongly suggests that the narrator coincides with the spirit of Madero’s deceased younger brother Raúl. Indeed, the historical Madero believed himself to be inhabited by this spirit, in that it was Raúl who moved his pen when he practiced automatic writing during his communions with spirits. However, this suggestion that Raúl also narrates the novel we read is contradicted in obvious ways at various points in the text. There are several moments when Raúl would be inexplicably reduced to referring to himself by name in the third-person —“te dictó el espíritu de Raúl” (*Madero, el otro* 19-20) and “A partir de mayo de 1901 empezó a visitarte el espíritu de tu hermano Raúl”—not to mention stripping Solares’s frequent play of subject pronouns—e.g. “entiende, entiéndete, entiéndeme” (11) and “Aprecia la maravillosa experiencia de observarte, desde aquí, a ti (a mí) mismo” (41)—of any greater significance than self-indulgent narrative play. Brushwood’s multi-faceted interpretation of the narrative polyphony is decidedly more attractive:

[T]he concept of a voice addressing the deceased Madero seems a reflection (slightly ironic) of a living Madero addressing his deceased relative or friend. The voice also addresses Madero as “brother,” suggesting that the communication may be between Francisco and Raúl. However, the pronouns I/you/he are used in such a way that, for most of the time, the sense is that one aspect of Madero is addressing the other aspect, but without making a categorical distinction between the two. (15-16)

103. Surprisingly, critics of the novel have failed to note the allusion to similar narrative techniques practiced in relation to the eponymous protagonist of Carlos Fuentes’s *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, another grotesque body in agony. A reading of Fuentes’s novel as a model for a number of technical aspects of *Madero, el otro*, in particular the division of the protagonists identity and the forceful, catalyzing appearance of an interrogating voice in the second-person, fully supports the notion that contemporary historical novels fit comfortably into long-established narrative traditions.

104. Pedro Ángel Palou cites the “redemptive” qualities of Solares’s historical novels as a reason not to include them in the series of historical fiction descended from *Noticias del Imperio*; I believe the two authors are united in their presentation of grotesque bodies as a provocation to explore questions of nationhood. Furthermore, I contend that the emphasis on the redemptive in *Madero, el otro* serves to conceal the prominence of the physical. For an analysis of the parapsychological in the early oeuvre of Solares, easily among the most salient attributes of the author’s style, see John Brushwood’s article, “Narrating Parapsychology: The Novels of Ignacio Solares.”

glance: it is the pillar around which the novel structures itself. This assertion is confirmed by a close reading that attends not to what is immediately and emphatically visible in the novel, but what, through conscientious narrative repression, manages to hide in plain sight.

It is immediately striking to note how emphatically Solares underscores the sheer corporality of his eponymous protagonist's dead body. The conspicuous reality of his physical figure imposes itself on the reader in the novel's opening gesture, which eloquently foregrounds the material, even as it suggests a spiritual aspect that will become its ostensible focus. The whole of Solares's novel is harvested entirely out of seeds planted in this passage, which bears citing in its entirety:¹⁰⁵

Qué evidente el último latido, la última sensación de la tierra en las manos crispados, las bocanadas inútiles que apenas atrapaban hilos de aire, el dolor —asidero final— que se apagó contigo y dejó tan sólo algo que era como el eco del dolor. ¿Y luego? ¿Cómo nombrar esta angustia que surge de continuar, de permanecer, de mirar, a pesar de ya no estar en ti mismo? A través de las capas de neblina deshilachándose adivinaste la salida del túnel que, intuitivamente —¿o fueron los espíritus quienes te lo dictaron?— sería como el acerado canal de una aguja. Salida luminosa que te acosa como si miraras el sol: clara luz a la que prefieres volver el rostro (pero no el rostro) para permanecer en la infinita pena de verte tendido ahí, al lado del sedán Protos negro, como un títere al que hubieran cortado los hilos, desfigurado dentro del charco de sangre, las aletas de la nariz profundas y dilatadas, los ojos asimétricos, desorbitados, que parecen, desde ahí abajo, buscar, buscarte, buscarme aquí. Mira, llevas la misma ropa del día 18 en que te aprehendieron: la camisa dura, el jacquet y el pantalón claro a rayas. El sombrero de hongo —ridículo— ha rodado hasta cerca de una de las llantas del Protos. Y con la pena parece retornar el dolor físico. Pero no. Es como la sensación de una tierra que ya no tienes en las manos, que ya no puedes palpar, la sensación que deja un miembro que ha sido amputado. (9)

105. Brushwood's assertion in the aforementioned article that Solares's novels "do not open with especially disarming narrative techniques, but each uses an initial image that suggests the mood of what is to come" (15) is true, in the case of *Madero, el otro*, albeit undeveloped in his analysis.

A close reading of this passage reveals all of the salient features of the novel; let us note them each in turn. Solares's narrator opens with the physical processes Madero experiences at the moment of his death, but quickly abandons the concrete, material plane. "[E]l último latido" and "la tierra en las manos" cede to the decidedly more abstract (but still physical) sensation of pain, which is already fading. The anguish Madero feels in the following sentence is no longer material, but already spiritual, the experience of something that feels compelled to continue observing the dead body that is *him* but that he no longer inhabits. Madero is defined, from the first instant, by a split —what Lacan would call a "gap"— between the physical body he no longer occupies and the spiritual entity that is also "Madero." This gap, hinted at here for the first time, will become the motor that drives *Madero, el otro*, and will continue to exacerbate itself within this passage and throughout the remainder of novel.

The "exit" from the "tunnel" Madero is said to perceive elevates the narration to a uniformly spiritual plane. This movement contains the novel's first surprising twist: the narrator expresses his uncertainty regarding whether the accurate description of the tunnel ("acorado canal de una aguja") originated with Madero himself, or from the spirits whose messages he had famously transcribed while alive. This twist is the second manifestation of the split from which Madero suffers throughout his life, in this case a schism between his own beliefs and the messages he receives from the spirits who communicate to him during his *sesiones de espiritismo*. Despite being offset between dashes, the introduction of spirits here is anything but casual. The reader is immediately and plainly reoriented from the physical toward the supernatural plane; moreover, the reader is left to evaluate for him or herself the

ambiguously ironic tone that the narrator employs to observe —or perhaps to reprimand— Madero’s belief in the guidance of the supernatural.¹⁰⁶ Subsequently Madero’s surviving consciousness, along with the narration, begins to turn back to contemplate the dying body lying before him, but is again derailed by the passage’s next twist. In this third indication of Madero’s fundamental disunity, the narrator reverses Madero’s examination of his body and instead follows the *body’s* gaze as it “searches, searches for *you*, searches for *me*” (emphasis added).¹⁰⁷

From this point forward, Madero’s relationship with the narrator —who at the moment remains little more than an object pronoun and whose identity remains mired in significant doubt throughout the novel— slips between the self-identity of subject pronouns and the schism of desire and intent, compounding both the novel’s ambiguity and the already significant split between Madero’s corporeal being and his non-corporeal spirit. While the narrator wryly points out the absurdity of Madero’s clothing —suggesting that he does *not* identify with the protagonist’s physical self—, he cements the narrative register in the spiritual, as we learn that the initial sensation of pain, Madero’s final link to the physical world, has faded into a mere absence, like that of an amputated limb.

The apparently overwhelming emphasis on the spiritual in the forgoing analysis studiously ignores, and therefore misreads a fundamental element of the novel’s opening passage. Though the narration is cleverly crafted specifically to (mis)direct our attention away

106. The rebuke will amuse the careful reader, who will note that the narrator is himself a supernatural presence.

107. Within the Lacanian context in which I’ve situated this analysis, it is obviously impossible to speak of “the gaze” innocently. I shall return to a fuller discussion of the importance of the gaze shortly (see page 137).

from the material, we mustn't be fooled into believing that the material plane is unimportant merely because it resides below the surface narration; that is, merely because it is *repressed* by the focus on more ethereal concerns. Indeed, reading against the grain of the same passage — looking at it *awry*, as Slavoj Žižek might say— we can focus our attention on those aspects from which Solares's narrator expends significant energy attempting to distract us.

Reading between Solares's narrative twists, and avoiding the splits that fracture his self, we in fact find an overwhelming emphasis on Madero's physical body. The physical processes of Madero's death —the heartbeat, his last breath, the sensation of earth in his contorted hands— are precisely, palpably narrated.¹⁰⁸ Note likewise the otherwise inexplicable focus on many of the trivial, even “ridiculous” details of his grotesque body: the meticulous and seemingly superfluous description of his clothing, his bug-eyed rictus of death, even his position with respect to the car —whose make is obligingly specified— that carried him to his execution. And while the spiritual aggressively harasses and beckons him away from what is repeatedly described as physical and psychological pain (*dolor* and *pena*, respectively), Madero prefers instead, on two occasions, to turn back and regard his body rather than abandoning the physical universe to which he is no longer tethered. The desire to remain in the presence of his body, to look upon it, a mere puppet whose strings have been abruptly

108. One cannot help but note the obvious allusion to the moment in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* in which Cruz, like Madero, becomes suddenly, preternaturally aware of the unconscious physical processes that integrate to form his fundamentally disunited body:

Hoy en que las funciones involuntarias te obligarán a darte cuenta, te dominarán y acabarán por destruir tu personalidad: pensarás que respiras cada vez que el aire pase trabajosamente hacia tus pulmones, pensarás que la sangre te circula cada vez que las venas del abdomen te latan con esa presencia dolorosa: te vencerán porque te obligarán a darte cuenta de la vida en vez de vivirla. (Fuentes, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* 90)

severed, is one that causes *anguish* both because of and in spite of the severed connection between them.¹⁰⁹

DESIRE AND THE GAZE

We must furthermore take very seriously the appearance of the gaze in these excerpts. To a greater extent even than the body, it is not accidental that the gaze appears almost immediately in the early stages of the novel. The concept of the gaze (*le regard*) bears on a number of key Lacanian notions, such as identity and alterity, and the complex interplay between the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real that is an important aspect of our object of investigation in *Madero, el otro*. In order to adequately frame the discussion of the gaze, however, a brief overview of these, and several other key Lacanian concepts, is necessary.¹¹⁰ In his early work, Lacan's reflections on the gaze take as their point of departure Jean-Paul Sartre's own views, developed in the latter's *Being and Nothingness*, and are in general agreement with these; indeed, it is not until twenty years later, after much of his conceptual model is more firmly established, that Lacan returns to the gaze and radically revises its theoretical structure and function, weaving it through his notions of desire and of the subject's relationship with the other, the Other, and the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of the subject's desire.

Lacan is from the outset taken by Sartre's observation that the gaze "does not necessarily concern the organ of sight":

109. This image of the puppet with severed strings is among the more fortuitous, overlooked images in the novel, despite the precision of the metaphor with respect to Madero's conduct during the final stages of his life.

110. This primer on Lacanian terminology, which has no pretensions of dealing completely with any concept completely, owes much of its conceptual clarity to Dylan Evans's unparalleled volume *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. Any errors or misstatements are, of course, my own.

Of course what most often manifests a look is the convergence of two ocular globes in my direction. But the look will be given just as well on occasion when there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain. (qtd. in Evans 7)¹¹¹

Lacan's paraphrase of Sartre in his first *Seminar* (1953-4) restates the essence of latter's conceptualization, framing the gaze's function in terms of the subject's relationship to the other:

The gaze is not located just at the level of the eyes. The eyes may very well not appear, they may be masked. The gaze is not necessarily the face of our fellow being, it could just as easily be the window behind which we assume he is lying in wait for us. *It is an x, the object when faced with which the subject becomes object.* (*Freud's papers* 220, emphasis added)

Lacan's gaze, like Sartre's "look," thus not only allows the subject to recognize another subject in the other, but furthermore causes the subject to perceive him or her self as an object for the other; an object, indeed, "who knows himself to be seen" (215).

When he revisits the concept in 1964, again in a seminar, Lacan radically redefines the nature of the gaze in a manner relevant to our present object of study. He does so by fundamentally altering three of the basic characteristics he initially borrowed from Sartre: first, he disassociates the gaze from the mere act of looking, establishing a relation of complete antinomy between "the gaze" and "the look." In doing so, he maintains the gaze's association with the visual by aligning it not with the eyes or the act of seeing, but with what he calls the *scopic drive*. Second, Lacan repositions the gaze, removing it from the margin that negotiates the relationship of the subject with the other and relocating it, instead, entirely on

111. We must here draw the reader's attention to the fact that *le regard* is translated variously as "the look" in Sartre and "the gaze" in Lacan. Ultimately Lacan will propose a radical distinction between the two terms, locating the former in the field of the subject, and the latter in the field of the Other.

the side of the Other.¹¹² Finally, he identifies the gaze with the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire.

In order to adequately assess the consequences of Lacan's redefinition of the gaze, many of the concepts implicated —drive, desire, and the *objet petit a* principal among them— must be elucidated somewhat.¹¹³ Though all three differ fundamentally from one another, drive, desire and the *objet petit a* are conceptually bound together, and can best be unravelled by beginning with the basic distinction between the notion of need as distinct from desire. The objects toward which need tends are tangible, biological necessities; needs can be temporarily sated by the acquisition of the objects they demand (e.g. hunger can be sated by the acquisition of food). At first, demands are articulated as prelinguistic screams that enjoin the original Other —typically the mother— to fulfill the subject's needs. Over time, the presence of the Other and the objects she offers become bound together and come to symbolically signify her unconditional love for the subject; concurrently, the scope of the subject's demand expands to encompass both the satisfaction of needs *and* the constant love of the Other. The contamination of demand by the insatiable craving for love opens what Lacan refers to as “the margin in which demand rips away from need”; it is here that “[d]esire

112. To avoid confusion, I have elected to follow Lacan's capitalization conventions regarding the Other in the following discussion. Sartre's and Lacan's use of the term “other” differ significantly. At the risk of oversimplifying, whereas “the Other” for Sartre refers to an exemplar of the category of other human beings, “the Other” (*l'Autre*, or *A* in Lacanian algebra) in Lacan refers both to the symbolic order as the site wherein law and language are constituted and, in a secondary manner, to any subject who might come to occupy that position for another subject. “The other” (*l'autre* or *a*) in Lacan refers, at least initially, to the reflection and projection of the ego at the mirror stage, the site of identity formation, and will be dealt with later (see page 158).

113. These concepts inevitably depend on others for their theoretical consistency; these others will be called upon and defined as necessary.

begins to take shape” (*Écrits* 689) and, not coincidentally, where a child’s first interaction with the symbolic order takes place.

As this margin is merely the location where desire is born, it would be an error to mistake the craving for love as the object that the subject desires, rather than as the motivation that ruptures the consistency of demand and opens the space that desire will fill. The object of desire is a great deal more complex. Unlike need, Lacanian desire can never be fulfilled, for it *has* no object that can be seized in the symbolic, where the conscious subject exists: its proper object is therefore lacking or, more properly, a lack. Lacan is quite clear and consistent on this account throughout his long, prolific life: “Desire, a function central to all human experience, is the desire for nothing nameable [...]. Being comes into existence as an exact function of this lack. Being attains a sense of self in relation to being as a function of this lack, in the experience of desire” (*The ego in Freud’s theory* 223-24). The object of desire is not nameable by any word because it has been removed from the symbolic (Olivier 16). Though subjects may fantasize (about) objects that will fulfill their desire, such objects function exclusively in the imaginary, and may even be thought of as pathological. Lacan himself proposes that “the object of desire, in the usual sense, is either a fantasy that is in reality the support of desire, or a lure” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental* 186). As Žižek points out, satisfaction of one’s desire is in fact constitutively undesirable, a condition from which the subject instinctively retreats. “[Lacanian] anxiety,” he suggests, “occurs not when the object-cause of desire is lacking [...] but, on the contrary, [is produced by] the danger of our getting too close to the object and thus losing the lack itself. Anxiety is brought on by the disappearance

of desire” (*Looking Awry* 8), and goes on to suggest that the ethics of hysteria is based on the subject’s fear that his desire will be satisfied and disappear (271).¹¹⁴

If we accept that the subject’s Being is brought about and supported by desire, whose essential lack is provisionally filled and supported by the unattainable fantasy objects that the subject imagines will bring about satisfaction (and thus collapse his Being) the true “object” or “objective” of desire can only reasonably be its own eternal self-reproduction. Our question then becomes: how does desire guarantee its constant reproduction?

As the foregoing demonstrates, desire’s object is not properly an object at all, but rather a lack or a split which, as pure absence, can never be obtained. Desire’s persistence is ensured, under normal conditions, through the ceaseless reproduction of this split based on the fact that the object of desire is never approached or addressed directly: “one lack is superimposed upon the other. The dialectic of the objects of desire [...] now passes through the fact that the desire is not replied to directly. *It is a lack engendered from the previous time that serves to reply to the lack raised by the following time*” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental* 215, emphasis added). The split between the subject and the “Mother-Other”¹¹⁵ prevents the latter from fulfilling the former’s unattainable craving for love, but thrusts the subject into the symbolic order and witnesses the simultaneous advent of the unconscious. The symbolic “cuts” into

114. Given that psychoanalysis was conceived by Freud in relation to hysterics and obsessional neurotics, whose condition is predicated on the notion that they see the fulfillment of their desire everywhere, it is natural that the objective of psychoanalysis is not to articulate one’s object of desire. Rather, psychoanalysis seeks to articulate the *nature* of desire —its essential insatiability, its incommensurability with objects— and through its articulation bring it into the symbolic, where we can believe we are chasing down the object of our desire, despite its nonexistence. According to Lacan, the translation of desire into the symbolic will inevitably leave a surplus (*Écrits* 275) that cannot be articulated and thus remains in the unconscious. It follows that this surplus in its turn allows desire to continue functioning.

115. Žižek’s term, which I prefer to Fink’s decidedly postmodern “mOther.” (“Much Ado About a Thing” 265, Fink 173)

the real and structures “reality” in terms of language—in which only what can be named “exists”—,¹¹⁶ and of desire, which inhabits the site of the cut. This split is conceptually the same as that which divides and alienates the subject from the specular projection of his ego on the mirror stage, permitting the formation of identity;¹¹⁷ the same lack as the lack in the symbolic that is embodied by the portion of the real that cannot be assimilated, but permits the symbolic to function by virtue of its exclusion (referred to by Lacan variously as a “gap,” a “spot,” and a “stain”). In each of these cases, the purported object of desire is the same. Lacan calls this object the *objet petit a*.¹¹⁸

The trajectory of the *objet petit a* in Lacan’s panoply of terms is circuitous at best. Initially, the *a* of *objet petit a* refers to the “other,” the subject’s ego or specular image: the “other” that is not really other (or the self that is not really self), the imaginary component of identity that is first grasped at the mirror stage. Eventually, the *objet petit a* acquires status independent of the other—even usurping the other’s algebraic symbol (*a*)—, but forever retains its imaginary status. At this point, the *objet petit a* comes to represent the object of desire sought by the subject in the Other. Most relevant for our reading is the status that the *objet petit a* came to acquire toward the end of Lacan’s life, when “the accent [of his interest] was shifted from the split between the imaginary and the symbolic to the barrier separating the real from (symbolically structured) reality” (Žižek, *Looking Awry* viii). The *objet petit a*,

116. Lacan opposes the notion of “existence” to “ex-sistence.” Everything that the symbolic excludes in the composition of reality is said to “ex-sist” in the real. The moment that it can be named, it passes into existence in the symbolic.

117. For more on the mirror stage see page 158.

118. According to Evans, “Lacan insisted that *objet petit a* should remain untranslated, ‘thus acquiring, as it were, the status of an algebraic sign’” (128). Both Žižek and Fink is regularly violate this injunction; to avoid confusion, I have replaced their “object a” with “[*objet petit a*]” throughout this document.

while always retaining its link to the imaginary, shifts concurrently with the shift of accent Žižek refers to, and aligns itself with the vocabulary of desire —lack, remainder, surplus—, but specifically in reference to the element of the real that remains unassimilated in and unrepresentable by the symbolic. The true object of desire is precisely the portion of the symbolic that is “missing.” As such, it coincides precisely with split that we have identified as the mechanism through which desire ensures its eternal self-reproduction, the “object-cause” of Lacanian desire.

This definition of the *objet petit a* allows us to return to the scopic drive and, through it, the gaze.¹¹⁹ Indeed, the scopic drive and the gaze must be dealt with together, for Lacan himself pronounces on two separate occasions that “[t]he eye and the gaze [...] is for us the split in which the drive is manifested at the level of the scopic field” and, more plainly, that “[t]he objet [petit] a in the field of the visible is the gaze” (*Four Fundamental* 72, 105). Lacan defines the drives as partial manifestations of desire, topographical locations (“erogenous zones”) where portions of desire can be, in a sense, materialized and dealt with in the symbolic register. The notion of drive is therefore concerned with the partial satisfaction of desire in the form of excitement that promises the possibility of pleasure (*jouissance*). We must note that *jouissance* itself is not coextensive with pleasure or pain (though it can result in either or both), but is a relationship between the subject and the excitement he or she feels by fantasizing about possessing an object of desire. When Ellie Ragland posits that “desire enters the

119. Of the four drives Lacan names, the scopic is one of the two that is intimately related to desire. Each drive is localized around an erogenous zone: the mouth (oral drive), the anus (anal drive), the eyes (scopic drive), and the ears (invocatory drive). Lacan is careful to underscore that these four zones are not essentially erogenous, but symbolically structured; that is, they are erogenous only because we understand them to be erogenous. According to Lacan’s conceptualization, the former two drives relate to demand (the fulfillment of biological needs), and the latter two relate to desire.

symbolic order in the partial drives circulating around partial objects, fetish objects that lure one in the imaginary” (Barnard and Fink 197), she not only suggests that the drives allow some of desire to be symbolized. She also indicates that the satisfaction of that part of desire is postulated not in terms of the possession of a “real” object, but in the subject’s relationship with imaginary objects that he imagines will satiate his desire. *Jouissance*, then, is something that “the subject orchestrates for himself in fantasy” (Fink 60).¹²⁰

The relationship that *jouissance* and the gaze have to fantasy is fundamental. The subject of the scopic drive unconsciously desires to recuperate “the gaze that first structured [him or her] as a subject of desire, seeking to retrieve a lost *jouissance*” (Feldstein, Fink and Jaanus 197), that is, a lost sense of fullness or wholeness perceived as lost from the moment that he mistakenly recognized himself as the object of the mother-Other’s gaze. At the moment of that (mis)recognition a number of monumental things occur. The subject first realizes that the Other is shot through with desire and therefore not complete; that is, he recognizes that the Other is a “split” subject.¹²¹ The subject furthermore recognizes that he, too, is thoroughly penetrated by desire, and is therefore likewise a split subject, with a lack parallel to that of the Other. Finally, the subject misapprehends the Other’s desire as the desire to return to a state of completeness, which she will achieve by filling her lack with the subject; he identifies his own desire as the desire to fulfill that Other’s desire by completing her, by filling her lack with his own. In Lacan’s already-cited words, “one lack is superimposed upon the other.”

120. In Lacanian algebra, fantasy is represented as $\$ \diamond a$, which is read as “the split subject in relation to *objet petit a*.”

121. Lacan calls the desiring subject a “split” subject (indicated by the bar in the matheme $\$$) because desire, as we’ve seen, implies a lack that cannot be filled. The subject of the scopic drive who hopes to fill his lack with the the desire of the Other (“materialized” in the gaze) essentially seeks to fill a lack with a lack.

In reality, the gaze in question is literally the absence about which the scopic drive circles, representative of the lack at the heart of the subject and desire. It is a purely formal object—it is “objectively nothing” (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 12)—that only functions insofar as it is not constituted in the symbolic. But when “viewed from a certain perspective [...] distorted by desire” this nothingness “assumes the shape of ‘something’”; that is, its “empty form [is] filled out by [the] fantasy” (133) of wholeness that to the subject’s conscious mind only requires that he acquire the fantasy object of his desire. Any object will do: Lacan, here paraphrasing Freud, underscores that “[a]s far as the object in the drive is concerned, *let it be clear that it is, strictly speaking, of no importance*. It is a matter of total indifference” (*Four Fundamental* 168, emphasis added). Despite whatever material reality the fantasy object that fills out the emptiness of the real has, it is the subject’s relationship to it in the imaginary that posits it as an object of his desire. But, as Ragland notes, since “where the object is sought there is an empty place that ultimately cannot be filled, [causing] a dissatisfaction that is finally unappeasable” (Barnard and Fink 197), the actual acquisition of the object “may turn to disgust and even to horror” (Fink 60).¹²² The satisfaction of the drive is thus not obtained through the acquisition of a purported object of desire, but instead by *postponing* its acquisition and thus allowing for the renewal of the circuit followed by the drive in question: though it seems to chase after a goal, the “object” of the drive is actually the drive itself. As

122. Omri Ceren at *Icon Index Symbol* has published the following clever, modern example of the inherent ambivalence of *jouissance*:

The dynamic of the gaze can certainly be a source of pleasure. The example [professors] use in discussions [...] is about being on the dancefloor in a club. A woman is dancing by herself, but she knows that some man is looking at her. The guy knows that she knows, she knows the guy knows that she knows, and so on [...]. But if the guy stares at her too openly—or if she forces him to acknowledge that he’s watching her by making eye contact for too long—then the *jouissance* of the encounter violently dissipates. People actually have a word for what happens if the guy keeps looking after this happens: creepy. (n.p.)

Lacan notes, “[b]y snatching at its object, the drive learns in a sense that this is precisely not the way it will be satisfied” (*Four Fundamental* 167); that is, the moment the subject reaches to grasp the object the drive posits as its goal, desire slips away, latching onto a new object, and the possibility of *jouissance* at best dissolves, thereby perpetuating itself, or at worst materializes, producing disgust or horror.

What does the subject desire in relation to the gaze? Lacan answers, to realize “the desire of the Other.” One of the ways that we can read Lacan’s classic formula “man’s desire is the desire of the Other”¹²³ is as a suggestion that desire is fundamentally recursive: all a subject truly desires is to be an object of desire for the Other; that is, the subject seeks to fill his or her lack by (ful)filling the lack in the Other, by being what the Other needs to be whole and thus becoming whole again him or her self. Put another way, the subject longs to be the object that reconstitutes the wholeness of the Other, whose gaze will reconstitute his own wholeness. He seeks to align his lack with the Other’s lack, his *jouissance* with the Other’s *jouissance*.

This interpretation, which is corroborated by Lacan as one of many possibilities, suggests far-reaching consequences for the circuit of the scopic drive. Consistent with the structure of fantasy, the gaze as *objet petit a* is now positioned in the imaginary (as fantasy object) and the real (as lack), but *not* in the symbolic (which the Other inhabits). The gaze does not properly belong to the Other, nor is it initiated by the Other; it is merely *imagined* (or fantasized) by the subject *in the place of* the Other. The subject fantasizes that the gazing Other

123. “*Le désir de l’homme est le désir de l’Autre*” (*Écrits* 690 and elsewhere).

sees him or her as an object of desire, and consequently offers him or her self up¹²⁴ as both desiring subject and object of desire. It is immaterial to the subject's experience of *jouissance* whether there is in fact an other watching him or whether he is truly an object of that other's desire; "[the subject's] desire is merely a vain detour with the aim of catching the *jouissance* of the [O]ther [...]" (Lacan, *Four Fundamental* 183). The maintenance of this fantasy, the "clinging" of the subject to *objet petit a* (the gaze, the desire of the Other), allows him to "sustain the illusion of wholeness" and "ignore his or her division" (Fink 59). The breakdown of the fantasy —the horrific revelation that neither the fantasy object nor the gaze fills the lack in the subject, nor does the subject fill any lack in the Other— entails the breakdown of the subject's illusory integrity.

By way of illustration, the scopic drive may trace the following course: a subject feels gazed upon by an Other whom he cannot locate, and who may or may not exist. His inability to locate the gaze of which he is the object activates the scopic drive, whose objective is rendered in the subject as the desire to be the Other's object of desire. By constituting himself as the desired object of an invisible Other's gaze, the subject manages to fuel his fantasy of primordial wholeness while at the same time repeating the originary split that constituted his traumatic experience of *jouissance*, which in its turn signaled the advent of his subjectivity.¹²⁵ This portion of the drive's circuit is summed up laconically (or Lananically) in Lacan's translation of the formula "*che vuoi?*": not "what do you want?" but "what do you want *from me?*" (*Écrits* 690, emphasis added). As long as the Other's gaze remains unlocalizable —that is, as

124. "*se donne à voir*"

125. According to Žižek, the fantasies that support desire are "a surplus of the real that propels us to narrate again and again our first traumatic experience with *jouissance*." (*Looking Awry* 133)

long as it remains a lack, representative of the *objet petit a*— and as long as the Other's desire is neither too transparent nor too opaque, the scopic drive may satisfy its goal of circling around it. The moment the gaze comes out into the open —when “eye contact” is made, so to speak— the gazing big Other becomes a mere little other whose desire is transparent. The subject is no longer forced to ask “*che vuoi?*”, the scopic drive ceases its circular motion and desire slips away as the possibility of *jouissance* evaporates.

Because the scopic drive is manic and mechanical in its devotion to following its circuit, there are occasions when the pleasure derived from the gaze goes awry. The drive is persistent, constant, and unregulated, seeking only to postpone the consummation of desire. If, instead of eventually coming into the open, the Other's desire remains persistently opaque, the drive accesses its predisposition to escape our grasp and cycle out of control. In this scenario, “*che vuoi?*” transforms into a protestation, a desperate “what do you *want* from me?”, and the subject is forced to endlessly repeat the trauma of *jouissance* that prevents him or her from fantasizing his or her own integrity as a subject. At this point the gaze transforms into a symptom of the Lacanian real, the unnameable lack at the center of the symbolic network and the subject's place in it. When the object sought reveals “an empty place” in the subject “that cannot be filled,” the imaginary scaffolding that supported his or her identity as a desiring subject within the field of the Other becomes unsustainable, and begins to break down. The subject collapses under the weight of the gaze. *Jouissance* cedes to anxiety, anguish, and psychosis.

MADERO'S BODY CANNOT SEE; IT CAN ONLY GAZE

With this theoretical context in mind, let us return to *Madero, el otro*. In order to analyze the mechanism that drives the dissolution of Madero's identity, we must attend to the margins of the narrative, those sections from which Solares's sententious history lessons serve to distract the reader. As we have seen, the libidinal punch of the gaze dissolves when eye contact is made with the gazing subject. But throughout *Madero, el otro* the spirit Madero looks persistently at his dead body. He seems unable to look away; its unblinking gaze seems to hold him in its psychic grasp. The gaze is only broken off at the end when the body's eyes close, after Madero has been forced to relive his last days, to be subjected to interrogations about his motives and reasonings, and to weave the reality of his death into a symbolic narrative. Unlike the conceptualization of gaze we have considered thus far, the gazing subject in *Madero, el otro* is immediately visible, but it is impossible to achieve eye-contact with him. This is the fundamental fact, the crucial detail that allows Solares's narrative to function: Madero's body cannot see; it can only gaze. This implacable, empty gaze seems to demand something from Madero, but the opacity of its demand is exemplary. "[T]he apparitions that emerge in the domain 'between two deaths' [symbolic death and real, physical death]," writes Žižek, "address to us some unconditional demand, and it is for this reason that they incarnate pure drive without desire" (*Looking Awry* 21). Ignited and set in motion by the impenetrable gaze, Madero's drive—which issues the demand to reconcile the reality of his death with the imaginary identity he had fashioned for himself—spins out of control.

In short order, Madero's identity appears to be in shambles at the intersection of two warring impulses: the pacifist, vegetarian, *espiritista* Madero on the one hand, and the warlike

leader of the Mexican Revolution —*el otro Madero*— on the other.¹²⁶ The astonishing completeness of his disintegration is helped in no small way by the litany of questions with which the narrator accosts him throughout the novel, but most relentlessly in the opening gestures,¹²⁷ and the almost comically superfluous appeal for the spirit Madero to remain with his body: “Quédate ahí, hermano. No te vuelvas hacia la luz” (10).¹²⁸ The need to rebuild the protagonist’s identity is the motor that drives the narrative, whose content ranges from extended history lessons on the *decena trágica* to problematic considerations of the schism that seems to articulate the relationship between Madero’s ideals and the historical reality he brings about. Solares’ goal in *Madero, el otro* is to at least bring into focus the moments when Madero’s irreconcilable motivations reveal themselves with the most clarity, which predictably coincide with points of historical articulation in which the revolutionary leader’s decisions change the course of history. By bringing into relief the conflict that constitutes the core of Madero’s identity and informs his decisions in his final days, Solares shines a spotlight on the complexity and inconsistency of Madero’s historical activity, a complexity that is often

126. Because Madero remains mute throughout the novel, any assertion about what spirit Madero as a character in the novel thinks, feels, desires, or experiences in the novel is, at best, an educated guess on the part of a careful reader. As evidence of the breakdown of spirit Madero’s subjective integrity, for the moment the following quotation —a clear allusion to *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*— shall suffice: “...haciéndote por primera vez plenamente consciente de su complejo mecanismo por el cual la sangre circula, el hígado secreta bilis, el páncreas regula azúcar, los riñones producen orina, los músculos responden a tus órdenes” (*Madero, el otro* 10). This topic will be taken up again in the section on the Mirror Stage.

127. “¿No eras tú el que siempre refirió a su cuerpo como un mero instrumento para cumplir los designios de la providencia, y llegaste a casi despreciarlo?” “¿O fue el el rompimiento tan brusco [...]? ¿O la convicción de haber cometido un gran error [...]? ¿Te hubiera sucedido igual si mueres en tu casa [...]? ¿O es el presentimiento de que tu muerte no hará sino desencadenar otras muertes [...]? ¿No te jactabas más de tus triunfos conseguidos en el campo de la democracia [...]? ¿Y ahora? ¿Qué hacer con toda esta violencia de la que te sientes responsable? ¿No te duele más el sacrificio de tu hermano Gustavo que el tuyo propio?” (10-11).

128. This quotation should be read as another, curious attempt to distract the reader from the importance of the body by suggesting that Madero himself must be encouraged to remain with it for a time.

whitewashed in the name of national mythology and the all-purpose amalgam of ideals known as The Revolution. At the same time as he reveals these contradictions, he exculpates his hero by providing a cogent and convincing case for their origin in the deepest part of his identity.

Solares' line of questioning renders the figure of Madero in three dimensions as a man with faults and failings, as neither hero nor villain. Unfortunately, in so doing he also problematizes Madero's position in the pantheon of Mexican revolutionary heroes by acutely destabilizing his viability as a historical figure worthy of remembrance. Solares's objective is not, however, to topple Madero as a revolutionary leader or even to call into question his value as a Mexican hero. On the contrary, he seeks to seriously interrogate Madero's history in order to separate the man, in all his contradictions, from the mythology in which he has been steeped since the moment of his death, his name seized for this or that reason in support of mutually exclusive platforms. The disunity articulated in the opening passage of the novel, which widens into a split between the two constitutive and contradictory components of Madero's identity, is brought to bear on the figure of the protagonist at every turn as he wends his way through his final days, and relentlessly asks: which Madero will prevail? Solares's unmitigated success in putting Madero's legacy in question, in dividing him from the myth and within himself, is only half of his artfulness. At the same time as he demonstrates Madero's fundamental disunities, Solares must sustain him as a coherent historical personage. Having broken Madero's identity down into two utterly antagonistic, mutually exclusive halves, he must also allow for their resolution into a cohesive whole whose legacy, Solares

seems to suggest, is much more complex than it has traditionally been portrayed to and by the Mexican public.

Seen through this lens, the remainder of the novel is as much a systematic history lesson (that verges on the outright didacticism) as it is a furious attempt to reconstitute Madero's identity as a coherent unity in order that he may be released from his endless consideration of his dead body and pass on. The process of identity (re)formation to which Madero is subjected—in this instance identity formation is in part the symbolic task of an already-constituted subject, rather than the imaginary task of a Subject-to-be on Lacan's mirror stage¹²⁹—works exclusively in favor of reconciling the shocking but ultimately foreseeable denouement of the *decena trágica*, with the narrative Madero had evidently been counting on.¹³⁰ *Madero, el otro's* task is to demonstrate how Madero's assassination at the hands of his political adversaries was overdetermined by the events that preceded it, which is to say, by Madero's own contradictory impulses. Until such work is completed, and the symbolic narrative of Madero is reviewed, interrogated, and corrected; until Madero can be reconciled in the imaginary, albeit provisionally, with Madero, el otro; until his *sense-less* (i.e. real) death can be made to *make sense* and inserted into a *sensible* narrative, Madero is a corpse who cannot die.¹³¹

A corpse where there should only have been an absence, Madero must be quickly and quietly assimilated into a narrative to allow the symbolic to continue functioning. The fact of

129. Though the presence of mirrors should not and shall not be overlooked in this analysis (see page 158).

130. That is, the notion that he would stabilize the country, finish out his term as President, and put his country on the path toward functioning democracy by holding free and open elections.

131. We will return to this image later in reference to Volpi's and Uribe's novels (see Chapter 3).

his death likewise resists symbolization until it can be interpreted by the characters in the novel as the historically appropriate consequence of a given set of pre-conditions. Read through Lacan's theory of the drives, Solares's staging of Madero's death converts the latter's corpse into the evidence of a breakdown in the symbolic network that organizes the imaginary meaning traditionally attributed to the paradigmatic Mexican hero. Thanks to this breakdown, Madero himself, as he is typically remembered, is revealed as a fantasy object; the characteristics of his historical narrative unsuitable for the construction of a Mexican hero are rejected and forcibly excluded from the symbolic, becoming instead the lack around which Maderista mythology is organized, covered over with an image of Madero rendered wholly desirable. Since the (likewise imaginary in the Lacanian sense) concepts of Mexico and "Mexicanness" tend to be structured in large part around the legacy of the Revolution set in motion by that hero, Solares reveals to the reader that these notions, too, are structured around a fantasy that must be contested, or at minimum questioned. It is to that end, to force a long overdue interrogation of the elements that structured Mexico's reality at the end of the 1980s, that Solares novelistically reveals, reclaims, and rehabilitates the unappealing reality of his protagonist's identity. Recalling this chapter's epigraph, the generation of conflict, the breakdown of the protagonist's identity, and the necessity of interpretation all derive directly from the gaze.

It is not surprising, given the overwhelming nature of Madero's corporality, that *Madero, el otro's* final gesture likewise begins by turning back to the dead body of the protagonist, and repeats some of the motifs of the opening: "Como ves, el primer pasaje —que siempre relacionaste con el canal acerado de una aguja— te ha conducido al mismo lugar en

que estabas, tendido boca arriba en un páramo ahora desolado.” What is of the utmost importance is that here Madero’s body has finally died:

Ahora que los párpados [de tu cuerpo] de sangre han terminado de caer, vuelve a abrir los ojos [de tu espíritu] y, mira, la luz que te acosaba no era sino el puro casco reluciente de la noche. Mírala, adivina la estrella a la que irás. Quizás, a pesar del dolor y de la culpa, has empezado a desatarte, a salir, a elevarte sin darte cuenta. (220)

The body’s eyes close, and the impenetrable gaze is broken off. Madero’s spirit is released from whatever bound him to the site/sight of his murder —“Mira, ¿lo ves?, aquí; en este sencillo tapanco *has logrado abolir la muerte* y lo puedes ver: *eres todos nosotros y tú mismo*, y estás en donde, desde siempre, tenías que haber estado” (221, emphasis added)— and, having rewoven his death into a cohesive symbolic narrative, Madero “[puede] volver a ser [...] él,” that is, *he can again be who he has always been*: contradictory, imperfect, but integral:

ése, el loco Madero, que fue un místico equivocado porque lo invadieron demasiadas voces y un político equivocado porque traspuso el umbral de la paz y de la democracia y holló con su pie un terreno que no le correspondía y aceptó y generó una violencia que temía y rechazaba, que lo desconcertó y culpó tanto que terminó por hacer exactamente lo contrario a aquello que debería haber hecho para evitarlo. (220)¹³²

The gravity of the gaze in the novel’s opening paragraph appears unquestionable, but its consequences can only take on the importance our reading wishes to ascribe them if they are borne out by the rest of the novel. It is therefore significant that Solares carefully highlights the central importance of Madero’s body by establishing it as a recurring element throughout the novel. Indeed, references back to the “present” of Madero’s death and the observation of his dead body form a steady undercurrent that both drives and supports the his-

132. This will not be the last time we see the Lacanian real prompting a character to do precisely the opposite of what he wishes to accomplish (see page 206).

torical narrative that is the novel's primary content. These returns to the body become one of the novel's main structuring elements. The visions Madero's experiences of his past are constantly being interrupted by reminders of where he is and how his historical journey is to proceed: jumping between pivotal moments in the narrative —“Pero no te detengas en una sola imagen: podrías después no salir de ella” (41)—, and, as with any good psychoanalytic narrative, always backwards —“Por eso, continúa mirando (mirándonos) y *recuerda el momento anterior y luego el otro anterior, siempre hacia atrás*, hacia el inicio, lo que es para ti, en estos momentos, *la única forma de avanzar*” (71, emphasis added)¹³³—. These recurrences, which are crucial to establishing novelistic continuity between scenes, always occur at structurally important moments when what has already been remembered is revealed as insufficient to explain Madero's demise; that is, they herald the need to look further back in his history to make sense and establish the inevitability of his end. They serve not only as interjections into a historical narrative of a non-objective narrative voice, or as a reminder to the reader of spirit Madero's principal importance in the novel (despite the limitations of his role as a non-participatory observer), but also as a subtle reminder that the sight of his dead body is specifically what is keeping him tethered to the physical world, to the *site* of his dead body. The body searches for him and his spirit companion with an uncomprehending, unceasing gaze; the narrator insists in each interruption of the narrative that Madero, who cannot seem to look away, continue seeking in its eyes for the explanation he requires to move

133. The precision with which Solares here describes the psychoanalytic method of working backwards toward the beginning in order to move forward with the analysis is essential to my reading of the novel within a psychoanalytic frame as described in the introduction to this chapter.

on: “Mira, tus ojos muertos, recién muertos, parecen buscarte, buscarme. No salgas de ellos. Mejor dicho, adéntrate en ellos [...]” (43).

The insistence that Madero’s spirit remain tethered to his body is thus both implicit and explicit in the text, and assumes thematic and narratological dimensions. The narrator is not the only force bringing Madero back to the site of his murder; something structural to the novel continually recalls the scene, as though forbidding Madero from moving on before completing his pilgrimage through his final days. Indeed, though until now we have emphasized primarily the importance of the opening paragraph as thematically indispensable, it is possible to locate the fulcrum of the narrative motor even earlier. The epigraph to the novel, extracted from the *Bhagavad Gita* —a sacred Hindu scripture, elsewhere cited as Madero’s *libro predilecto*— reads thus: “Cualquier forma en que el hombre medite continuamente, esa forma es recordada en la hora de la muerte y hacia esa forma va él, oh Arjuna.” This passage constitutes another reason why Madero must reconcile death in the symbolic with his death in the real. Given the analysis we have carried out this far, we must ask, as Solares seems to bid us, what it means to be as deeply divided as Madero is in this moment. Which Madero will be remembered at the moment of his death?

Our reading of the novel seems to offer two potential answers. Solares and the narrator would have it that the root of the injunction to proceed to what lies beyond death resides in Madero’s divided nature. This is confirmed by Madero’s spiritual readings: the excerpt from the *Gita*, recast slightly, asserts that man must reflect continuously on the “form” toward which he wishes to go in the moment of his death. A reader whose interpretation was unbound by the supremacy of the spiritual might notice that spirit Madero’s mute inaction

before the narrator's interrogation throughout the novel connotes bewilderment more than reflection, which suggests that Madero's incapacity to move on stems from the breakdown of his identity; that is, from his need to ultimately confront the divisions in his identity and reintegrate his self into the symbolic narrative of Mexican history. In either case, the consequences are the same: Madero must unearth and reconstruct the form on which he wishes to meditate by tracing his history back to the moment when *el otro Madero* asserted himself for the first time and compromised his unity. Likewise in either case, it is essential to note that spirit Madero and his companion are consistently pulled back to the site of Madero's murder at the conclusion of each historical episode. As each episode in its turn proves insufficient to adequately explain how Madero's assassination was the predictable result of his own fragmented identity, the narrator must return to what he refers to as a "reference point," back up, and begin anew: "Pero regresa, vuelve a regresar una y otra vez a tu *otra* realidad [y] no pierdas de vista que *tu recuento debe encontrar un punto de referencia que te ayude a ir y venir. Mira, apenas has avanzado —hacia atrás— [...]*" (94, final emphasis added).

On the next page, the narrator curiously belies the extent to which he is circumscribed by the very narration he guides —unreliably, we must conclude— by suggesting that Madero's last day in power would make an ideal reference point: "El último día que ejerciste poder, por ejemplo. Eso, qué mejor punto de referencia que el día en que tuviste ya claro cuanto iba a suceder al final" (95). This may be an adequate point of reference for the final historical episode, which begins here and spans fully half of the novel. For the novel as a whole, however, that can be no finer reference point than the fixation on the materiality of Madero's dead body, the point which most prominently anchors the novel's "ir y venir."

MADERO IN THE MIRROR STAGE

Given that the overarching drama that unfolds in *Madero, el otro* describes the breakdown and reconstitution of Madero's identity, it is unsurprising from a Lacanian perspective to note the abundance of mirrors that appear throughout the novel. I am not the first to note the conspicuous presence of mirrors in Solares's novel, nor am I the first to suggest the appropriateness of a Lacanian reading. William Martínez's 1999 article "¿Eres o te pareces? la cuestión de la historia en *Madero, el otro* de Ignacio Solares" dedicates a small section to making an explicit connection between mirrors and Lacan's writings on the importance of the "mirror stage," the developmental phase in which the subject's ego is born. In the three brief paragraphs Martínez dedicates to his Lacanian analysis, he manages three distinct but, for him, equivalent sets of terms. Martínez's discussion begins by suggesting that "El desdoble 'Madero/el otro' encaja muy bien con lo que ha escrito Jacques Lacan sobre la etapa del espejo." With this apparent parallelism as his starting point, he also claims that *Madero, el otro* is fundamentally a story about the unsuccessful attempts of a "Madero personaje" to identify—as the ego identifies with its specular image on the mirror stage—with a "Madero histórico" (81) who is fundamentally illusory.

Configured thus, the titular Madero is equivalent to the subject in the mirror stage and to "Madero personaje," while the *otro* refers to the specular image and to "Madero histórico."¹³⁴ Despite his accurate identification of the cast of characters and the role each plays within its own binary, an error in the Martínez's reading prevents him from describing

134. "Madero personaje" for Martínez is roughly equivalent to what I have been calling "spirit Madero." "Madero histórico" refers to the Madero that "Madero personaje" and the narrator attempt to reconstruct over the course of the novel, who of course is represented by the corpse lying before them.

the struggle of Madero's struggle to identify with his true specular image —his corpse— in all its drama. I hesitate to accept several of Martínez's premises and conclusions: first, that the "*otro*" of *Madero, el otro* is a reference to the protagonist's specular image at all;¹³⁵ second, that Madero is attempting to identify with an image that is literally specular (i.e. located in a mirror); or third, that Madero's undertaking in the mirror stage is ultimately illusory or in vain.

As Lacan explains in "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," the mirror stage is paradoxically both the site where the subject first recognizes himself as a unified subject as well as that of his/her permanent, radical alienation from himself.¹³⁶ When the infant in the mirror stage "misrecognizes" himself in the mirror, identifying with a specular image that promises "wholeness and unity," he establishes his identity as something literally outside himself, an outside entity over which he seems to exert mastery, unlike his experience of his own fragmented body (4). The infant does not confuse the image with itself, but "situates" the ego by *assuming* the image *as* itself:

The jubilant assumption [*assomption*] of his specular image by the kind of being [...] the little man is at the *infans* stage [...] situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a *fictional* direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual. (Lacan, *Écrits* 76, final emphasis added)

This quotation makes two essential points that we must underscore. The infant's identification with his image in the mirror has a *fictional* quality, and therefore locates itself in the

135. In spite of the orthographic appropriateness of the fact that the Lacanian vocabulary identifies the specular image as the "little other."

136. "[T]he mirror-image in the life of every subject performs a quasi-transcendental function: it is the very 'fictional' (and indispensable) condition for having a sense of 'self' or of a series of variations ('selves' on the initial *Gestalt*, but simultaneously also the condition for being alienated from this genuine capacity of fictionalization or fantasy in so far as the subject tends to construct a kind of (no less fictional) straitjacket or carapace to 'contain' or limit its generation of images of the self" (Olivier 6-7).

imaginary order. It is only later that the imaginary “I,” the subject’s ego, is inaugurated into the symbolic order as part of the matrix, alongside the unconscious, that defines what Lacan calls the “barred” or “split” subject:¹³⁷ “the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to *socially elaborated* situations [in which it] is mediated by the [O]ther’s desire [...]” (*Écrits* 79, final emphasis added).¹³⁸ Socially elaborated situations —and by extension the subject— are by definition linguistically constituted, which is to say, fundamentally symbolic.¹³⁹ The quotation also refers to the dependency of the ego on a self-that-is-other —the specular image, the “little other”— that it can only ever approach “asymptotically,” indicating that the subject lays the groundwork for his identity atop a gap, an experience of alienation from itself that is “inalienable” (in the words of Lacanian critic Malcolm Bowie), that is, that cannot be eliminated or smoothed over.¹⁴⁰

137. Bert Olivier suggests that the formation of the subject can be expressed thus: subject = ego / unconscious (Olivier 2), which is to say that the subject is defined by the conflict between the (imaginary) ego and the (symbolic) unconscious.

138. The full quotation, which also describes the subject’s subjection to the desire of the Other in the symbolic, reads thus:

“This moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end inaugurates, through identification with the imago of one’s semblable and the drama of primordial jealousy [...], the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations.

“It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge [*savoir*] into being mediated by the other’s the desire, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence due to competition from other people, turns the *I* into an apparatus to which every instinctual pressure constitutes a danger, even if it corresponds to a natural maturation process.” (79)

139. “To the extent that *langue* embodies the ‘social bond’ [...] it is therefore understandable that, prior to acquiring the use of language, one can hardly be called a subject in the sense of being able to position oneself in the social and cultural world (represented by the symbolic order) through language in spoken or written form. In an important sense, one ‘becomes subject to the laws of society’ by entering the symbolic order of language” (Olivier 5).

140. “Significantly, Lacan observes that the specular image determines the functioning of the ego, prior to its social development, in fictional terms which are ‘irreducible’ for the individual. This implies that it —the ego or self modeled on the mirror-image— possesses an inimitable specificity, and will therefore never coincide completely with the subject in its genesis via entry into the (universal) linguistic order” (Olivier 4).

The fact that in *Madero, el otro* Madero (as spirit) literally looks upon his dead body *from outside himself* powerfully materializes and inverts the “lack” Lacan speaks of as constitutive of the subject.¹⁴¹ The materialization in Madero’s body of this lack, which emerges thanks to Solares’s reliance on the supernatural, transforms Madero’s imaginary (specular) body into a material fact. Its materiality permits spirit Madero to locate the gaze in his own former eyes —note how they “parecen buscar, buscarte, buscareme”— and remain fixated on them throughout the novel. The site of this uncanny gaze of Madero’s reified otherness furthermore acts as a screen for projecting and foregrounding the split between Madero’s two mutually exclusive selves, amplifying his own radical, permanent sense of alienation. This alienation widens into a rupture that threatens to rend apart his sense of self, both personal and social; that is, it threatens the most fundamental aspect of the protagonist’s imaginary constitution, endangering his capacity to exist as a subject.

These brief theoretical notes directly contradict the assertion that the “Madero/el otro” (or Madero personaje/Madero histórico) binary coincides with the split between Lacan’s subject and specular image: we cannot map Madero and his *alter ego* onto “Madero histórico” and “Madero personaje,” because each of the former Maderos coexist in tension inside both of the latter Maderos. That is, both “Madero” and “Madero, el otro” —passive idealist and violent revolutionary— are immanent to the figure of Francisco Madero, whether historical or literary. Since neither is “outside,” neither can represent Madero’s specular image or his ideal ego, as Martínez hopes to demonstrate.

141. From the reader’s perspective, the “true” Madero whose identity is in question is spirit Madero. The lack Lacan points out is inverted in the sense that this Madero doesn’t lack the alterity that constitutes the body as a subject; rather, it lacks a body in which to install itself as alterity.

Reading from this perspective, I sustain that the Madero/el otro split in fact *threatens* the project of aligning Madero (personaje) with his specular image (Madero histórico as represented by the corpse). As soon as we read Madero personaje's project as an attempt to *identify* with Madero histórico, we have already gone astray; in fact, the opposite occurs. Madero personaje already identifies with Madero histórico, and this is precisely the trouble: he no longer *recognizes* himself as or in the corpse with which he identifies, driven to its fatal end by two seemingly irreconcilable, warring psychical factions. The gap that emerges between Madero's ego and his specular image underscores and expresses, in a different way, the same identity crisis provoked by the corpse's gaze. The gap between Madero histórico y Madero personaje is then reified in the distance between Madero's spirit and his corpse. Following Martínez's reasoning to a different conclusion, Solares's successful literary project involves bringing these two visions back in line.

I propose, following a number of other readers of Solares's novel, that spirit Madero's inability to recognize himself in his corpse refers back to another of Madero's *internal* "splits": a propensity for violence and action that the protagonist is not willing to acknowledge in himself, personified and rejected as an "other Madero." Though the effects of the rupture manifest externally as history in the novel, the conflict from which the split materializes takes place and finds its resolution *inside* the protagonist. The novel makes the nature of this split clear at several points; "el otro Madero" is almost invariably treated nervously and kept at a fearful distance. As a "horrificed" Madero rapidly loses control of the violence he unleashed, prompting him to "absurdly" attempt to reformulate his revolution as a lawful act, the narrator queries, "¿Te asustaba el otro Madero, que habías descubierto en tu fascinación por la ac-

ción, en contraste con el de los retiros místicos, la meditación y el silencio?” (124). Accessing the essence of el otro Madero “implicaba sin remedio desatar las amarras de la furia y de la sangre contenida” (146). Madero is intoxicated by this essence —“¿Te embriagaba el mundo de la violencia al que ibas a adentrarte, tanto como en tu juventud, en París, te embriagabas con alcohol, con la sensación de no ser tú, de ser otro?”— which makes itself known “en la letra redonda y apretada [del] espíritu visitante” that persuades him to take up a revolutionary political mission (147, 154); indeed, it was el otro Madero who conceived “la gran acción redentora.”

It is furthermore made clear that “el otro” is neither outside of nor “other than” Madero; rather, the opposing Maderos are two sides of the same coin, inside and immanent to one another, as though Madero were situated between two mirrors in which he sees only the reflection of his own “other” side: “¿Cuándo, en qué momento empezaste a ser ese otro que ahora, mira, puedes descubrir en el espejo difusamente, no de frente sino más bien como si [te] miraras de espaldas, como si [te] miraras a través de espejos paralelos?” (155). The novel describes the manifestation of Madero’s other side in terms of liberation, a rediscovery of something previously latent: “Vamos, hermano, confíésalo: [...] ¿no fue aquella batalla como una explosión de vida; mejor dicho, como un reencuentro con la vida misma?” (157). This repressed aspect of Madero’s self naturally bursts forth time and again throughout Madero’s political life and the *decena trágica*. The narrator describes as “una promulgación de fe del otro Madero” the final paragraph of Madero’s call to revolutionary action, the *Plan de San Luis Potosí*, which reads “Conciudadanos, no vaciléis, pues, un momento: tomad las armas, arrojad del poder a los usurpadores, recobrad vuestros derechos de hombres libres y recordad

que nuestros antepasados nos legaron una herencia de gloria.” (145).¹⁴² As Madero’s tragic end approaches, the two are made to coexist in a state of increasing tension and instability:

—¿Le parece inútil la sangre que se derrama por acabar con los traidores, señor?— insistió [Gustavo Garmendia].

—Toda la sangre derramada por un conflicto entre hermanos es inútil, se lo aseguro.

¿Cómo podía hablar así el jefe de una revolución triunfante, que además él mismo inició? Pero aquel había sido otro Madero, ¿no es verdad?, y para entonces —como ahora— sólo te provocaba culpa y no querías ya saber de él. (196-97)

Though initially he may never have acknowledged or recognized the other Madero inside him, here we can see how earnestly he eventually practices a conscious, willful denial of its existence. By the time of his assassination, his “*fe en lo otro*” has run out entirely (212).

Like Madero’s inert body, mirrors also take on a structural importance by bookending the novel and marking important interior formal moments.¹⁴³ The whole drama of *Madero, el otro* plays itself out on a specular stage, converting mirrors into the space not where the protagonist recognizes himself as integral for the first time, but the space where he takes stock of his *disunity* and where his specular image reaches out and re-invests him with a meaningful and consistent identity by forcing him to retell the narrative of his life. In order to do so, the mirror occupies the locus of Madero’s unconscious, and his task reveals itself as fundamentally psychoanalytic. The mirror seems to absorb his words as well as his actions,

142. We might read this as the first official recognition of the other Madero.

143. For a brief moment, the reader can justifiably suspect that the narrator of the novel is, in fact, Madero’s specular image —“Estás solo (tú y yo), el espejo no refleja sino un rostro” (10)—, but this notion is quickly dispelled when the narrator implicitly identifies himself, in the same sentence, as spokesman for the mute protagonist.

and “stupidly” (to borrow a word from Žižek’s) repeats them over and over again (25), as if they were part of a repressed or traumatic experience demanding to be dealt with.

An appeal to trauma theory to describe the repetition in the mirror of Madero’s history would not be amiss. Taking as a starting point Freud’s theory of trauma found in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Cathy Caruth explains trauma as a wound that is not “a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and [that] is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.” The nature of trauma is such that it cannot be located in the original event, but in the impossibility of its assimilation which causes its return “to haunt the survivor later on” (4).¹⁴⁴ Madero is forced to read these images from the real into a cohesive symbolic narrative that permits him to confront and ultimately dispel them once stripped of their traumatic aspect. The scenes that appear in the mirror proceed backwards, and the consequences of past choices must be worked through before confronting the choices themselves, a regressive process akin to the interpretation of dreams and the piecemeal revelation of psychoanalytic narratives.

By way of repeated appeals to approach the mirror (*Madero, el otro* 128, 201) and to look deeper into it (146, 159) —that is, further back in time— Madero will supposedly be able to accomplish a number of mutually sympathetic and fundamentally psychoanalytic goals. In the first place, he will finally come to understand the apparently historically overdetermined causes for the things that went so terribly wrong in his administration. Most no-

144. It is significant that Madero is made not only to see the events of his past, but to *hear* the repetition of his words. Trauma for Caruth is intimately tied to the voice of the other.

tably he will face his “betrayal” of Emiliano Zapata, the loss of whose support induces immense guilt in the protagonist: “¿Cómo entenderlo [el por qué de la traición de Madero] sin revivir el inicio de tu relación con él [Zapata], sin avivar las escenas: altas lenguas de fuego, con el espejo que tienes enfrente?” (100). In the second place, he may be able to dispel his guilt, not just for betraying Zapata, but for unleashing the waves of violence and death that will outlive him by nearly a decade. The elimination of his “gran culpa” (11) will permit him to quit the terrestrial plane to which he is bound, and move on to the Hindu eternity that awaits him, as promised in the *Bardo Thodol* [*Tibetan Book of the Dead*] and in his *sesiones espiritistas*. According to the narrator, “sólo al volver a ver, una y otra vez, las escenas que más te culpabilizan podrás, quizá, desvanecerlas, convertirlas en humo, como a tantos otros recuerdos” (201-02). As borne out in the narrative, Madero successfully achieves both of these goals.

Lastly, the re-vision of his past in the mirror also grants Madero the opportunity to identify the pivotal moments when his warring motivations seized the chance to make decisions consistent with their respective ideologies but without regard for historical circumstances, at times even antithetical to Madero’s revolutionary program. Prominent among these are the decisions that delivered him into Huerta’s hands (214), decisions leading directly to his assassination, as well as those that thrust him into politics in the first place. In answering this question, more than anywhere else in the novel, Solares and his narrator, two readers invested in unraveling the mysteries of Madero’s life, avail themselves of their own creative potential. Their solution to explaining the seemingly inexplicable path Madero chose, and in harmonizing his perennially frustrating incoherence, is to qualify his actions as

historical imperatives that could not have happened any other way, or to invest Madero himself with an unlikely omniscient clairvoyance, due either to revelations brought about during his *sesiones espiritistas* or to an innate talent, with respect to the endpoint of his historical trajectory.

A CONTINGENT ACCIDENT

“[...] the catastrophic event is inscribed into the future as destiny, for sure, but also as a contingent accident [...]. It is [...] the event’s actualization —the fact that it takes place— which retroactively creates its necessity.”
—Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *qtd. by Slavoj Žižek in First As Tragedy, Then As Farce*

The interpretations put forth by the narrator are indeed tempting. It is easy to read the narrative outlined in Solares’s novel as leading inexorably up to the outbreak of revolutionary violence, and simple to see Madero merely playing the role assigned to him by what psychoanalysis would refer to as the (non-existent) “Other of the Other,” “a hidden subject who pulls the strings of the great Other (the symbolic order) precisely at the points at which this other starts to speak its ‘autonomy,’ i.e., where it produces an effect of meaning by means of a senseless contingency” (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 18). Elisabeth Guerrero has proposed a Hegelian reading in *Confronting History and Modernity in Mexican Narrative*, suggesting that “Madero would be unconsciously guided not by the spirits of the dead but by a rational world spirit” (17). The large-scale historical determinism espoused by the Hegelian model of history seems to be precisely what the narrator indicates by repeating throughout the novel expressions like “[y]a no tenía remedio”, “ya no había regreso”, “no podía ser de otra manera”, and “¿quién podía haberlo evitado?” (13, 16, 33, 41), to list only those that occur in the first 50 pages. Viewed thus, Madero lacks the historical agency required to lay the blame for his

decisions and their consequences at his feet; indeed, if history lacks contingency because it evolves in a pre-determined way, major players on the historical stage cannot be held accountable for their actions at all. Exculpated by the relentless advance of history, Madero could reasonably abdicate responsibility for the decisions he made and abandon the desire or obligation to explain them.

A Lacanian reading of *Madero, el otro* categorically denies the possibility for such radical determinism: as Lacan asserts, there is no Other of the Other. Another interpretation, more in keeping with our “symptomatic reading,” is possible. From Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* and going forward, psychoanalysis teaches that “meaning” is an imposition the subject places on a set of contingencies. Just as the dream stitches together a mismatched set of condensed and displaced repressed wishes into a cogent narrative, so the subject must, in Lacanian parlance, piece together the disparate real elements of the world he or she inhabits into a set of connected, causal relationships in the symbolic. The most favorable interpretation of a dream integrates as many elements of the dream—which in its turn uses the dreamer’s life as its own building blocks—as possible; that is, as Freud points out, dream narratives and their interpretations tend to be overdetermined by the materials they put at the disposal of the analyst. The narratives that subjects construct to retroactively impose meaning on an otherwise incoherent reality are likewise overdetermined by the elements of the real rejected by the symbolic. Furthermore, the indelibility of the past imposes rigid limits on our ability to think about what might have been: only what has happened can be what has happened.¹⁴⁵

145. Ignacio Solares has proven himself well aware of this important point. In his recent collection *Ficciones de la revolución mexicana*, he repeatedly carries factually-based historical narratives up to the very point of rupture at which, by altering key details, history’s radical contingency erupts onto the stage of historical fact. He is ultimately reticent to pursue the alternate contingencies he so prolifically creates—e.g., what

The analyst —the “reader”— assumes the responsibility for remembering that the narratives that govern the symbolic, convincing though they must be, are constructs bound together in order to hide the radical contingency of the events that describe their trajectory. When I speak of the contingency of the symbolic, I am referring, following both Lacan and Žižek, to the fact that the occurrences of the real are both random (not bound by script or teleology) and accidental (not produced by the will or intention of any subject). The symbolic scripts that subjects retroactively impose on the real —which we know as “interpretations”— deny these qualities in a variety of ways: by privileging certain elements of the real while discarding others; by establishing implicit and explicit hierarchies governed by causal relationships; and by constructing retroactive narratives that institute teleologies that manifestly do not exist in the real. Once initiated, the symbolic machinery does not require any intervention; it will blithely continue running, “relentlessly pre-ordain[ing] and organiz[ing] human experience” (Olivier 5), without regard for or awareness of the unstable contingencies that grant it the illusion of structure and order. Žižek refers to this “blind, contingent automatism” as “the constitutive stupidity of the symbolic order” (*Looking Awry* 18). The symbolic automaton continues running until some element of the real, an element that the symbolic machine cannot account for and whose quality of radical contingency it cannot mask, suddenly appears and threatens to break the system down. “The contingent real,” when

would have happened if Porfirio Díaz had decided to execute Francisco Madero before the latter launched his campaign; what would have happened if Madero had later listened to his brother instead of trusting Huerta—, admitting in a recent conversation his belief in the precise line of reasoning I have quoted here, expressed in the succinct form, “no hay ‘hubiera.’” That is, he sees little value in pursuing unrealized potential histories, as the histories that have already happened are retroactively overdetermined as the only conceivable possibilities.

it appears in the symbolic, “triggers the endless work of interpretation that desperately tries to connect the symbolic network [...] with the events of our ‘real life’ [...]” (31).

The narrative that *Madero, el otro* attempts to piece together resides firmly in a symbolic order as I have just described it. The events it attempts to bind together and explain — that is, the individual events that we put together to create “history” — exist, undifferentiated and utterly contingent, in the real. The narrator summons them into the symbolic in order to impose structure, order, and meaning on them. Madero’s body, considered through this lens, is a symptom of the real, the visible effect within the symbolic of what Madero excluded to write his narrative: the possibility of his own death. The senseless presence of what should have been intrinsically absent irrupts into reality as evidence of the symbolic order’s “constitutive stupidity,” breaks Madero’s system for meaning-making, and forces the full-scale reappraisal of the Madero narrative in order to build in the eventuality of what, at the beginning of the novel, comes to pass. This reappraisal takes the form of an interpretive task “triggered” by the appearance of the “contingent real” in the symbolic order.

In order to assimilate Madero’s body into a new, coherent system of meaning, the narrator must likewise systematically and relentlessly ignore that it is fundamentally meaningless, merely a “contingent accident.” To do so, he seeks out and overemphasizes the details of the Madero narrative that point to the overdetermination of three central elements: he takes for granted, first, that Madero’s death was the inevitable result of the events preceding it; second, he remains intransigent before the possibility that, at any stage, things could have worked out any other way; and third, he assumes that, at some point, Madero came to understand what he had to do in order to bring about the Mexican Revolution and his own

death. The narrator's obsession with denying the contingencies he encounters with far-flung theories about Madero's preternatural knowledge of the future attests to the seriousness of his task. The contingency of the real is sheer absence of meaning, unseizable and unassailable. This is why the narrator insists so strongly throughout the novel on remaining "blind" to the contingencies that lead to Madero's death. Convincing himself of Madero's clairvoyance constitutes a valid, albeit desperate, defense mechanism.

This is another reason why the narrative proceeds backwards, from end to beginning. In retrospect, Madero's death seems inevitable insofar as it has already occurred and is therefore retroactively instated as *the only viable outcome*. It also explains the narrator's insistence that there was "no other way" events could have played out. The illusion of teleology is an unavoidable consequence of the symbolic order's inherent "stupidity," as is the blindness of those immersed in the illusion of order and inevitability that it mechanically produces: "the experience of a linear 'organic' flow of events is an illusion (albeit a necessary one) that masks the fact that it is the ending that retroactively confers the consistency of an organic whole on the preceding events. What is masked is the radical contingency of the enchainment of narration, the fact that, at every point, things might have turned out differently" (Žižek 69).¹⁴⁶ By concealing alternative paths, teleology denies the possibility of narrative contingency by installing a spurious, a priori notion of order, such that events are taken to be always already

146. To see how this notion can be brought to bear on the way in which *Madero, el otro* manipulates the historical record to contest received narratives, see Elisabeth Guerrero's analysis of the novel. I will limit my own comments on the matter to the following quote from Michel de Certeau's fundamental book *The Writing of History*: "Historians endlessly establish contingent time through archeology; they produce the past by virtue of practicing arcane crafts of resurrection, animation, and even ventriloquism" (viii).

meaningful and purposeful. But, as Žižek reminds us, the experience is ultimately illusory, a “retroactive illusion” whose by-products are “radically contingent.”

It is curious, with this in mind, to note that the narrator is reluctant to assign any particular moment in Madero’s trajectory as the point of no return, the moment when the sequence of events will have already demanded the inevitability of a single viable *denouement*. As he marshals evidence that the protagonists’s death was overdetermined, the point at which “ya no había regreso” remains decidedly fluid. Initially, Madero’s fate (and that of the Revolution) is sealed only when he falls into the hands of one of his enemies in February of 1913: “es cierto que al final no había regreso: sólo tu sacrificio sería antídoto ante el veneno que lo invadía ya todo, y si no te mataba Huerta te mataba Zapata o te mataba Carranza o, si aguantabas lo suficiente, te mataba Obregón y, entonces: ¿qué imagen dejabas de tu pobre revolución?” (16).¹⁴⁷ In subsequent pages, the narrator wonders if Madero’s destiny became fixed as far back as 1903 when the spirits teach him to forgive his enemies and to look upon death with disdain (55); or later, in 1904, when he gets involved in local politics and encourages the *campesinos* who admire him to take advantage of their rights to vote, after which “[y]a no había regreso, hermano, caíste (te hicimos caer)” in the temptation to move into the arena of national politics (63-64); or much later, in 1910, when Madero emerges as the only viable candidate in the Club Antirreeleccionista: “Ya no había regreso. ¿Ya no había regreso, hermano? Quizá fue ahí donde debiste detenerte. ¿Todavía era posible?” (135); or perhaps in 1912, when he inexplicably reduced the sentence for Huerta’s treachery, wondering “¿O ya no había, desde entonces, posibilidades de elegir?” (121).

147. Let us note in passing that even here the inevitability of Madero’s death remains rather unfixed.

Ultimately, it does not matter at which of these moments the narrator decides that Madero could no longer turn back. Nor does it matter if, as he repeatedly suggests, Madero knew everything all along (221) or if “no lo [sabía] del todo, no [podía] saberlo. ¿O sería mejor decir que lo [sabía] y, a la vez, no lo [sabía]?” (214), if he desperately sought a way out at the last moment (209) or if he longed for a bullet that would bring about “el final inexorable” (196). Nor does it matter, in the end, whether he believes that Madero was orchestrating his own demise, or was merely one of “las piezas de la fatalidad [que] empezaban a distribuirse y a colocarse en su sitio correspondiente” (193). Just as he cannot resolve the paradox between Madero’s freely chosen but pre-determined destiny (that is, between his contingent narrative and his teleological destiny), the narrator seems believes that all of above possibilities are true notwithstanding their mutual exclusivity.

At bottom, we must understand the narrator’s relentless interrogation of the protagonist’s past, his enthusiasm for drawing the reader’s attention to all the moments when his choices impacted his future path while simultaneously denying that he had any choice at all, as a desperate, sustained attempt to stave off the possibility that Madero’s death was not somehow historically necessary; that is, that Madero’s narrative will have to be entirely rewritten to account for his premature death. For Madero’s fate is nothing if not a “contingent accident.” There are any number of moments when a different choice would have led him inexorably away from his tragic fate. Madero was “where he had to be” only insofar as he was nowhere else, and was meant to die only because he *did* die. In the context of the *Decena Trágica*, Madero’s death is, from our vantage point in the future, an inevitable narrative and historical necessity —“las cosas [...] sucedieron como tenían que suceder” (172)—; we must,

however, remain rigorously skeptical of any implication of rigid determinism or vulgar Marxist materialist necessity, and should not delude ourselves, as Solares's narrator would have us do, into believing that it was somehow historically unavoidable. Žižek expresses the same conceptual frame in terms of Hegel's law of contingency and necessity. In the former's words,

If —accidentally— an event takes place, it creates the preceding chain which makes it appear inevitable: this, and not commonplaces on how underlying necessity expresses itself in and through the accidental play of appearances, is *in nuce* the Hegelian dialectic of contingency and necessity. In this sense, although we are determined by destiny, we are nonetheless *free to choose our destiny*. (*First as Tragedy* 151)

WHY MADERO?

In his note after the conclusion of the novel, Solares reiterates what has become the rallying cry for historical novels published after *Noticias del Imperio*: “[E]sta novela surgió más de lo simbólicamente verdadero que de lo históricamente exacto, según fórmula de Borges [...]” (223). In the end, he says, his goal was not to resolve the incompatibilities he discovered in the historical record, but to “[e]scoger la versión que más convenga a la novela [...] siempre desde ese intervalo en el que resplandecen la realidad y la imaginación” (225). But this explanation masks by omission the manner in which Solares deals with another set of incompatibilities he discovers: those that inhabit the character of his protagonist. While Madero's review of his past manages to successfully weave his untimely death into a cogent narrative, it also raises, without answering, an astonishing number of questions about Madero's character and behavior. Besides the hundreds of questions the narrator explicitly poses in the text, we might ask the following: why did Madero so systematically and repeatedly forgive and trust his enemies while mistrusting and betraying those loyal to him? How

did a pacifist *espiritista* with no particular aptitude for government end up sparking a bloody decade-long revolution and occupying, albeit briefly, the presidential seat? Once there, how did he manage to make a series of decisions that left him dead at the hands of the very political enemies his supporters consistently warned him about and even jailed on his behalf? As Guerrero notes in her analysis,

the narrator in the novel does not make clear whether the greater changes that Madero's sacrifices brought about have affected Mexican history for better or for worse. On the one hand, both his initiation of the revolution and his assassination unleashed waves of violence, suffering, and death throughout the region. On the other hand, the novel concedes implicitly that inaction may also have been unacceptable [sic] [...]. (17)

Neither Solares nor the narrator passes judgment on Madero from the perspective of historical hindsight; indeed, their function is limited strictly to presenting the past, and the questions it poses, for the consideration of the reader.

In leaving these questions unanswered, Solares tacitly challenges his reader to ask: Who was Francisco Madero, not as the celebrated father of the Mexican Revolution, but as a mere person? Like any subject's, Madero's narrative is shot through with the symbolic order's limitations and inherent "stupidity." It can therefore only be reconstructed but provisionally, based on a certain privileged set of contingencies whose status is inherently disputed by the impossibility of unambiguously answering the questions they provoke. Solares leaves to us as readers —and to Mexicans as Mexicans— the responsibility of evaluating what the leader of the Mexican Revolution, the ostensible source of modern Mexican identity, did with the choices he confronted, knowing that our evaluation is inevitably retroactive and speculative, always already skewed by a vision of the past that is overdetermined by the future we inhabit. By making its readers aware of their limitations and pointing out the contingency of their

own narratives, *Madero, el otro* seeks to perform the same task in society as Madero's body does in the novel. By acknowledging and calling attention to unanswered and unanswerable questions about the figure of Francisco Madero, Solares does not only call into question the validity of the historical record or of received narratives, as others have already shown that he does. He also signals the need to critically reevaluate what it means to be Mexican, the citizen of a nation that idealizes so puzzling a figure.

Retreating from the text proper for a moment, it is worth touching on the following point: Solares's selection of Francisco Madero as the protagonist best suited to realize his narrative project was neither incidental nor accidental. In the pantheon of Mexican heroes, Francisco Madero is an ideal candidate for embodying the emptiness of the real and demonstrating its effects on the symbolic; in the more limited circle of heroes of the Mexican Revolution, Madero is perhaps the only candidate. The reason Madero's body so aptly embodies the gaze is because it is, in the Mexican imaginary, already empty. Solares had no need to empty it literarily, as Jorge Volpi and Álvaro Uribe will do to the bodies in the novels discussed in the next chapter. Madero's is an exemplary body, insofar as it was already empty of any stable symbolic content decades before Solares put pen to paper. The young, idiosyncratic, idealist dandy with a fuzzy notion of (political) justice from northern Mexico had long been a vessel into which even modern Mexicans funnel their desires, be they political, social, or (agri)cultural. In staging *Madero, el otro*, Solares perspicaciously selected a stage on which the body of his protagonist is empty in a variety of senses: his spirit watches him from outside, his identity is in shambles, and the narrative of his life, for the moment, has lost its (psychic) integrity and its meaning. Historically speaking, it is also the very stage on which

Madero's symbolic emptying can be said to have occurred, given that Madero only consummated his transformation into a symbol of idealized Mexican identity *after* and *by way of* his assassination.

As I wrote this in November 2010, on the days approaching the centennial of the Mexican Revolution, one needed only tune in to any broadcast of the Instituto Mexicano de la Radio (IMER) to hear the effects of this transformation continuing to reverberate in Mexican society, then in the form of propagandistic commercials in which youthful Mexican voices repeat Madero's famous quote —“un buen gobierno solamente puede existir cuando hay buenos ciudadanos”— and declare that “el deseo de México es que cada uno de nosotros sea mejor.” Although the commercials do not explicitly link their invocation of “Madero” with a personified “Mexico” except by transparent and unambiguous metonymy, their straightforward suggestion is that today's Mexico is essentially identical to the one Madero envisioned one hundred years ago, and that the revolution eventually achieved the goals Madero hoped it would. In a world in which repeating something enough times and with enough conviction is often sufficient to make people believe in its truth, it is ultimately irrelevant that these assertions are both either patently false or profoundly unprovable. One of Solares's goals in *Madero, el otro* seems to be to combat the roots of this irrelevance; that is, by submitting Madero's history to serious interrogation, even when that interrogation is largely speculative, also shines a critical light on the tendency to take for granted the untouchable nature of Madero's legacy and, perhaps more importantly, the notion that Madero (and the revolution he fomented) constitutes the immaculate cornerstone of modern Mexican identity.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have traced the breakdown and reconstitution of Francisco Madero's imaginary identity in *Madero, el otro* through the mechanism of Lacanian desire and the gaze. Madero's gazing body and the sequence of events that it sets in motion provoke a profound challenge to the prevailing narrative that underlies one of the cornerstones of Mexican identity and political legitimacy. In identifying the intrusion of Madero's unforeseen death and the consequent crumbling of his symbolic reality as the context of this breakdown, we have extended our understanding of the various methods that the grotesque has at its disposal for inscribing broad and far reaching national debates on the body of one of its most prominent heroes. We have furthermore expanded the category of the grotesque body to encompass bodies that continue to live even after they are dead, persisting between their real death and their symbolic death.

As with *Noticias del Imperio*, in conjugating the literary with the historiographical my analysis has served at times to confirm and at times to contest or correct prior purely historiographical or theoretical readings of the novel. Significantly, reading Solares's historiographical project through the lens of the body serves to highlight the large scale structure of the novel as one depending not on Madero's retrospective of his own (symbolic) narrative as prompted by his spiritual guide, but on the progressive destruction and reconstruction of his (imaginary) identity as prompted by his corpse's gaze and the anxiety it produces. The novel's spiritual elements, designed to draw the reader's attention away from the corpse, serve to distract from the anxiety-inducing real and the itinerary of the imaginary, deceptively framing the novel as fundamentally a crisis of the symbolic. While the two registers are intimately re-

lated, I have shown by attending to the symptoms of Solares's narrative repression that the novel's most consequential drama lies in rereading and reformulating Madero's identity in the imaginary. My reading furthermore brings out the conceits and inconsistencies inherent in the narrator's desperately self-assured construction of a historical imperative from a series of "contingent accidents," and the compromises he must make (and conceal) in order to reconcile the different facets of Madero's historical persona. By making the reader aware of the constructed, essentially fictional nature of his narrative, Solares opens a space in the discourse of Mexican identity-formation that tolerates the possibility of other histories and other identities built from the same (but differently configured) series of facts and events.

CHAPTER 3.
**BODIES OF EVIDENCE: LACK AND EXCESS IN TWO 21ST-CENTURY MEXICAN
HISTORICAL NOVELS**

“Wo es war, soll Ich werden’: *in the real of your symptom, you must
recognize the ultimate support of your being.*”
—Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry*¹⁴⁸

“*The distortion of a text is not unlike a murder. The difficulty lies not
in the execution of the deed but in doing away with the traces.*”
—Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*

In the preceding chapter we extended the typology of the the grotesque body established in Chapter 1 to encompass bodies that have crossed the threshold of death but not yet emerged on the other side; bodies that exist briefly “between two deaths.” Francisco Madero’s nearly dead body exemplifies the potency of this image in destabilizing and dismantling the identity of a figure who represents one of the cornerstones of modern notions of *mexicanidad*. In this chapter we will shift the weight of the psychoanalytical crisis from the imaginary to the symbolic register. At the same time, we will shift our focus away from the construction of identity, first to the composition and exercise of power, and then to its uneven distribution.

The novels discussed in the present chapter, both significantly more recent than *Noticias del Imperio* and *Madero, el otro*, will continue to push the boundaries of the grotesque

148. *Wo es war, soll Ich werden*: Freud’s motto translates literally to “Where it is, will I be.” Žižek paraphrases here one of Lacan’s glosses of the phrase.

body and to challenge the limits of the space between real and symbolic death. Jorge Volpi's *La paz de los sepulcros* (1995, revised 2007) opens on two corpses, one decapitated, both unequivocally dead; the corpse inhabiting Álvaro Uribe's *Expediente del atentado* dies in the course of the novel's unfolding. Both sets of bodies persist in altering the symbolic network in which their death's occurred. Like Madero's unflagging gaze, these corpses come to signify the intrusion of the real in the fabric of reality; this two-part chapter will depart, therefore, from the notion proposed by Slavoj Žižek that murder produces a tear in the symbolic which must be dealt with and smoothed over, lest the real remain exposed.

It bears noting as a curiosity that each of the three authors dealing with bodies between two deaths approaches the historical genre in a radically different manner. Solares's approach to history responds to what author Pedro Ángel Palou called the Mexican "prurito de la verdad" ("Historia y novela en México"): he crafts fiction carefully around verifiable history, with the intention of thereby accessing truth. At the other extreme, Volpi spins the truth he perceives into fiction, projects it into the future, and ends up writing history. Uribe, mediating the space between the two, weaves history into a predominantly fictional framework, suggesting truths in the process.¹⁴⁹ These novels are linked by the dominating presence of dead bodies—one or more—as symptoms of the Lacanian Real that act as catalysts for the breakdown of socio-political structures and perceptions.

149. Though tempting, we would err to generalize that more recent historical fiction feel less compunction about straying from this historical record. To name only two examples, Rosa Beltrán's celebrated *La corte de los ilusos* (1995) has more in common with *Expediente del atentado*, while Eduardo Antonio Parra's *Juárez: Rostro de piedra* (2008) can be read as the direct descendent of *Noticias del Imperio*. The sprawling historicity of Paco Ignacio Taibo II's *Pancho Villa* (2006) pushes the boundaries of what can be considered a novel at all.

THE CORPSE AS LACK IN JORGE VOLPI'S *LA PAZ DE LOS SEPULCROS*

Thanks to his Biblioteca Breve award-winning novel *En busca de Klingsor* and the two loosely-labeled “sequels” that constitute what has come to be known as the *Trilogía del siglo XX*, Jorge Volpi is well-known as the author of novels with a high degree of historical self-consciousness. It is likewise well-known that, in writing *La paz de los sepulcros*, one of his few novels set in Mexico, Volpi did not intend to write a historical novel. Yet, as the author himself attests, the circumstances surrounding its composition are doubly marked by a curious foresight. In the author's words,

Aunque resulta difícil de creer, la primera versión del manuscrito narraba el asesinato del candidato del PRI a la presidencia de México. Menos de un mes después de concluidas aquellas líneas, caía asesinado Luis Donaldo Colosio en la Ciudad de Tijuana. Por supuesto no confío en mis dotes de clarividente: en aquellos días la tensión en la clase política casi podía tocarse con la mano. Superado por la realidad, deseché aquellas páginas y escribí otra novela, a la vez deudora y antítesis de la iniciada en Oaxaca. (back cover of *La paz de los sepulcros*)

Initially published in 1995, the year prior to the publication of the *Manifiesto Crack* that brought Volpi and his companions to prominence, and described by its author as a *divertimento* (as over and against the major novels he would write later), *La paz de los sepulcros* has received significantly less critical attention than its successors. But despite having discarded his original, patently prophetic pages, Volpi nevertheless accesses a kind of prescience. The palpably unstable sociopolitical atmosphere in which the future dystopia was written, in the 12 years between its publication and its re-edition at the author's hands in 2007, and the half-decade since then, has lent the novel qualities that have converted it, to the author's expressed surprise, into an unintentional historical novel. Set in early twenty-first century Mexico City, after the dictatorship of the PRI has fallen (as it did six years *after* the work's

initial publication), the novel “describes the uncertainty and hypocrisy of a corrupt political system” (Anderson 10) (with a virtuous public face) in a country on the brink of chaos, tormented by a lawless band of largely ineffective guerrilla radicals and host to all manner of disreputable underground organizations. The novel’s retroactive historicity came about through the relatively predictable development of a set of historical contingencies after its publication: the replacement of one corrupt, ineffective political system with another (the dictatorship of the PRI replaced by the “democracy” of the PAN), threatened by a recalcitrant sector of the population (the EZLN replaced most recently by drug cartels), but mostly governing a disaffected public, ignorant (willfully or otherwise) of the corruption perpetrated under their noses and content to accept the status quo so long as it does not interfere with their lives. This change in the novel’s status has been picked up and commented on not only by the author, but also by his critics, who note its strong ties to a narrative tradition of “vinculación con el desarrollo de la realidad histórica nacional” (Regalado López 41), its debt to the tense political climate that characterized the novel’s genesis, and to its curious parallelism with Martín Luis Guzmán’s *La sombra del Caudillo*.

Empty(ing) Bodies

Though it fulfills a similar theoretical role in the three novels in question, acknowledging the importance of the body in Volpi’s *La paz de los sepulcros* (and later in Uribe’s *Expediente del atentado*) is conceptually more straightforward, but curiously more difficult to recognize than in the other novels dealt with in this dissertation. The dead bodies that populate Volpi’s future-Mexico are not empty of symbolic content *a priori* as they are in *Madero, el otro*: their identities and histories are not to be interrogated to the extent that Madero’s is,

neither have they been co-opted for decades to represent historical or ideological movements writ large. They must instead be emptied literarily over the course of the novel.

Volpi's dystopia opens on a stage that foregrounds an unlikely pair of corpses: Alberto Navarro, Minister of Justice and public face of the current political administration, alongside Ignacio Santillán who, decapitated, remains unidentified for several days, and who once identified is only of interest in the stark juxtaposition of his complete obscurity to the Minister's renown. Connected at first only by the setting of their gruesome murders, the bodies share the narrative stage with Agustín Oropeza, homicide reporter for the sensationalist *Tribuna del escándalo*, erstwhile acquaintance of Ignacio Santillán, and narrator of *La paz de los sepulcros*. For Oropeza, the corpses serve as springboards for a series of quasi-poetic digressions concerning the nature of death. Brimming over with long-winded platitudes, his reflections occupy the narrative space in a manner that upstages and diverts attention away from the bodies that are their purported object.

However, by reading askew Oropeza's narration, by attending to what is *not* said and what does *not* explicitly attract our attention, a number of important processes become apparent in the textual unconscious. If we attend carefully to the what his work suggests about the nature of the bodies, the documentation of their sheer materiality, and what is explicitly stated in Oropeza's affected reflections, it becomes apparent that behind the scenes the narrative work of emptying the bodies of their symbolic content, of priming them for the uses to which they will be put as symptoms of the real, begins immediately. The "poetry" of Oropeza's narration reveals itself as a highly visible distraction from the explicit meaning of

the words he is saying; that is, from the fact that he is explicitly working to transform the bodies that lie before him into empty objects.

Unintegrated into the symbolic order, the corpses in *La paz de los sepulcros* remain “between two deaths,” torn from the network that produces meaning, and therefore radically meaningless themselves. This tear threatens to unravel the symbolic, a threat which presupposes the possibility of an encounter with the real around which it was previously organized. As in *Madero, el otro*, dead bodies in *La paz de los sepulcros* precipitate an encounter with the repressed real and the collapse of the symbolic; but, unlike *Madero, el otro*, Oropeza’s work at first is not in the interest of reassembling a cogent symbolic narrative. Instead, Oropeza’s descriptions of the bodies and the crime scene, coupled with his partner’s photographs, convert the corpses into cadavers; that is, into objects of fascination: “en objetos de exhibición [...] en *cadáver[es]*” (Volpi 9, emphasis added).

Oropeza’s encounter with Navarro’s and Santillán’s corpses inspires in him a series of simultaneous and contradictory reactions, not unlike Francisco Madero’s encounter with the immediacy of his own dead body in Solares’s novel. As objects, a public “siempre ávido de muertas” will consume, digest, and forget them: “las noticias se vuelven tema de sobremesa y [...] se agotan al cabo de unos días” (15). Curiously, Oropeza insists on the corpses’ status as simple objects removed by death from the symbolic and imaginary network of intersubjective relationships, and therefore devoid of interpretative potential or *a priori* content as of the very moment of their discovery. Even so, he simultaneously endeavors to weave a cogent narrative of the moments prior to their death that can explain the unusual manner in which

they were discovered. The narrator's affirmation of the significance of those moments, tacit in his tentative attempts at their reconstruction—

Parecía como si se empeñasen en ocultar el dolor impensable y artero que los llevó a ese estado pero que ya no se encontraba en ellos. [...] Aparentaban cierta apacibilidad detrás del pánico, cierta calma [...] como si en el último momento hubiesen reconocido la cercanía de la muerte: quizás entonces ya no sentían miedo ni angustia [...]. (10)

—appear in stark contrast to his flat, paradoxical rejection of the very existence of their history that follows on the next page:

Ahora sólo eran los sujetos de una inmortalidad que los dibujaba como *cadáveres* nauseabundos y mutilados, *máscaras desprovistas de pasado y de memoria*, de la vida con sus padres, parientes, esposas y amantes, de voz y de defensa, de pasión y de movimiento, de raptos y tazas de café por las mañanas, o de baños o lecturas o francachelas nocturnas, simples retazos en la (atroz) fotografía tomada por Juan Gaytán. (11-12, emphasis added)¹⁵⁰

Several pages later his attempts to impose an interpretation on the scene grow bolder: “[H]abía sido una especie de ritual, una ceremonia de tortura donde las víctimas no habían opuesto resistencia” (15).¹⁵¹

The de-person-ification of these cadavers (and their questionable histories) is carried to morbid extremes in the first pages of the novel, in which macabre descriptions of mutilated bodies are subjected to the narrator's florid, grandiloquent prose and transcendent inter-

150. The objection that this quotation, in its proper context, refers not to the non-existence of the corpses' history but to the irrelevance of that history to the public who will consume Oropeza's story is hardly inconsequential; it is, in fact, essential to my argument. It is the public's willingness to dismiss the bodies' history that allows the public to persist within the symbolic, and Oropeza's inability to do the same that ultimately converts the corpses into representatives of the real for him.

151. If any doubt remains, Volpi's heavy handed narrator is sure to dispel it at the end of the first chapter:

Una absurda e impensable coincidencia había emparentado, al menos en la muerte, [...] a Alberto Navarro y a Ignacio Santillán [...] Pero no sólo eso: como ellos ya no podían referir sus encuentros o la casualidad que los había acercado, había aparecido yo, un turbio reportero, como el nudo que ahora podía *hacerlos hablar* y que acaso develaría la historia oculta que los había llevado a morir en ese mismo cuarto de motel. (24)

pretations. The object-ification of the corpses is transparent: Oropeza describes them each in their turn as “ese amasijo de carne” (14), “desprovisto [...] de aquel componente básico: [...] el alma” (15), and “un ovillo negro, un ato de ropas negras esparcidas por el suelo, *nunca un cuerpo humano*” (19, emphasis added). Their bodies thus converted into empty objects, lies the more profound work implicit in Oropeza’s labor: the transformation of the bodies into convenient fantasy spaces on which the public can inscribe its troubled relationship with the real of desire. They become a space to fill with the rumors and gossip (15) required to distract them from the process of repairing the tears in the symbolic left by their deaths until the memory fades away or is superseded by the next scandal.¹⁵² We have already seen that Oropeza himself, from the moment he sees them, falls prey to the desire to impose a story on the cadavers, to speculate on the secrets they reveal, without entirely realizing that he is doing so.

The novel later verifies that it is not only in death that one of the cadavers functions as a fantasy space. According to the narrator, the Minister of Justice Navarro’s identity, while he lived, assumed the characteristics desired by those who surrounded him at any given moment. He is described as “un camaleón [...] que se acoplaba y adaptaba a cualquier circunstancia, cambiando de opiniones y pareceres de acuerdo con las personas que tenía al lado

152. For the narrator, the consequence of death is precisely this loss of control over one’s public image:

De qué modo la fama cambia y nos transforma, cómo un día somos una cosa, y todos nos ven y conocen y recuerdan como tal, acaso la imagen que hemos creado a lo largo de años de penas y denuedos, para que de pronto, con un sólo golpe de suerte (de mala suerte, de infortunio), nuestra fama sea otra, la celebridad nos rodee por motivos distintos o contrarios a los nuestros, y todo lo que habíamos construido se derrumba, como si nunca hubiese existido, convirtiéndonos para siempre, para la eternidad y el futuro, en algo que no éramos y nunca quisimos ser o parecer, o en lo que ocultamos cuidadosamente de nosotros mismos y que ahora la mala suerte y el infortunio sacan a luz. (17)

(eso lo ayudó mucho para su carrera política, como usted comprenderá)” (55). A fantasy space even in life, his political acumen and his talent for taxonomy allowed him to categorize and anticipate the expectations of his public such that the latter remained unaware that they were interacting with a mere projection of their own desire. In this way Navarro constitutes a perfect metonymy for the two-faced government that he represented, “el intachable gobierno del presidente Del Villar, los defensores de la democracia, los servidores públicos de más limpia trayectoria [...] en la historia del país [que] declaró una feroz campaña contra la pornografía y la prostitución infantil” (70), but which utilizes an underground adolescent escort service at its nightly reunions where, drunk and hopped up on cocaine, the ministers distribute power, strike unscrupulous deals, and secretly govern the Mexican people.¹⁵³

Capitalizing on the fantasies that the public would organize for itself around the Minister —perhaps even fueling it through a system of corruption (that may include Oropeza’s police contact) intended to disseminate the scandal on the pages of a the *prensa roja* before other, more respectable sources—,¹⁵⁴ the power structure of which Navarro was a part (and in which Santillán was presumably implicated) opens an investigation into the murders, further relieving the public at large of the burden of establishing a satisfactory narrative. Since any honest investigation launched by the public would in due course reveal and incriminate a system of power that, as we shall see, must remain hidden to continue to oper-

153. The metonymy is further developed if we consider the public and private lives of Alberto Navarro and his wife. Apropos of Navarro’s “utilization” of the escort service, the narrator notes that

[N]adie ponía en duda su amor y sus ideales compartidos [de Navarro y su esposa], y esta creencia bastaba *para interponer una máscara entre la realidad y la apariencia* —no digo que haya sido falso su amor, sino que permanecía *oculto*—, los convertía en sombras distantes y misteriosas, figuras públicas al fin y al cabo, en donde resultaba imposible adivinar sus pasiones, odios, luchas y reconciliaciones. (72, first emphasis added)

154. Though textually unprovable, this theory is not improbable.

ate, this relief is fundamentally a ruse through which power safeguards its own clandestine nature. We will return shortly to develop this line of reasoning.

Initially, despite his complicity in objectifying (de-subject-ifying) the dead bodies, transforming them for the public into idle scandals rather than the subjects of civil investigation, Oropeza demonstrates an almost implausible naïveté regarding what he considers to be the inexorable consequences of the government's investigation into the murders. Early in the novel —belying again his paradoxical belief that the bodies who (as objects) have no past, but (as subjects) have a past that will eventually come to light— he reflects that

el estado de aquel cuarto de hotel bastaba para comprobar que ahí yacía [...] una trama abyecta que necesitaba ser revelada [...], por más que a nadie conviniese tal pesquisa [...]. Estas consideraciones hacían que el crimen se perpetuara en el tiempo: el crimen *debía* ser investigado [...], el público *debía* conocer la verdad [...], y el culpable o culpables *debían* ser hallados y castigados, sin importar quiénes fuesen, todo ello gracias a la inercia propia de los homicidios [...]. (20)

Oropeza remains credulous to a fault, a believer in the system's probity to the point that he believes the government will carry out its investigation, no matter the consequences to the regime in power: “este largo y abstruso proceso equivalía a mantener las heridas abiertas y sangrantes [...] y provocaría sin duda el desprestigio del reluciente y ahora occiso ministro de Justicia y, por descontado, la ruina del gobierno de la República. Qué manía de seguir matando a los muertos [...]” When the Del Villar administration's counsel to the public bluntly strikes down this eventuality —“es estos ‘tiempos difíciles’ [...] había que ‘mantenerse unidos, evitar los rumores que vulneraban la estabilidad de la democracia [...]’ y, en fin, ‘andarse con cuidadito’”—, Oropeza tellingly reacts by contradicting his own previous hypothesis with the same degree of certainty with which it was proffered:

lo que equivalía, en mis menos cuidadas frases, a callarse la boca, hacerse el muerto, nunca mejor dicho, y esperar a que se desarrollase el normal ‘curso de las investigaciones’ (es decir: el olvido). De este modo, uno de los crímenes más espantosos de que se tuviera memoria sería olvido por la fuerza, resuelto o no. Ningún crimen en el que se vea entremezclado el poder jamás será del todo esclarecido. (21)

Far from maintaining the wounds “open and bloody,” all of this would allow for the murders’ quiet, untroubled re-integration into the symbolic network without occasioning its disruption; it is ultimately the narrator’s unwillingness to “andarse con cuidadito” and allow the investigation to run its spurious course that upsets the symbolic economy of convenient forgetfulness and reveals what should have remained hidden.

The Answer of the Real

Oropeza is not wrong that an investigation that revealed the Del Villar administration’s entanglement in the murders would occasion the fall of the regime (it very nearly does); nor is he wrong to believe that portions of the investigation would be dishonest; he is simply wrong to believe that any portion of the investigation would *not* be dishonest. It is immediately clear why this system of power, if it is to function properly, must remain hidden from the critical public eye even as it structures public reality: its eruption into the public sphere would shatter the very reality that it seeks to construct. Just as the real constitutes the symbolic by remaining outside the symbolic, the absence from Mexican reality of the political network Oropeza discovers allows Mexican reality itself to operate. This is why Oropeza’s penetration of the political machinery that organizes his reality heralds its breakdown into a nightmare. Although this may seem ironic, even paradoxical, it is perfectly consistent with Lacan’s writing on the symbolic’s relationship to the real. Glossing Lacan, Žižek writes that “common everyday reality [...] turns out to be an illusion that rests on a certain ‘repression,’

on overlooking the real of our desire. This social reality is then nothing but a fragile, symbolic cobweb that can be at any moment torn aside by an intrusion of the real” (*Looking Awry* 17).

To ensure its own invisibility, the Del Villar regime assiduously puts forward a screen of absolute propriety onto which Mexicans may project their idealistic expectations, but which is ultimately propped up by the depravity it conceals. The two poles —overt propriety and covert depravity— exist in perfect tension: the visible illusion of respectability that confers meaning on the (imaginary) experience of Mexican-ness “represses” the clandestine (real) reality that makes (symbolic) meaning possible in the first place.¹⁵⁵ The collapse of the clean image of Del Villar’s government, occasioned by the narrator’s discovery of what it concealed, precipitates a profound crisis in his relationship to the powers that govern him and his experience and understanding of the world. The veil falls away from the previously harmless stories —stories he was (and will continue to be) complicit in propagating— that distracted the public from true political consciousness. He begins to suspect, rather than trust or play along with the powers that be. No longer a cog in the symbolic Mexican machine, he is transformed, quite literally and quite against his will, into an outsider staring down at the monstrous motor that propels the system even as it threatens to destroy it.¹⁵⁶

155. Volpi’s novel is shot through with polarities like these, most obviously in the day/night opposition that runs through the entirety of the novel, and that (in the narrator’s opinion) describes Ignacio Santillán’s transformation.

156. The epithet “machine” is far from casual. Oropeza writes later that, because of the inevitable intervention of chance, one can never accurately measure the consequences of one’s actions. The conclusion that he draws from this platitude, however, is startling in its suggestion that the Mexican power structure may not consciously put forward an illusory image to hide its true nature, but rather that the illusion may be a fortuitous by-product of the workings of the symbolic: “Uno descubre, así, que los poderosos no planean y reproducen esquemas cuidadosamente diseñados para beneficiarlos [...], sino que la maquinaria resulta superior a sus componentes” (Volpi 80).

Oropeza's work, in this context, is considerably more important to maintaining the public status quo than even he might imagine; indeed, by transforming the dead into objects, he renders them not only harmless but *silent*. The dead as presented by Oropeza are unable to tell their stories. As objects they have no voice, and, if Oropeza is correct, no stories to tell regardless. Harmless and voiceless, they become eminently forgettable, and by and large the psychic economy allows the dead to be forgotten. They quickly become the passing subjects of occasional, government-sponsored news announcements concerning the details and conclusions of the fraudulent investigation. By imposing false stories on the cadavers of Navarro and Santillán —stories that the bodies themselves cannot contest— those charged with the fraudulent investigation are able to wrap it up quickly, and in a marginally satisfactory manner, by leveraging the public's recent obsession with the FPLN and the willingness of the press to parrot the official explanation.¹⁵⁷ Its master stroke, though, would appear to be procuring the willing complicity of Agustín Oropeza to publicly legitimize their conclusions. As we will show later in the chapter, his willingness (from a Lacanian standpoint) is not only natural, but inevitable (see page 206).

Before looking further into the occurrences and consequences related to Oropeza's investigation, let us parenthetically highlight an aspect of Jorge Volpi's narrative capabilities. It is easy to overlook Volpi's clever narration of the how the symbolic constitutes and reconstitutes itself, and how the real protects itself in the process. The preparation of Oropeza's ulti-

157. A nod by the author to the context in which *La paz de los sepulcros* was written, the FPLN is a guerilla organization hypothetically descended from the contemporary Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN). "El FPLN era conocido, o al menos es la imagen que todos guardábamos de él, o la que nos habían inducido, como el errático, desbalagado y funesto epígono de la guerrilla selvática de los noventa (éste era su fundamento, pero el parentesco ya era muy lejano), que con el cambio de siglo se había vuelto urbana en vez de rural y había modificado diametralmente su discurso" (81). The ineffectual "teniente Gabriel" is a transparent foil for Subcomandante Marcos.

mate complicity is impeccable; note how each step in the process is entirely contingent but unquestionably *necessary* on the path to the endpoint, such that the process appears to have been carefully orchestrated. Under deadline pressure, the result of chasing “el fantasma de Ignacio Santillán” instead of doing his job, Oropeza stumbles upon and publishes a fabricated exposé of the FPLN that he had written prior to the homicides, but ultimately discarded for being “pasado de moda.” To its author’s surprise, the report’s claims of the guerrilla’s use of “terrorismo psicológico” ignites disproportionate public and official furor over an organization that Oropeza himself admits to be “desgastado y casi inofensivo”: discussion of psychological torture quickly becomes ubiquitous; any and all adversity is attributed to “el infamante disignio de la guerrilla”; the rich and powerful demand the extermination, once and for all, of the FPLN in the interest of domestic security (80-84). Shortly thereafter, Oropeza’s colleague fuels the obsession (and adds another link to the chain of contingencies) by writing a column for a rival paper attributing an epidemic of missing corpses to the FPLN (88), an epidemic that had caught Oropeza’s interest as well as a potential clue in his investigation. The Minister of the Interior suggests the possibility of connecting the murder of Alberto Navarro with the FPLN’s illegal activities; this is precisely the explanation later proffered by those in charge of the official investigation, along with the claim that Oropeza himself had been kidnapped by the organization (152-54). At the conclusion of the novel Oropeza dishonestly confirms the latter claim, apparently legitimizing the former by association. Not one of the links in the chain of explanations is true; regardless, they all have a certain “truthiness” (to borrow a word from popular culture) and an internal consistency that

makes them acceptable to the idly interested public.¹⁵⁸ Explicitly involved in producing the false explanations, and therefore explicitly cognizant of the cover-up, even Oropeza can't help but get caught up in the *truthiness* of his colleague's spurious report on the stolen corpses, attempting to think the claim out to its logical conclusions, and puzzling over its inconsistencies.¹⁵⁹

For all his effort and professional readiness to contribute to and profit from the cover-up, the only figure in Volpi's novel unwilling to play along with (and eventually forget about) the investigation and its conclusions is Agustín Oropeza. His unwillingness to let the matter rest transforms *La paz de los sepulcros* from an allegory of how participants in the Lacanian symbolic unwittingly protect themselves from the intrusion of the real, as described in the preceding paragraph, into what resembles a hard-boiled detective novel about a man whose utterly failed investigation of a tear in the symbolic brings him face-to-face with the real that he was instrumental in covering up for everyone but himself. How does this transformation occur? Why does Oropeza take this investigation up at all?

He takes it up because the real issues him a call he cannot refuse. The real, as Žižek likes to remind his readers, is "radically ambiguous"; as we have noted previously, it has the power both to sustain and derail the symbolic. The real is also radically contingent: utterly outside the symbolic, it has no immanent meaning, place, or identity within our construc-

158. The word "truthiness" describes the quality of something that sounds plausible, particularly in reference to something that is untrue. It was proposed and popularized by television personality Stephen Colbert on the Comedy Central conservative news show parody *The Colbert Report*.

159. Despite his perplexity at why the FPLN would only steal *young* corpses when old corpses are surely in greater supply, his only strong objection to the article is to the poor quality of the writing, not the absurdity of its subject matter.

tion of everyday reality.¹⁶⁰ When the real intrudes and the symbolic begins to crumble, the subject experiences what Žižek terms a “loss of reality,” characterized by the inability to decode what he experiences in terms of the network of meaning that formerly structured his world. As the subject struggles to reconstitute a sense of reality that incorporates the ambiguous, contingent piece of the real, Žižek points to the potential for a subject “to invert his utter impotence into omnipotence [and] to conceive [of] himself as *radically responsible* for the intrusion of the real” (29). In this way, the subject imbues the real with meaning, takes up his supposed responsibility for its intrusion, and organizes his crumbling experience of reality around a denial of the real’s inherent contingency.¹⁶¹ The real is responsible for shattering the symbolic’s consistency, but Žižek notes paradoxically that once a subject takes responsibility for the real’s intrusion, it also performs *exactly the opposite function*:

The contingent real triggers the endless work of interpretation that desperately tries to connect the symbolic network of the prediction with the events of our ‘real life’ [...]. The real functions here not as something that resists symbolization, as a meaningless leftover than cannot be integrated into the symbolic universe, but, on the contrary, as its last support. (31)

When the real shatters a subject’s symbolic universe, he grasps for anything to prop it up; seizing onto the real and imbuing it with meaning, even if it is false and provisional, allows

160. Identity, place, and meaning are all interrelated notions whose consistency derives directly from the organization provided by the symbolic. Identity as an attribute of an object depends on the radical differentiation between signifiers; that is, an object is what it is only by virtue of not being anything else. In terms of place, an object can either be “in place” —where it belongs—, or “out of place” vis-à-vis the matrix of the symbolic. An object’s meaning is the intersection of its identity and its place. Since Lacan is consistent and emphatic in asserting that the real is both undifferentiated and always “in its place” no matter where it is, it follows that there is no meaning possible in the real.

161. That is, the intrusion of the real is no longer an impersonal “this happened,” but as “*I caused this*” or, at least, “this happened *because of that*.”

the subject to continue making meaning of the rest of reality, even if that meaning is founded on false premises. Žižek deems this support “the answer of the real.”

The real speaks to Agustín Oropeza in this way the day after the double homicide when the narrator spots on Santillán’s finger the ring that he had given the deceased when they were adolescents. For a moment Oropeza fixates on his discovery: “yo *conocía* a aquel sujeto, yo *sabía* quién era el hombre [...]. Es más: había hablado con él, había sido mi amigo. No me equivocaba: era *él*” (23). This traumatic turn of events, however, does not threaten the integrity of Oropeza’s sense of reality for long; the narrator almost immediately seizes on the piece of the real that will serve as its “last support”: the ring. The language he employs as he muses over his serendipitous discovery reflects how profoundly the recognition of his erstwhile friend affects and bewilders him.¹⁶² For Oropeza the ring is not just a ring, but a message, a call to arms, a plea to solve the mystery before him.

No sé si fue mi vista calcinada, o el azar, pero entonces observé algo que no había visto antes: una señal, *un indicio que nadie más sabría interpretar y por tanto una especie de orden venida de ultratumba* [...] que para mí representó una sacudida radical, un cambio, un drástico transformación de mi vida (a partir de ese instante también yo dejaría de ser lo que era para convertirme en otra cosa, en algo que nunca había buscado y que nunca había sido antes), una iluminación [...]. (23, emphasis added)

His later reflection on the discovery negates the very possibility of contingency; indeed, it is as though the dead literally spoke to him: “Apareció allí como una señal, una clave expresamente diseñada para mí: soy yo, este cuerpo sin cabeza es mío, de Ignacio Santillán, date

162. That Oropeza discovers the ring is not casual: “The crucial point here is that the real that serves as support of our symbolic reality must appear to be found and not produced” (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 32).

cuenta, Agustín, me estoy dirigiendo a ti y sólo a ti, parecía decirme. [El anillo] nos ataban de nuevo [...]. Más elocuente que si su cabeza [...] me hubiese hablado.” (37).

Oropeza's discovery completely reorients his sense of reality and his position in the symbolic; many of his ensuing troubles result from the fallacious interpretation of reality brought on by such a shift. He is, so to speak, operating a broken machine. The shift is decisive: he promptly restores Santillán's formerly negated position in the symbolic network, recognizing the existence of his identity;¹⁶³ he assumes the responsibility of heeding Santillán's instruction from beyond the grave;¹⁶⁴ and he imbues himself with the power to unravel the mystery and make the dead speak.¹⁶⁵ In order to execute his charge, he must first reconstitute Santillán's identity by inquiring into the obscure history that separates the men from their adolescent selves —“el vacío doble que va desde la oscura juventud de Nacho hasta su horrible y oscura muerte [...]” (117)—, and must also determine the equally obscure connection between Santillán and the Minister of Justice. Oropeza is resoundingly unsuccessful at unraveling any of the mysteries with which he is confronted. The terms of this failure will be focus of the remainder of our analysis.

163. “[Y]o el infeliz reportero que lo había descubierto allí, en el lugar de los hechos, aunque sólo ahora lo reconocía y lo arrancaba del anonimato para reintegrarle un nombre y una historia, los restos de su pasado: su espíritu” (23).

164. “No había remedio: yo había reconocido a Nacho, y eso bastaba para cargarme con una responsabilidad de la cual no podría despojarme fácilmente [...]. La sabiduría indudablemente me brindaba algún poder, la capacidad, única acaso, o al menos inimitable, de relacionar los hechos y conocer las causas y establecer la verdad [...]” (24).

165. “[C]omo ellos ya no podían referir sus encuentros o la casualidad que los había acercado, había aparecido yo, un turbio reportero, como el nudo [!] que ahora podía hacerlos hablar [!] y que acaso develaría la historia oculta que los había llevado a morir en ese mismo cuarto de motel” (24).

Pawn

Oropeza's mindless self-aggrandizement, as well as his foolish belief that he possesses power or cunning enough to go up against a government that overtly pleads with its citizens to "andarse con cuidadito," are far from casual: in these passages the narrator establishes himself as a kind of inept, unqualified hard-boiled detective. Notwithstanding that Oropeza is not, in fact, a detective, that he takes the case upon himself rather than agreeing to take it at the behest of a third party, and fails to resolve the most important questions he sets out to answer before being forced to abort his investigation, Žižek's psychoanalytic description of the hard-boiled detective novel outlines the form of *La paz de los sepulcros* with surprising exactitude:

By means of his initial decision to accept a case, the hard-boiled detective gets mixed up in a course of events that he is unable to dominate; all of a sudden it becomes evident that he has been "played for a sucker." What looked at first like an easy job turns into an intricate game of criss-cross, and all his effort is first directed toward clarifying the contours of the trap into which he has fallen. The "truth" at which he attempts to arrive is not just a challenge to his reason but concerns him ethically and often painfully. The deceitful game of which he has become a part poses a threat to his very identity as a subject. In short, the dialectic of deception in the hard-boiled novel is the dialectic of an active hero caught in a nightmarish game whose real stakes escape him. [...] In [the hard-boiled novel], it is the detective himself [...] who undergoes a kind of "loss of reality," who finds himself in a dreamlike world where it is never quite clear who is playing what game. (*Looking Awry* 62-63)

This is precisely the situation in which Agustín Oropeza finds himself as he takes his first trepidatious steps into his investigation. His sense of "omnipotence," of understanding and being in control of the situations in which he finds himself, is as naïve as it is transparent. He constantly flounders in his attempts to delineate the boundaries of the case, to clarify who exactly is implicated in the murders, and the extent to which he is merely a pawn in a political

game whose magnitude he is completely unaware of. He consistently misreads the “clues” offered up in the symbolic —identifying many of them only later, after everything has been revealed—, and is never able to discern for himself “who is playing what game,” or who is playing at all. “According to Lacan, the famous ‘sensation of irreality’ that we experience in the face of certain phenomena [...] indicates that the object in question has lost its place in the symbolic universe” (136); for Oropeza, this formula is inverted. It is he who has lost his place in the symbolic, who finds himself, thanks to the real’s intrusion, *between* one crumbling and one inchoate symbolic universe. He only comes face-to-face with the real, as we shall see, in the moments before it is absorbed into a new symbolic order. His kidnappers, who make the intricacies of the murders explicit, count on Oropeza’s capacity and willingness to reframe the real as a comfortable, symbolic fiction, lending credence to the official story that forms the foundation of the new order, and to promptly withdraw back into the comfort of a newly established symbolic. Before this occurs, and despite multiple setbacks, repeated warnings, threats, and assaults to his bodily integrity, Oropeza finds himself not only unwilling, but *unable* to retreat from his mission; he senses that the real continually calls him back.

The contours describing Oropeza’s investigation quickly take on the trappings of a Lacanian drive. Failing to approach the correct solution —although he does at times believe he is approaching *a* solution—, he circles incessantly around the real of Mexican power, never truly threatening to expose it and only vaguely aware of what lies behind the fantasy object, the “truth” he seeks to expose. Though he does not realize it, Oropeza’s desire is provisionally fulfilled not by solving the mystery he sets out to solve, thereby uncovering the real, but by continuously circling around it, reproducing his desire by recognizing and investigating

clues to *other*, related mysteries, but failing to add them up in a manner that helps him approach his objective. He furthermore fails to find, or even truly look for, the clues that would expose the complexity of the central mystery. The sense of fulfillment he feels at times is akin to the sense that he is drawing closer to his target, though it is obvious to the reader that he is only drawing closer to *a* target. He fails to connect what clues he does uncover in any meaningful way, ensuring the integrity of this cycle. However, it is crucial to note that his inability to *make sense* of what he finds signals something more significant and thematically substantial than mere narrative naïveté or investigatory ineptitude. Oropeza's failure to make the correct meaning of the facts (signifiers) at his disposal eloquently demonstrates to the reader that Oropeza does not operate within the symbolic network proper to the ruling elite; that is, he never manages to gain access to an articulation of the symbolic that structures and regulates the Mexican government.¹⁶⁶ In other words, the signifiers he gathers are meaningless to Oropeza not only because he is looking for the *wrong signifiers*, but because he belongs to the wrong system of meaning: even if he were able to connect the clues he finds, they wouldn't really get him to "the bottom" of the mystery. Let us investigate this more in depth.

After floundering for some time, Oropeza's relationship to the symbolic that he attempts to reconstruct changes dramatically at three critical moments in the second half of the text. The first of these moments occurs when, after finally recognizing Marielena Mondragón in the *efímero* and following her to the Servicio Médico Forense where she and her cohorts in the *cofradía* acquire their corpses, Oropeza muses that "los cabos —por buena suerta o por fortuna— comenzaban a atarse" (97). To an extent his conclusion is reasonable: it has not yet

166. Until the end of the novel, which is why he is able to signal to the reader some of the clues he initially missed.

occurred to Oropeza that exposing the *cofradía* will not clarify Ignacio Santillán's murder, but only provide another clue to further complicate the already complex narrative that he struggles to construct; he has likewise not considered how far the *cofradía's* reach might extend, or the extent to which Navarro's colleagues might be invested in its concealment. While he clearly sees the government's corruption, thanks to his escort contact Azucena's infiltration of Ministers' meeting at the Palacio, he continues to pursue Santillán's connection to Mondragón and the *cofradía* and the revelation of governmental degeneracy and perversion as though they are separate problems, when in fact they are profoundly related.

Indeed, everyone in *La paz de los sepulcros* is profoundly related. Marielena Mondragón's role and Oropeza's own, as he spectacularly fails to realize, are determined by "the intersubjective dimension of the murder, more properly, of the *corpse*" (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 59), or even more properly, of the *corpses*.¹⁶⁷ For Žižek, the corpse in the classic detective novel establishes an intersubjective relationship that "binds" together a group of suspects, each of whom *could be* the murderer given some combination of motive, means, and opportunity; the detective's task is to solve the crime by teasing out a narrative consistent with a universalized understanding of the symbolic. The relationships established in *La paz de los sepulcros* are significantly more numerous and complex. In Volpi's novel, corpses forge relationships between all of the following subjects: Navarro and Santillán (the corpses themselves), the perpetrators of the crime and its cover-up (both independently and as a collective force), those complicit in its execution (Marielena Mondragón and the Minister of the Interior Gustavo

167. For a lucid explication of the concept of intersubjective relationships, and how they are affected by encounters with the real, see Lacan's analysis of Edgar Allen Poe's "The Purloined Letter" in *The Purloined Poe*.

Iturbe),¹⁶⁸ those willing to profit from its execution (primarily the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of Finance), and Agustín Oropeza. Their relationships to one another arise directly from their relationship to the corpses that surround them. Were it not for these relationships, Oropeza would not be an unwitting and under-informed detective, the ruling elite would not accidentally find him threatening and take measures to protect themselves, the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of Finance would not be engaged in political infighting to determine which of them will replace Navarro as the President's successor, and Marielena Mondragón would not be suffering from a psychotic breakdown under the thumb of influential businessman Joaquín Mercado, who himself sacrifices some of his mastery of the situation to become a willing pawn in orchestrating Iturbe's eventual victory and dying in the process (see 114). Let us not forget, either, that though Santillán and Navarro are the *central* corpses of the novel, they are far from being the only ones. Likewise, while Marielena Mondragón is *a* key to unraveling the murders, she is only able to resolve anything when her relationship to the other players becomes clear; she is not, as Oropeza believes, the only key.

The second critical moment in Oropeza's investigation occurs when he is kidnapped. In the intervening time he accomplishes the following: with Azucena's help, he infiltrates a meeting of the powerful at the Palacio and discovers the extent of their perversity;¹⁶⁹ discovers the aforementioned political infighting, but remains blithely unaware of their connection to Santillán and the *cofradía*; follows José María Reyes—who unbeknownst to Oropeza is a

168. Iturbe's complicity in the crime is unclear. The reader is led to assume that the unidentified "hombre que no es el Viejo" who speaks to Marielena in the wake of the murders is Iturbe, but this suspicion is never explicitly confirmed.

169. It is fascinating to note that, in addition to acts of sexual depravity, the meetings in the Palacio also host daily consultations with Alonso de Bernárdez, chief political astrologer. The real, it seems, also speaks to the elite (103).

mutual friend of Santillán's and Mondragón's and a member of the *cofradía*— to a meeting of the *cofradía*, resulting in a pummeling at the hands of the organization's brawn which lands him in the hospital; spins what he had seen of the *cofradía*'s illegal activities into a fabricated story for *Tribuna del escándalo* about the existence of a satanic sect (of which Santillán was a part) and its supposed involvement in Navarro's death, meant to provoke the *cofradía* into making a move (112), but instead provoking the government into considering him a threat; and becomes the willing victim of that provocation by being kidnapped.

The sequence of events leading up to his kidnapping gives the reader extraordinary insight into Oropeza's changing relationship with the symbolic network that his investigation seeks to piece together. For the first time, he recognizes his capacity to manipulate the subjects of his investigation, despite the fact that he *doesn't know precisely who they are*. He accomplishes this by exploiting to his advantage the code, the symbolic system inside which they operate, even though he remains largely outside of it. Despite his own considerable uncertainty (disguised as false confidence), his physical peril, and the clumsiness of his objective, his article for *Tribuna del escándalo* quite deftly manufactures doubt among those members of the elite who are invested in the *cofradía*'s role in the homicides and its continued role in political affairs. Instead of continuing to fumble, he leverages the knowledge he can be certain about —the *cofradía* exists; Ignacio Santillán was connected to the *cofradía*; Ignacio Santillán was connected to Alberto Navarro; therefore, the murder of Navarro conceivably had something to do with the *cofradía*— to insinuate that *he knows what they are up to*. Without positively claiming any specific knowledge, he poses (as) a threat to their operation in the hopes that they will be forced take action against him, thereby revealing themselves, at which

point Oropeza would be more able to maneuver himself into a position from which he can verify his conclusions and ascertain the details that remain unknown.¹⁷⁰ This is precisely what occurs, if not as quickly as the impatient narrator would have liked (115). Whether he sought, as he later bombastically claims (127), to end up sequestered by his own suspects, he *does* quite ingeniously end up in the clutches of the only people capable of completing the narrative Oropeza struggles to recompose, even though it means giving up his narrative authority.

Indeed, the most surprising consequence of Oropeza's kidnapping is his abdication of narrative dominance. I reproduce the passage in which he announces that he must relinquish the narrative voice below in its entirety:

De algún modo tengo que contar lo que sigue, la enorme elipsis que contiene mi historia, el vacío doble que va desde la oscura juventud de Nacho hasta su horrible y oscura muerte hace unos meses, y aquel otro vacío que condujo a Alberto Navarro desde sus primeros puestos en el gobierno hasta el asesinato en aquel cuarto de motel. He de robar una voz que no es mía, suplantar los términos como si me pertenecieran, contar cosas que nunca vi ni conocí de cerca en su momento, cuando sucedieron, y que, por tanto, no me constan ni resultan comprobables, apelando a la buena fe de quien me lea —me traiciono como periodista—: se trata, acaso, de un testimonio ofrecido a mí en circunstancias que ya ni siquiera puedo creer ciertas, una narración basada en suposiciones y juicios parciales, una visión apenas verificable pero necesaria para aclarar, al menos un poco, la tragedia. (117)

Throughout the novel Oropeza has been an unreliable narrator, prone to poeticization and self-aggrandizement; at this point Oropeza himself explicitly and definitively disclaims whatever reliability remained to him. From this point on, the story is told through the doubly un-

170. At this point it is safe to assume that Oropeza is no longer engaged in his investigation because of purely journalistic interest. Having been hospitalized once already, he must expect that the action taken against him as a result of his ploy will be violent, but also that it will confirm his personal suspicions and validate his personal interest in the case.

reliable filter of Mondragón and Oropeza; the reader is left to take them at their word to the extent possible, to piece together meaning and “truth” from the undifferentiated facts and conjecture they offer, and to read against the grain of their interactions to discover what is left unsaid.

As the details of the narrative emerge Oropeza, who earlier saw the threads of his investigation resolving into a consistent narrative, is finally able to see the staggering complexity and implications that his investigation would eventually have had to confront. It is likewise only as the complex relationships criss-crossing *La paz de los sepulcros* are explored that it becomes clear to Oropeza and to the reader the extent to which corpses in general—not just Santillán’s and Navarro’s—have been central to the unfolding of events. Though his suffering is foregrounded and thus simpler to recognize, it becomes clear that the narrator is not the only subject made to endure the effects of his own “corporeal” misunderstandings. Instead of installing or revealing consistency in the symbolic, as the classical detective strives to do, the process of disentangling the intersubjective relationships established and sustained by the corpses only serves to demonstrate how each subject is “duped” as his or her grasp of the symbolic is fundamentally disrupted or shown to be insufficient.¹⁷¹ Initially it appears that these disruptions occur on account of specific encounters with the novel’s corpses. We have already made sufficiently clear the extent to which Agustín Oropeza, the novel’s hapless narrator, is the principal dupe in Volpi’s tale. As Marielena Mondragón narrates the twists and turns of her relationships with Navarro and Santillán, the reader is granted access to the moments in

171. Apropos of Lacan’s exceptional seminar on Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” Muller and Richardson define being “duped” as being “determined in [one’s] action by a signifying chain beyond [one’s] power to control” (63).

which other characters are duped into playing the role the symbolic defines for them rather than those they define for themselves. Principal among them are Alberto Navarro, Ignacio Santillán, Marielena Mondragón herself, and Joaquín Mercado (“El Viejo”).

Dupes

To comprehend the symbolic’s power to define a subject’s role in an intersubjective network (often against that subject’s intentions), the reader need only follow Alberto Navarro, the Minister of Justice. Though as a corpse Navarro serves as an instrument to dupe others, his own duping takes place much earlier, and his ultimate fate is sealed by the intersubjective power of the corpse. Navarro arrives on the political scene as a paragon of justice and virtue and evolves from exemplary public servant to a lifeless corpse in a motel room alongside a decapitated Ignacio Santillán, wasted on sex, cocaine, and power. His “clean” image and “honesty” make him an ideal repository for the trust of the Mexican people; his “political conviction” and faith in justice avail him as a capable negotiator, but also as “un espléndido constructor de su propia imagen” (120), as we have previously suggested (see page 187). We should understand Navarro’s “image” in the same way we characterized that of the del Villar administration: a visible screen projected for public consumption, and onto which the public can map its own fantasy of an incorruptible Minister of Justice, behind which Navarro’s true character and motivations can be “repressed,” and a tool for repression and the symptom which simultaneously conceals and reveals that repression. Navarro’s screen, in keeping with his character, is exemplary: in life it reveals nothing of his fall from grace, and even in death he maintains his air of uprightness and pulchritude. Only in the hands of his captors —be-

hind the screen— does Oropeza gain access to the Minister's descent into dishonor and death.

Navarro's first political victory rids his ministry of "cualquier vestigio de corrupción e ineficacia," cementing his public image as an honest politician and the face of the del Villar administration. From that moment, he accesses and is immediately subsumed into a symbolic network that makes demands on him in order to preserve its consistency, demands he will be made to fulfill whether he means to or not. Navarro privately abandons the image he has established, adopts the role he must play within the symbolic machine of which he is now a part, and begins acting against his own ideals. He comes to understand that his capacity to serve his country is directly correlated to the power granted to him as the personification of the government, and that therefore his top priority is to preserve his (and its) public image, preserve his Ministry, and eventually become the successor to the del Villar presidency. Predictably, his story becomes an exemplary illustration of the corruptibility of those in power by power: "Pronto el ministro se dio cuenta de que el poder lo carcomía definitivamente, sin que pudiese evitarlo." Navarro's surrender to the thrall of power is precisely that: a surrender, as exemplary, unavoidable, and conscious as Oropeza's surrender to the call of the real, but narrated tersely, without any of Oropeza's extreme self-consciousness or self-aggrandizing poetry. "[N]o se trataba de que se vendiese o de que traicionase sus convicciones [...], sino de que su devoción por el poder le exigía trasladarse a un plano distinto, donde la bondad o la esperanza no importaban, donde las decisiones estaban encaminadas a un único fin: la conservación de la fuerza" (121). He slides almost effortlessly into the precise role assigned to him in the symbolic system that organizes Mexican power.

Unsurprisingly, Navarro begins to reflect the same divisions between darkness and light that define both Ignacio Santillán, the *cofradía*, and the del Villar administration —the agents to and accessories of his fall— and separate them from Mexicans at large: “de día era uno, el funcionario preocupado por el bien común, mientras que por las noches lo único que le interesaba, [...] come a los demás miembros del gabinete, [...] era alimentarse por el poder” (121). Despite being “behind the screen,” Navarro initially does not recognize that the tension which maintains the regime now applies to him as well (see page 191). He protests the equilibrium established between light and darkness, believing that, despite the terrible things he does, his efforts for good outbalance his newfound predilection for evil. He soon learns, however, that his role cannot be thought in terms of the disjunctive *either* light *or* darkness, but only as *both* light *and* darkness. We have already identified the lesson that Navarro fails to properly comprehend: “el que una cosa no altera[b]a la otra —que, por el contrario, una necesita[ba] de la otra” (124).¹⁷² His continual struggle to eliminate the dark in favor of the light provokes a heart attack in the Minister; upon opening his eyes in the hospital recovery room, he recognizes once and for all what he has become and realizes that the symbolic demands to which he must resign himself to be part of the system are not negotiable. Navarro ultimately accepts his metamorphosis, and his inevitable inclusion in the secret nightly meetings in the Palacio, as unavoidable, as his “destiny.”¹⁷³ He frenetically pursues the balance of light and darkness by carrying both to their extremes, even at the expense

172. According to Oropeza, Navarro never gives up on his desire —his “destiny”— to “[romper] la dualidades funestas, la separación entre el sol y la tiniebla” and create a government “prístino, nítido, transparente: luminoso” (147-48).

173. Destiny, for Žižek, would be just another name for the answer of the real, a fiction imbued with secret meaning that acts as the symbolic’s final support. In this case, though, someone *is* pulling the Minister’s strings, and his “encounter” with the real is not entirely delusional.

of his already fragile health; the pursuit constitutes for Navarro “una justificación, una tarea y una meta” (126), the support of his identity. Until he meets Marielena Mondragón.

Navarro’s first meeting with Marielena Mondragón coincides with his apparent submission to the intersubjective power of the corpse. Marielena’s performance at the meeting of *cofradía* where they meet in which she seduces the Minister “a través del cadáver” (137), forges a complex relationship that disrupts the symbolic and permanently alters the dynamics that define how their reality operates. According to Oropeza, the act establishes a perfectly balanced triangle between Marielena, who performs, Alberto, who watches, and Ignacio Santillán, who observes the whole scene, in which each member understands his or her role, despite the fact that “tensiones interiores” would eventually “romperlo y convertirlo en un punto fijo y solitario sin dimensiones” (144). Insofar as Marielena as informant is never more than a disembodied voice that vanishes when her narration is finished, this is precisely what happens, though not without the assistance of a catalyst. It is not until later that Oropeza realizes how wrongly he perceived the roles each character plays. What is established is far more complex than a triangle, touching so many points in the network of power that it requires a reorganization of reality that implicates, to some degree, everyone who participates in that reality.

Upon meeting her, Ignacio Santillán sees in Marielena a “salvavidas” whom he ironically seeks to redeem from her affinity for darkness with his own (135-37). Marielena, in her turn, sees in Ignacio her own “salvavidas,” a figure that she can make into her slave and destroy little by little, to help her regain the feeling of control she has surrendered to that shadowy “El Viejo.” El Viejo introduces Alberto and Marielena at a meeting of the *cofradía*. The

slippage in the symbolic begins to occur immediately as the various interpretations of the ensuing events are tainted by each reader's intersubjective position. Marielena puts on her best show of seducing a recently deceased corpse (an "especimen tan perfecto [que] se trataba de una ocasión especial" [137]) for the Minister; the Minister, sees through Marielena and is fascinated instead by the corpse, but Marielena misreads his stare: "Alberto la observaba [a Marielena] consternado, pero no con aquella fascinación que Marielena suponía dirigida hacia ella o sus movimientos, hacia el placer que extraía de la muerte, sino hacia la inmovilidad y el pasmo del muchacho [...]." ¹⁷⁴ El Viejo, who has orchestrated the affair to use Marielena to ensnare and control the Minister, surreptitiously ensuring his influence "en los círculos del poder," also mistakenly attributes the latter's fascination to Marielena's wiles, and interprets it as evidence of an assured victory. Marielena, obsessed with the coldness with which Navarro endures her subsequent seduction —"casi un muerto, casi un cadáver"—, is so assiduous in her desire to appeal the Navarro that he eventually gives in, considering her another inevitable "mal" he will have to endure on the path to the Presidency, but whom he will discard once he reaches his goal. The apparent success of Marielena's seduction is taken as another confirmation of El Viejo's triumph over the Minister. Santillán and Navarro are, by all accounts, still unaware of one another, and everyone seem comfortable in their relationships with Marielena, until Navarro commits

su gran error, su desvarío [...] cuando, irresponsable, soberbiamente, introdu[ce] a Marielena en las reuniones de Palacio (*vaya revelación, cuántos hilos por amarrar*), ¹⁷⁵ donde ella se encargaría de seducir, entre otros, al doctor Luciano Bonilla, el ministro de Hacienda, y al doctor Gustavo Iturbe, nuestro

174. It is fundamentally immaterial whether Navarro is aware that the boy is dead or not. What is important is his lack of awareness of Marielena, who desperately desires to be seen by him.

175. We take this as yet another indication of how out of his depth Oropeza was.

amigo, nuestro viejo conocido, el ministro del Interior. (138, emphasis added)

El Viejo's misreading of the relationship between Navarro and Marielena is catastrophic to the integrity of the symbolic order, and this catastrophe is ultimately the first step leading to Navarro and Santillán's death.¹⁷⁶ It becomes increasingly clear from this point on that El Viejo —self-proclaimed “*ideólogo* de los empresarios del país” (138), and wealthy member of the Mexican elite— has worked behind the scenes in an attempt to orchestrate events that would grant him a greater measure of control over the other participants in the symbolic network in which he participates. A participant in the system, though, can never control the system, and Mercado's machinations are doomed to eventually break down under the weight of his inevitable misreadings. That is, Joaquín Mercado, who would be a master, ends up as just another dupe.

Navarro's willingness to use Marielena as a tool to achieve his own ends, to subject his colleagues to his control in the same way that Mercado sought to control him, reveals the latter's grave error. Navarro's power and influence in the del Villar administration, which makes him an ideal pawn in Mercado's hands, also prevent him from being controlled. Both attributes derive from his single-minded determination to become President, and his willingness to endure any “mal” that obstructs his path: “Mientras tanto [...] sigue al lado de Marielena: pero sólo hasta hasta que por fin puede deshacerse de ella —y, *por supuesto, de su amo, del Viejo*— [...]. El suyo será un régimen cuyo emblema sea la luz y cuyo primer sacrificio, doloroso e inevitable, tendrá que ser esa mujer” (127, emphasis added). Mercado's misguided

176. Oropeza, ostensible investigator of the perpetrators of those murders, hadn't the faintest idea of the existence of El Viejo, much less that he was the mastermind behind the double homicide.

attempt to seduce Navarro is doomed to failure from the outset; the belief he would succeed results from a failed reading of Navarro's character, his goals, and his methods. Indeed, as often happens, the subject who attempts to master the symbolic ends up achieving the exact inverse of his intentions: for all his scheming to use Navarro to achieve his goals, it is Navarro who ends up using Mercado to try to achieve his.

However, the symbolic catastrophe to which I have alluded is not built in to Mercado's misreading of events —the stability of the symbolic *depends* on the misreadings of its participants—;¹⁷⁷ rather, it owes its gravity to Mercado's unwillingness to let the symbolic operate without his intervention when his misreading comes to light. Though a dupe, Mercado has arranged the symbolic carefully to control, to the extent possible, the very possibility that he has miscalculated. No longer able to count on the services of the Minister of Justice, Mercado reformulates his plan and turns to an unlikely ally: Ignacio Santillán. Mercado recognizes Navarro as a clear threat to his interests: the face of the del Villar administration, he is both an unwilling pawn and the unopposed candidate for succession to the President. His death, however, would both eliminate the threat and bring about a struggle between the remaining contenders for the Presidency, contenders who might still be brought under Mercado's thumb.

Mercado activates Santillán's capacity to bring the Minister down at the same moment that he first attempts to bring Navarro under his control:

177. In his writing on psychosis Žižek states the following: "Given the central status of deception in relation to the symbolic order, one has to draw a radical conclusion: the only way *not* to be deceived is to maintain a distance from the symbolic order, i.e., to assume a *psychotic* position. A psychotic is precisely a subject who is *not duped by the symbolic order*" (*Looking Awry* 79).

La primera vez que se vieron los dos hombres [Navarro y Santillán] fue, inevitablemente, en la morgue del Viejo. La mala suerte o el infortunio los hizo coincidir en otra de aquellas ceremonias fúnebres [...]. Ambos se saludaron cortésmente y se ignoraron con diplomacia a lo largo de la noche, si bien, la mirada de Nacho [Santillán] no podía abandonar el rostro y la figura y la desnudez que Marielena compartía con el ministro. (150)

Though he does not recognize the possibility that Mercado's hand is behind what he calls "bad luck," Oropeza explicitly calls attention to this moment as central to the narrative that ends with the double homicide. Once Navarro's unwillingness to cooperate manifests, Mercado has simply to fuel Santillán's feelings of jealousy toward the Minister and his alternating rage and compassion toward Marielena —"ella se ha vendido, ella lo traiciona [...], ella está en peligro"— by orchestrating opportunities for him to see the two together: "Está seguro de que la encontrará con él, con su rival, con el ministro (el Viejo se ha asegurado de que así ocurra)" (148). When he comes to understand that her other suitor is a politician, Santillán's obsession with saving Marielena widens to include gathering as much knowledge of the Minister as possible; that is, to "apropiarse de él (*justo lo que planea el Viejo*)" (150, emphasis added). Unsurprisingly, Santillán also misreads Navarro's relationship with Marielena, convincing himself that the Minister considers the latter an object through whom he can demonstrate his power (148-49), rather than simply a "mal" he must endure. He unwittingly loses control of his identity, of his *selfhood* —"ella lo habita"— and transforms himself into a pawn, "en la pieza de un ajedrez que lo rebasa" (149), primed to carry out Mercado's wishes without understanding that he is but one piece in a game whose contours he can no longer distinguish, indeed, without realizing that his actions are being determined by someone or something other than himself.

Given what he knew, the revelation that Santillán probably murdered Navarro should not surprise Oropeza as much as it does.¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless, he is only somewhat disappointed that it was not Marielena, as he had suspected, and is uncharacteristically laconic when it becomes clear that he will never know who murdered or beheaded Santillán. Instead, he seems more interested in pressing Marielena on how she was duped by misreading her would-be savior's capacity for premeditated violence, what she later refers to as his desire to “inmolarse, cometer un acto extremo” (151). Just as Mercado believed he could control her and the Minister of Justice, Marielena believed she was capable of controlling Santillán, misreading whatever signs she was given that the triangle of men, of which she was the center, had exceeded her grasp. Oropeza intuitively understands this, even if he is not able to carry it out to its logical conclusion:

acaso Marielena no me engañaba ni ocultaba nada, pero también a ella le era imposible comprender lo que había sucedido, la trama de la cual ella era el centro. Se trataba de una elipsis insalvable, de un vacío que Marielena no podía llenar —y quizá nadie podría hacerlo—: cómo Nacho y el Ministro y ella habían llegado a lo que habían llegado [...]. (150)

Just as no participant in the symbolic can master the symbolic, no actor in a story can possess the whole story. Marielena did not know that Mercado pulled Santillán's strings just as he pulled hers; she could not have known that Santillán had been methodical enough to collect information on Navarro's illicit activities sufficient for the Minister to take his alleged blackmail threat seriously. Only a subject on the *outside* can gather all the pieces together to tell a coherent story, a story logically ordered, coherent in its symbolic structure, whose contingen-

178. Of course, Oropeza does not have the advantage of reading backwards, as the reader does.

cies are so endowed with meaning as to make its *denouement* inevitable. A detective story such as *La paz de los sepulcros* can only truly be told backwards, by a reader.

Oropeza is such a reader—he is, for example, able to tease the probability of Santillán's blackmail threat from the the gap he sensed in Marielena's narration (155)—,¹⁷⁹ but not while he is still in the hands of his captors. Despite his increased fluency in the symbolic “code” he so clumsily wields,¹⁸⁰ he too is punished for his attempt to master the story of which he has become a part, suffering three final inversions centering around his contact with Marielena Mondragón.

In the first place, not only is he Marielena's captive, he is also her captive audience; just as the would-be master of the symbolic Joaquín Mercado ends up mastered, would-be active interrogator Oropeza, in his interview with Marielena Mondragón, is reduced to passive recipient of her freely offered, at times delirious confessions. Next, as the government disseminates the “official story” of his kidnapping at the hands of the FPLN, he finds his role at *Tribuna del escándalo* awkwardly inverted: “No podía creerlo [...]: ahora yo me había transformado en uno más de los inútiles y mediocres escándalos de Tribuna [...].” (142). Lastly, his entire investigative endeavor is upended as he is compelled not to solve the mystery behind the deaths of Navarro and Santillán or to reveal the government's fundamental depravity, but instead to be an active party in suppressing his discoveries.

179. Faulkner would refer to this probability as “the might-have-been that is more true than truth” (Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 115).

180. It is worth noting that, even after his kidnap, he still fails to appreciate the government's involvement in the “mystery”: “Qué situación tan ridícula [...]: los dos ahí, a punto de resolver un misterio que el gobierno no había logrado entender [...].” (127)

Joaquín Mercado's willingness to help Oropeza finally "atar los cabos" —to reassert an uneasy control over the articulation of a reconfigured symbolic before his imminent demise— constitutes the third and final critical moment in Oropeza's investigation. Only in the moments he spends with Mercado does Oropeza finally become a capable reader of the narrative he set out to understand at the beginning of the novel. At Mercado's urging, Oropeza pieces together the final details that his narrative lacks: the involvement of Iturbe, Minister of the Interior, in his kidnapping; the reasons why Marielena was permitted to convey her story to Oropeza; the full scope and the implications of the power struggle between Iturbe and Bonilla, the Minister of Finance; the role he, Oropeza, is expected to play in the drama's *denouement*; and the extent to which Mercado's economic influence grants, restrains, and imposes limits on the exercise of and struggle for power. When he comes to understand the reasons behind and significance of the murders, and the ways in which they reveal the links between Mercado's economic power, the Del Villar administration's political power, the FPLN's social power and, of all things, the *cofradía's* potential to bring them all together, Oropeza is astonished to find that he has still failed to connect so many threads, that he has misread the dynamics uniting the constellation of Mexican institutions; that he has, once again, been duped: "[t]odo es lo que no es" (157).

As though cued by this "brillante deducción" (157), the shots that will rescue him from the (supposed) hands of the FPLN ring out in the distance. His rescue is timely in that, with Marielena and Mercado's assistance, Oropeza finally has come to understand the complexity of the symbolic he sought to decipher. But instead of publishing a more or less true account of what happened, he writes "Como fui rescatado de Manos de la Guerrilla" for *Tri-*

buna del escándalo. The account, already well prepared and widely disseminated before the rescue, is accepted wholesale by Azucena, the novel's expedient metonymy for the public at large. The narrator retains the conclusions of his investigation as life insurance against those it implicates; they are further silenced by the promise of the Premio Nacional del Periodismo and, perhaps to salvage some of his dignity in the face of so blatant a bribe, by his own musings on the malleable nature of "history" and "truth."¹⁸¹ What lies at the base of these philosophical meanderings, though, is the unstated fact that Oropeza came to understand the symbolic system of power at the precise moment in which the system expired and was superseded by a new one. As the novel concludes, the political system whose face was that of Alberto Navarro no longer exists; the scramble to fill the power vacuum left by the Minister of Justice ends with Iturbe's triumph. The final chapter of *La paz de los sepulcros* shows a re-articulated symbolic settling accounts: Marielena and Mercado, their power significantly diminished after Navarro's death, are killed during Oropeza's rescue; Bonilla tenders his resignation, implicitly admitting to having connections with Mercado and the FPLN; the FPLN, no longer necessary as a convenient scapegoat, or perhaps granted too much power in the public imagination by its supposed involvement in Navarro's murder and Oropeza's kidnapping, is annihilated in a matter of months; and Iturbe claims his place as the undisputed new face of the del Villar administration and candidate for President in the next election.

Oropeza, too, is affected by the settling of the symbolic and the retreat of the real. He no longer hears the call of the real, as demonstrated by his new attitude toward Santillán's

181. These musings are interesting in their own right in that they describe in simple terms a kind of poetics of history as it relates to the treatment of historical records and historical memory that many historical novels subscribe to.

role in the murder, the one important detail of the investigation that he is never able to determine with any certainty:

Nacho y el ministro estaban muertos muy muertos y nada podía hacerse para remediarlo: investigar las causas y las conexiones que los llevaron a compartir aquella escena postrera, tal como lo intenté yo, era desde el inicio un absurdo, una trampa que, sin darme cuenta, tendía contra mí mismo: ni siquiera llegué a conocer la verdad verdadera, ni siquiera conocí más de cerca a mi antiguo compañero de escuela como para averiguar si había sido o no un asesino (o al menos un torturador o un verdugo). (166)

Conclusion

In *Madero, el otro* the real addressed the protagonist with an impenetrable demand that shattered Madero's vision of his own integral identity. In *La paz de los sepulcros*, the real remains hidden but seems to call Oropeza obliquely, through its symptoms. The reader can and should recognize him or her self in Volpi's narrator, particularly in his or her status as perpetually "duped" by the symbolic orders in which he or she participates. The choice (if it is a choice) between being deceived by the symbolic and being non-duped but psychotic leaves no dignified alternatives. While Oropeza's ineptitude may be comical, we must recognize that it is not superfluous; he may be demonstrably unable to affect the course of events, or to alter the constitution of Mexican power structures, but those incapacities are not so frightening as not knowing how that course is chosen, or those structures constituted, in the first place. The universalizable substratum of Volpi's accidental historical novel suggests that societies, in order to function, must repress a certain "central" element around which the system will orbit; this element is both constitutive of and inimical to the system, immanent and yet radically exterior. Its repression will unavoidably engender perceptible symptoms in society whose function is to conceal the "gap" left by the repressed element. We can recognize

these symptoms and, were we to follow them to their source, we would theoretically discover the real that structures (and undoes) our reality.

But only theoretically: only what can be symbolized can be discovered, and if the real can be symbolized it is (always) already symbolic, and no longer real. Like Oropeza, we are in no danger of accidentally (or intentionally) chancing upon the real. Volpi's narrator emerges from his ordeal physically and psychologically intact, but intimately aware that the pathways of Mexican political reality are far more complex than what he perceives. He is still a dupe, but his awareness of the deception being played on him grants him power and insight that he did not previously possess: power over his fellow citizens as well as power over the powerful. *La paz de los sepulcros*, readable as an example of what is pejoratively known as "literatura light," thus also conceals at a deeper level a more meaningful and politically progressive call to arms. Volpi prompts his readers to "wake up" to what the symptoms of the repressed real conceal and reveal about the behind-the-scenes dealings of the powerful, especially with respect to the ways economic power is bound up with political power. He encourages us to refuse to be lulled into complacency by the projection of our own fantasies onto our perception of reality. He incites his fellow citizens not to be non-duped —impossible task—, but to diligently recognize and relentlessly protest that the wool is ever being pulled over their eyes.

“THE CORPSE THAT WOULD NOT DIE”: THE CORPSE AS EXCESS IN ÁLVARO

URIBE'S *EXPEDIENTE DEL ATENTADO*

“A veces la muerte immortaliza.”

—Jorge Vólpi, *La paz de los sepulcros*

“Hacia fin del siglo [...], el sueño de la unanimidad parecía completo. El arte de la adulación llegó entonces a extremos increíbles. Hubo quien se arrodillara ante don Porfirio pidiéndole la reelección. [...] Fue una década de aplausos que ni un sorpresivo atentado contra la vida de Porfirio en 1897 pudo empañar.”

—Enrique Krauze, *Siglo de caudillos*

The first and only attempt on the life of Porfirio Díaz during his 36-year reign first as president, and later as “democratic dictator” of Mexico, occurred in the middle of the 1897 Independence Day parade. The perpetrator, Arnulfo Arroyo —“un hombre dearrapado, densamente pálido y de aspecto repugnante” (qtd. in Cosío Villegas 684) or, in Álvaro Uribe’s laconic but incisive words, “uno de estos hombres endemoniados” (11)— constitutes a curious character in the pantheon of modern Mexican historical figures. Unanimously and ferociously condemned at the time for his singular crime, he has since faded into relative obscurity, to the point that he often goes unacknowledged in even sizable histories of Díaz’s life. By way of example Enrique Krauze, in his popular, above cited history, dedicates a mere clause to this singular event, and casually neglects to mention the name “Arnulfo Arroyo” at all; neither is there any mention of the gruesome lynching Arroyo suffered at the hands of vigilantes, many of whom held high posts in Díaz’s administration. After his gruesome lynching, Arnulfo Arroyo and his ill-fated attempt to assassinate a beloved dictator at the apparent height of his public approval fade, like his mutilated body, into relative obscurity, consigned to a fate as a minor episode in the voluminous narrative of Porfirio Díaz’s life.

On the other hand, historians who do dedicate space to Arroyo's attempt note its importance by identifying a vital pair of dissonances. As Daniel Cosío Villegas points out in his account of the event, the mere fact that the assassination attempt *could have been* successful in more adept hands indicates one of two things: that either Díaz was not as popular as he was widely regarded to be at the turn of the century, or that he had become so accustomed to unanimous support that he had become lax with his personal security. Cosío Villegas offers a detailed summary of the events as they unfolded, including the immediate and "indignant" reaction of the official press, who took extreme umbrage at Arroyo's temerity; the crescendo of public outrage when Arroyo is shown to be low, ungrateful, and vice-ridden despite his honorable upbringing; and the groundswell of public approval that Arroyo's attempt generates toward its victim. He further offers a synopsis of Arroyo's murder at the hands of "una considerable masa popular," the genesis of the official explanation and the sequence of events that discredits it, the subsequent suicide of the Inspector General of the Police, Eduardo Velázquez, and the trial of the remaining defendants accused of playing a role in Arroyo's lynching. Cosío Villegas concludes by noting two intersecting "puntos oscuros" revealed in the drama: first, that the cult of personality that surrounded President Díaz was sufficient to extinguish the very possibility that his assailant's punishment would result from the operation of a functioning justice system; and, along the same lines, that the establishment and execution of "diligent and severe" punishment was imposed at the behest of a cryptic "voluntad superior," which we shall assume refers to the senior members of Díaz's administration, if not to Díaz himself (683-88).

Álvaro Uribe's *Expediente del atentado* felicitously inhabits these “puntos oscuros,” supplementing the historical record with fictional creation. In Uribe's hands, Arnulfo Arroyo becomes much more than a largely forgotten criminal who makes an attempt on the life of Porfirio Díaz: his identity within the symbolic network of Mexican reality, obliterated first in perpetual alcoholic stupor and later in gruesome death, becomes infinitely malleable—insofar as it can be fashioned into whatever one desires—but ultimately (and for precisely the same reason) essentially unseizable and uncontainable.¹⁸² The novel takes the form of a collection of articles, epistles, official communiqués, and recorded conversations, all surrounding the arrest and subsequent murder of the man who would have liked to assassinate Porfirio Díaz. The plot unfolds through the superposition of conflicting narratives, the responsibility for whose synthesis lies entirely with the reader. Díaz himself remains significantly absent from these narratives: though oft-mentioned, he almost never appears. At the same time, he permeates the consciousness of each of his subordinates as a figurehead whose shadow—an apt symbol for the oppressive presence of absence—is inescapable: everything is performed *in his name*, even if never *in his presence*. Paired with the empty, dead body of Arnulfo Arroyo, *Expediente del atentado* examines the complex construction of a system of power that implicates *two* symptoms of the Lacanian real at its center—one absence and one excess—and the inconvenient effects that the usurpation of justice brings to the stability of the symbolic order.

182. Note the analogy with the real. Recall that the embodiment of the real in objective reality depends entirely and exclusively on the desire of the subject; strictly speaking, the real, like Arroyo's identity, is nothing at all, which is conceptually indistinguishable from being literally anything at all.

In *Madero, el otro* and *La paz de los sepulcros*, bodies die when they are meant to, though this does not prevent them from having to die a second, symbolic death (as Francisco Madero does). The implacable gaze of his lifeless body, which unravels his identity, “se apaga” at the end of the novel when his eyes close, surrendering its grasp on Madero’s spirit. Neither does it prevent bodies from speaking, as they do to Agustín Oropeza. For the narrator of Volpi’s dystopia, transforming the dead into objects is neither so easy nor so unproblematic as it seems. Whether as heralds of the real or as disruptions in the functioning of intersubjective relationships in the symbolic, dead bodies have a way of ironically taking on a life of their own, forcing the reorganization of reality, compelling the living to take on roles that they do not elect for themselves, and revealing things better left hidden.

What happens, though, when a body like that of Arnulfo Arroyo in Álvaro Uribe’s *Expediente del atentado*, meant to die at a predetermined moment, remains alive? No longer indicative of a lack in the structuring of reality, Arroyo’s body becomes a grotesque *excess* that disrupts the consistency of the symbolic contexts in which he plays a role. Arroyo’s fundamental emptiness permits Velázquez and his accomplices to project onto him their illicit desires and conceive of him as an expendable means to achieve their ends; however, his superfluity to the organization of reality, the fundamental *meaninglessness* of his body, causes him to constantly exceed or escape the grasp of those who would put him to use. Through no fault of his own—he is dead for the greater part of the novel—he manages to consistently subvert and invert the objectives of those who would pull his strings.

In this sense, Arroyo (and later his body, and eventually the mere *idea* of Arnulfo Arroyo) functions as the element of the real around which the symbolic system of the narrative

structures itself. As such, he lacks any immanent meaning, identity, or place in the reality the characters inhabit. This does not prevent him, however, from provisionally taking on meanings ascribed to him by others, and throughout the novel he is imbued with different provisional meanings by those who wish to take advantage of him. My use of the passive voice here is not casual: Arroyo, even before his murder, is nothing more than a convenient body to be filled with whatever is needed. The meaning, the place he is given is structurally unstable, tied to a set of contingencies that are apt to change at any moment. He does not truly fit or belong anywhere; he is constantly in excess: change the circumstances, and he cannot help but be out of place.

Arroyo's circumstances change constantly in *Expediente del atentado*. He is a pawn first in the hands of the conspirators who recruit him; his failure to die at the scene of the assassination attempt permits Díaz to offer him up to the concept of "justice," a symbolic gesture in response to criticisms directed at his regime; misunderstanding how best to prove his loyalty to the dictator under a new set of circumstances, Velázquez makes of Arroyo an object of sacrifice in a demonstration of loyalist outrage; in the judicial prosecution of that sacrifice, his (absent) body becomes a prop for the defendants that refuses to work to their advantage. In each case, Arroyo's past roles and the circumstances arising therefrom complicate his ability to function as expected in the present; the way he fails to operate as expected in each scenario is, in its turn, determinant of the role he will next be forced to play.

The Living Dead

At the outset of the novel, there is no need to go through the literary motions of "emptying" Arnulfo Arroyo's body, as Agustín Oropeza must do; the protagonist is already

empty. In the section titled “Cómo me lo dejaron” at the end of the novel’s first part, between protestations and proclamations of her unconditional love for her son, his mother narrates his precocious and insatiable intelligence, the rise to prominence it occasioned for him in school, his growing habit of drunken debauchery, and ultimately his descent into irredeemable alcoholism (71-85). In a moment of lucidity after his arrest, Arroyo himself schematically outlines a portion of the same trajectory “en la sombra de Porfirio Díaz,” tracing in detail the evolution of his love and admiration for Díaz into deception, disillusion, and ultimately the hatred that prompts his excess and sets him on the path to becoming a pariah (45-48). Little more than a walking corpse, “cientos y acaso miles de días dilapidados en la ebreidad” have obliterated any traces of his identity (18). By the time Inspector Velázquez approaches him in the *Peter Gay* with his treasonous *apuesta*, all that remains of Arroyo is the basic, primordial “odio filial” he feels toward the disappointing dictator whom he once lauded (23).

Uribe is neither cautious nor subtle in his characterization of Díaz as the Freudian father whom Arroyo, the “son,” at once loves, fears, and detests.¹⁸³ Upon accepting Velázquez’s proposal, the reader is told, Arroyo does not take into account “el servicio impagable que le brindaría a la patria,” but is content to “saborear de antemano su íntima, enconada, *parricida* satisfacción” (23-24, emphasis added). In one of few abrupt interruptions in the text, the narrator notes that Arroyo, “[a]demás de temerlo, detestaba al caudillo” (23); Arroyo himself later relates how “[a] distancia, una distancia análoga a la que mediaba entre los hebreos del Antiguo Testamento y su Dios inabordable [!], la había adoptado como el padre enérgico y sapi-

183. I take as my model the prototypical Freudian father sketched out in *Totem and Taboo*.

ente que mi padre verdadero nunca fue [...]” (48). Like the Freudian father, Díaz personifies power, “[un] padre inalcanzable [...] hecho para mandar”; like the band of brothers who ultimately murder the father, “a todos los demás, sin excluirlo a [Arroyo], no les correspondía otra función que obedecerlo *como si fueran sus hijos*” (24, emphasis added).

Unlike the plot executed by Freud’s band of brothers, which is doomed to succeed, Arroyo’s assassination attempt is structurally doomed to failure. It fails not through any shortcomings of his own, but because the men who propose the plan and provide Arroyo with the tool with which to carry it out—a knife— surreptitiously remove it from his person before he exits the bar. He is not meant to kill the father of the nation, but merely to threaten him, which he manages to do, if only as ineptly as his inebriation allows. Unable to find the knife he no longer possesses, he picks a suitable rock up from the ground, approaches his victim, readies himself to execute his deed, accidentally drops the rock and, “con un puñetazo en la nuca cuyos únicos resultados visibles habían consistido en hacer trastabillar al caudillo y en tirarle de la cabeza el bicornio emplumado,” farcically announces in a voice whose virility he finds, like that of his diseased body, somewhat diminished, “¡Muera el dictador!” (19-20).

Arroyo is knocked off his feet and set upon by a contingent of guards, who are joined by “un civil con iniciativa propia” wielding a knife (20). What the reader will not discover until later is that, up to this point, the plot has unfolded exactly according to plan; only now do things begin to go wrong. The knife-wielding civilian, deployed by Inspector Velázquez to save Díaz from his aggressor by stabbing him to death, is prevented from executing his task by low-level soldiers who disarm him and take him into custody. His life no longer threatened, Arroyo attempts to redeem himself by stabbing Díaz with the broken end of the baton

that had been smashed over his own head moments before. He is so disoriented and his attempt so clumsy that Díaz manages to punch his assailant in the mouth before he can accomplish anything. This ineffectual second attack places him literally between the receiving end of a revolver and a sword. Trapped, he feigns struggling in an attempt to force their hand into killing him once and for all, but it is not to be. Díaz, renowned already in 1897 as a violently repressive autocrat, intolerant of political opponents, to say nothing of aspiring assassins, takes the opportunity to do something unexpected, and stays the hands of his bodyguards: “Que no se le haga nada a este hombre. Cuídenlo. Ya pertenece a la justicia” (24).

Had Velázquez’s plot succeeded —indeed, had Arroyo perished by *anyone’s* hand— before Díaz made his inspired announcement, perhaps some of the prevailing symbolic order could have been salvaged. Arroyo would have completed his task in a way more or less consistent with Velázquez’s expectations, and furthermore would be dead, unable to continue distorting the consistency of reality with his meaningless excess. Though Velázquez would not have increased his value in the eyes of his President, relative to his worth prior to staging the false assassination attempt, neither would he be have lowered himself. But in the moment Porfirio Díaz intervenes, the symbolic shifts to accommodate Arroyo’s new role. The protagonist is still a puppet, but the puppeteer has changed, and all the players’ roles have inverted: Díaz is no longer a target, but a beloved survivor; Arroyo is no longer an assassin, but a prisoner whose task is no longer to die, but to live; and Velázquez’s role is no longer to send Arroyo to his death, but to keep him alive at all costs. The shift in the symbolic goes largely unnoticed: indeed, almost none of the major players were aware of Arroyo’s existence until the shift occurs. Arroyo does not struggle with his new function, and remains internally consis-

tent, clinging to his seething hatred of Díaz; Velázquez, on the contrary, does not adapt as well to his new duties.

Reading (for) the Plot(s)

At one remove from the unfolding psychoanalytic drama, the plot at the heart of *Expediente del atentado* is actually quite banal. A high level government functionary —Inspector Eduardo Velázquez— seeks to ingratiate himself with Porfirio Díaz. In order to do so, he and Inspector Antonio Villavicencio, his right hand man, con a local alcoholic, Arnulfo Arroyo, into drinking himself into a stupor so as to convince him to make an assassination attempt on the president during the Independence Day parade. Arroyo does not realize that he is nothing more than a pawn in a larger game, for his benefactors do not in fact endeavor to kill Porfirio Díaz, but merely to put him in danger. Having taken away the very weapon they previously supplied in order to entice him into carrying out his mission, Velázquez and Villavicencio send a trusted subordinate after Arroyo, armed with a knife¹⁸⁴ and instructions to stab him to death in defense of their beloved leader. Díaz would later learn the identity of his savior, and of the men with intuition and sense enough to have defended him from his would-be aggressor, and reward them all with promotions. The plot outlined here emerges in fits and starts over the course of the novel; superficially, the novel's interest lies in the manner in which the story unfolds and coalesces around a collection of at times contradictory official and personal historical documents assembled by the narrator, F.G.¹⁸⁵

184. Perhaps even the same knife they removed from Arroyo's person only moments before.

185. Uribe reveals in numerous interviews that F.G. stands for Porfirian era author and government functionary Federico Gamboa, on whom the author published a "literary biography" in 1999. Uribe discovers the account of Arroyo's attempt on the life of the President in Gamboa's diaries, abounding in loose ends to be tied through fictional creation. The importance of Gamboa in the genesis of the novel cannot be

In fact, the diverse ways in which the novel's characters read and react to their changing circumstances constitute the true plot of Uribe's story. Every character's specific reaction is determined, as one expects, by his or her position in the symbolic; this position defines, albeit at times only indirectly, each character's individual, circumstantial relationship to an event so significant that it makes a decisive impact on the lives of everyone who knows about it. For Díaz it speaks both to a need for increased security and to a superlative opportunity for a diplomatic display of his regime's appreciation for justice; for each of Díaz's functionaries it presupposes a crisis of interpretation with respect to Díaz's pronouncement that Arroyo was not to be harmed; for the narrator, who is engaged in an affair with the Inspector's fiancée, it merely means they must take pains to avoid compromising themselves by concealing their former relationship with Arroyo and their present relationship with one another. But when the plot falls through, as it does so spectacularly in the opening section of *Expediente del atentado*, Inspector Velázquez proves entirely unable to properly read the new set of circumstances he faces.

Velázquez's reaction to the foiled assassination attempt is particularly exemplary of the way the symbolic can misfire. According to Díaz's word,¹⁸⁶ Arnulfo Arroyo is now to live,

understated:

La anécdota, estrictamente verídica, Uribe la encontró en los diarios —de los que es editor— del escritor Federico Gamboa, “uno de los documentos más importantes para conocer el porfirismo desde dentro”. Le llamó la atención que un hecho de tal importancia apenas mereciera breve mención en los diarios [de Gamboa, quien] “lo menciona con horror y sorpresa” al darse cuenta de que el frustrado magnicida había sido su compañero en la escuela.

186. A figure whose word can so fundamentally alter the symbolic structuring of reality through his word is perhaps a fine definition of a caudillo. Indeed, it resonates strongly with Arroyo's definition: “el más visible de los hombres” (50). Díaz, the most visible of men, the man whose position in the symbolic constitutes a node whose alteration can have far-reaching repercussions on nearly every cosmopolitan Mexican as well as the government's of the Western world, can only be approached by Arroyo, “un hombre invisible” whose position in the symbolic is null, a void. What is perhaps of even greater interest is the degree to which Díaz is “visible” *even when he is absent*.

but Velázquez persists in operating almost obsessively within the expired frame of reference that his plot presupposed. Indeed, within Velázquez's frame Arroyo is literally a corpse that will not—or did not—die. His body is, for the Inspector, empty of identity and function, but still Velázquez must somehow reconcile the fact that it continues to exist. Not a void but an excess, Arnulfo Arroyo has perished in the symbolic, but has yet to die in the real. The fact that Velázquez can no longer put Arroyo's body in the place he designated for it renders the body irreconcilable with the Inspector's organization of reality, which begins to break down. This breakdown is only exacerbated when an unsuspecting Díaz charges the Inspector with protecting Arroyo and keeping him alive. The persistence of the body, the brazen immediacy of what for Velázquez constitutes the real, threatens to burst the symbolic with its excess. Arroyo was to die in order for Velázquez to demonstrate his loyalty; unable to break from this reasoning, he continues to insist that Arroyo must die *even if it means contravening Díaz's direct orders*.

Velázquez's disobedience of the *caudillo* produces the direct opposite of both of their intentions: the brutal slaughter of Arroyo proves only that Velázquez's loyalty to the needs of his reality trump whatever fealty he feels toward Díaz, and nullifies the latter's opportunity to demonstrate the lawfulness of his regime. And the Inspector is loyal to a fault: in his suicide letter he acquits his accomplices of guilt for following his orders, assumes all the blame for the plot and the murder, and lays out the perfectly logical reasons why Arroyo ought to have died for his actions. Even after order is partially restored to Velázquez's conception of reality by way of Arroyo's murder, he remains unable to shift his perspective to align with Díaz's and continues to clash with the official, prevailing perspective. The very act that expels the excess

from his symbolic transforms him, in his turn, into an excess in Díaz's symbolic universe. His suicide is thus either a brave attempt to salvage his honor by remaining loyal to himself while restoring some stability to the prevailing order, or a cowardly unwillingness to face the consequences of his actions. In either case, his services are no longer fit for the symbolic in its new configuration, and he is speedily dispatched.

(In)versions

As death cannot properly put Arnulfo Arroyo's body to rest, he continues to meddle in the affairs of the Díaz administration. Though he cannot claim to have helped speed Inspector Velázquez's professional career along in any appreciable way, Arroyo does manage to accidentally bring about two curious effects, or rather to reveal two peculiar facets of the Díaz regime. Though on the one hand the Porfiriato and the loyalty commanded by its eponymous leader in those who support him seem to bely strength, the mock assassination plot and subsequent lynching of Arroyo suggest a surprising impotence in the control Díaz exerts (or fails to exert) over the actions of his subordinates. Indeed, for all his historical air of strength and power, for all his exhibition of pomp and stateliness, at no point in *Expediente del atentado* does Díaz in fact *exert* strength or *demonstrate* power; he is, at best, a prop, a pretext for the actions of others, entirely eclipsed by those actions himself. The second effect Arroyo that brings about, which we will take up later (see page 234), is another inversion: rather than acting as a testament to the Mexican justice system, the invocation of Arroyo's body at his the trial of the *lynchadores* works only to reveal that, under the Díaz regime, the concept of justice in Mexico is fundamentally a farce.

In the first “carpeta” —which comprises the first third of the novel, but does not strictly coincide with the same fraction of the plot’s chronological ordering— Díaz’s offscreen interactions range from issuing orders that are not obeyed to ceding authority entirely. We have already analyzed the most important of these moments: Velázquez’s betrayal. In an ironic twist, Arroyo’s murderers cry out the dictator’s name —“¡Viva Porfirio Díaz!”— mere moments before undoing his will (64). At another (chronologically prior) moment, Díaz meets with Inspector Velázquez in order to clarify the latter’s uncertainty about how Arroyo is to be treated; before quitting the room, the dictator makes two interventions in the conversation: “Estoy a sus órdenes” and “¿Y desde cuándo, señor coronel, los ofendidos les dan instrucciones a los jueces?” (40, 41). Both diminish Díaz’s authority, the first ironically, the latter in earnest. Even the act of reflection in this scene —marked typically by the stroking of the dictator-president’s mustache— is characterized by the twice-repeated and self-conscious locution “como suele hacer [Díaz] siempre que reflexiona o quiere afectar que reflexiona” (41, 102 with some variation); that is, as either the absence of action or the absence of volition.

Díaz’s only appearance in the second “carpeta” takes the form of a variation on his interaction with Velázquez, repeating many of the same words and gestures (101-03). The next and final time Díaz speaks —and even here only through the mouths of “los que saben”— occurs immediately prior to the “tiro de gracia” with which the novel concludes. Díaz’s appearance bears the date September 16th: Independence Day. So though the figure of Díaz —with his attendant air of pomp and control— effectively bookends of the novel, he only ever appears *chronologically* at the beginning, on Independence Day itself. During the three months that follow, in which F.G. assembles his dossier, the leader of the Mexican nation is

entirely absent. Further limiting his capacity for action, “los que saben” reveal that Díaz intended to dismiss Inspector Velázquez from his post two days after the assassination attempt, presumably as a result of their earlier (twice-repeated) meeting, but Velázquez’s suicide prevents this. His suicide, coupled with Arroyo’s murder, furthermore prevents Díaz —though he certainly suspects the truth— from knowing with certainty whether Arroyo acted alone or “si más bien, según se rumoraba, su actuación había formado parte no necesariamente consciente de un *complot*” (242).

Although it bears recognizing that the novel is not *intended* to be about Porfirio Díaz but rather about the effects on and subsequent machinations of his subordinates and subjects in the wake of his attempted assassination, it is nevertheless curious to note the extent to and consistency with which a figure as historically imposing as Díaz is robbed of volition and unceremoniously shunted to the margins of the narration in the wake of Arroyo’s lynching. As a peripheral figure he is noteworthy in and for his ex-centricity. In F.G.’s words,

Los lynchadores perpetraron, en realidad, dos crímenes. El primero y más craso consistió en acabar con la vida de un hombre, usando para ello de una violencia y alevosía que nada puede legitimar. El segundo, menos visible pero igualmente pernicioso, tuvo el efecto, quizá no impremeditado, de impedir que aun en las peores circunstancias prevaleciera el Estado de derecho. Y no sólo eso, sino que al ejecutar por su propia cuenta a Arroyo, los asesinos contravinieron la voluntad expresa del señor presidente de la República. (96-97)

The “inversion” of Díaz’s position of authority is not the only remarkable feature of the second crime that F.G. describes. A deeper reading into the significance of such a crime suggests that, in a way, Arroyo’s assassination attempt did not fail at all. Despite the fact that his attack leaves the dictator’s body intact, Arroyo obliquely and accidentally manages to contrive the “murder” of Díaz’s volition, the “assassination” of his authority, by provoking Díaz’s sub-

ordinates into brutally lynching him. As the plot progresses, this violation of the symbolic by the presence (or absent presence) of the Arroyo's excessive body ends up eclipsing Díaz almost entirely as a principal figure both in the novel and within his circle of power.

The narrative of the real —the erratic, excessive, unseizable body of Arroyo— in *Expediente del atentado* has taken the following course: Velázquez imbues the body with a place in the symbolic (and consequently with meaning) by assigning it the task of threatening Porfirio Díaz; it is prevented from carrying out its task and, in the vacuum left by its resulting meaninglessness, takes on a new meaning assigned to it by Porfirio Díaz. Unable to understand his relationship to its new function, Velázquez eliminates the threat of the real but, in accomplishing his task, exposes his own out-of-place-ness vis-à-vis the new configuration of the symbolic. Velázquez's final homicidal and suicidal acts once again alter the unstable contingencies upon which the meaning assigned to Arroyo by Díaz supported itself; no longer able to "place" himself in the symbolic, Díaz's authority collapses and takes up an ex-centric, "offstage" position.

The final stop on Arroyo's itinerary occurs during the trial of the lynch mob one month after the execution of their crime. The section, aptly titled "Órdenes superiores," carries the similarly appropriate subtitle "Farsa en un acto." Arnulfo Arroyo's body is not present on the scene of the trial except in its palpable absence, which is mirrored by the absence of Inspector Velázquez. The nature of the farse is double. F.G., on the one hand, belies his own contempt for the ineffective operation of the justice system. The banality of the witnesses' abdication of authority behind hollow appeals to "órdenes superiores" demonstrates their complete disdain for the judicial process, while the ingenuous Cándido Cuéllar serves as a foil as

much to their indifference as to F.G.'s scorn. Uribe tacitly authorizes the narrator's attitude in the "Colofón," which states that none of the death sentences delivered by the judge were ever carried out, but were stayed by a series of appeals resulting ultimately in the absolution of the defendants. "De acuerdo con la justicia porfirista," notes F.G. (or perhaps Uribe), "el único culpable del asesinato de Arroyo fue el difunto Eduardo Velázquez" (249).

On the other hand, F.G. does not explicitly acknowledge the above reading of the trial as farce. Instead, he articulates that for *him* the farcical nature of the trial lies in the question it asks—are the twelve defendants (thirteen counting Eduardo Velázquez) guilty of lynching Arnulfo Arroyo?—rather than the question it *should* have asked—is Arnulfo Arroyo guilty of attempting to assassinate Porfirio Díaz, and tacitly, did his crime merit the punishment he suffered at the hands of the lynch mob?—.

¡Ahora resulta que la cosa juzgada era únicamente el asesinato de Arnulfo Arroyo y no, por implicación, su imperdonable atentado contra el señor presidente de la República! Ya a nadie le importa saber por qué se cometió esa infamia, ni si el infame la concibió por su cuenta o actuó instigado por alguien más. De estar a punto de ser el mayor criminal en nuestra historia, el desencaminado Arnulfo pasó a convertirse en la víctima favorita del vulgo. Sólo falta que lo beatifiquen en calidad de mártir de la democracia.

A mi parecer, el proceso entero es una comedia de errores; aún más: una farsa apenas apropiada para un teatro de marionetas. Me pregunto quién jala los hilos que mueven a todos los figurantes, desde el único acusado inocente en apariencia hasta el mismo juez. (220)

The puppetmaster, if he can be called that, is once again Arnulfo Arroyo; the logic by which he "accomplishes" his task is the familiar process of inverting the intention of those who would assert mastery over him.

F.G. calls attention to the broad effect Arroyo has on the trial in the above quotation. Though his insistence that Arroyo should be put on trial *in absentia* is amusingly carica-

turesque, as is his implicit conclusion that Arroyo's guilt should absolve that of his murderers, F.G. correctly identifies the irony of the trial in pointing out how it effectively transforms a man perceived as the perpetrator of a heinous criminal act into a martyr for democracy and democratic justice. Indeed, the surprising inversion of Arroyo's role in the trial upends all expectations regarding the repercussions of his attempted assassination: where Velázquez would create a monster, Arroyo becomes the favorite of a fickle public;¹⁸⁷ where Díaz would build a testament to order and impartial justice, he instead erects a pillar to disorder and vigilante retribution.

Arroyo achieves the above inversion by way of another equally significant inversion that curiously fails to attract F.G.'s attention. By invoking Arnulfo Arroyo in a defense that ought to have restricted itself to appeals to "órdenes superiores," the defense opens its case to attack and eventual annihilation at the hands of the prosecution. The prosecution counters the defense's absurd allegations that there was no premeditation, no motive, and no opportunity, and therefore no crime, by citing unequivocal examples of all three. At this point the invocation of Arroyo "inverts," becoming a liability for the defense instead of an asset. Emboldened by these victories, the representative for the prosecution continues to question his opponent's claims. The defense missteps by claiming that "todos los acusados, sin ser inocentes, son inculpables, porque obraron obedeciendo órdenes superiores" (212), but characterizes the orders as those of a "vesánico." Besides implicitly admitting the *guilt* of his clients despite their previous denials of involvement, he opens his defense to the counterclaim that the orders of an insane man should be ignored. The prosecution, on increasingly unstable

187. See the section titled "Los moralistas y los sabios" as well as the stage directions on pp. 216-217.

ground, asserts that the accused saw the murder of Arroyos as “un acto de justicia” (214), that “Arroyo merecía la muerte” (215), that he was an anarchist, and finally that convicting the accused would amount to an act of spite by members of the “vulgo” who “odian irracionalmente a la policía” (216). The defense’s invocation of Arroyo from a position of strength belies a fundamental misreading of the latter’s current orientation in the symbolic, in which he is no longer understood as an aggressor but rather as a victim of aggression. As has occurred continually throughout the novel, Arroyo “exceeds” the intentions of those who would put him to use; the Lacanian real masters those who would manipulate it for their own use, inverts their intentions, and leaves their case in shambles.

Burying the real

In the end, the real must be —and remain— repressed. It is only in fiction and psychosis that it can come to light and be articulated as that which destabilizes the very possibility of articulating anything. *Expediente del atentado* is analogous to Ignacio Solares’s creative imagining of Francisco Madero in *Madero, el otro* and to Volpi’s hictórico-futuristic dystopia in *La paz de los sepulcros* insofar as the symptoms of the real that invade everyday life result in the breakdown of the tensions that structure local symbolic networks: Madero’s identity crumbles and must be reconstructed to accommodate formerly irreconcilable aspects of his historical narrative; structures of Mexican authority collapse and are replaced as Agustín Oropeza follows the symptoms of the real to their source, discovering the true nature of the powers that govern his reality (even though, surrounded by the detritus of the real, he remains dutifully duped); Arnulfo Arroyo’s excessive body ripples through the symbolic and de-

poses figures of authority, inverts their intentions, and reveals aspects of the Díaz regime that would best remain hidden.

Because of the nature of the real, its restitution to its proper place, as the pillar that structures but is absent from reality, constitutes the critical final step in the novel. In *Madero, el otro*, the real winks out as the protagonist's gazing body at last closes its eyes. For Oropeza, a new system of power rises to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of its predecessor. But in *Expediente del atentado*, nothing occurs to positively force the real back down to its place as the pillar that structures reality. For the length of the novel Arnulfo Arroyo's presence is defined by his slippage from one role to another, evading the grasp of one potential master by attaching himself to another. F.G. amasses an impressive dossier on the events at whose center Arroyo appears time and again. The privileged information it contains—including answers to questions Díaz has about the nature of the plot against him—grants him the means to exert considerable power; his contempt for the proceedings about the trial provide him with a motive to do so. Rather than take advantage of his circumstances, though, he does the opposite, “asestándo[le] a su juventud [un] tiro de gracia”: “Hoy tomé las tres carpetas de que consta el expediente del atentado y las sepulté para siempre en un baúl de doble cerrojo al que nadie tiene acceso más que yo” (245).

I propose that F.G.'s decision to lock away his dossier on the assassination attempt on Porfirio Díaz and the subsequent murder of Arnulfo Arroyo was logically pre-determined, even if he does not understand his motivation. F.G. states in his diary that he hides the *expediente* for the same reason that he marries his fiancée instead of his lover: cowardice (245). This is not an entirely fair self-assessment. To his credit, the compiler of the file unearths sev-

eral unnerving truths about how authority is distributed behind the scenes of the Porfiriato's public face and how little power its eponymous leader truly has. Moreover, these discoveries reveal how trivial it would be to truly threaten the regime, especially since Díaz is, following Marx, only a "king" because he is treated as one.¹⁸⁸ Even ignoring his evident approval of Díaz, F.G.'s motivation to abandon the dossier is as much to protect himself and his future family as it is a shameful career choice; his cowardice, if it is that, is at least in part a noble cowardice. But ultimately, I would argue that the "choice" not to bring his findings to light is dictated by the structure of reality. The plot of *Expediente del atentado* suggests certain disaster for schemes that presuppose mastery of Arnulfo Arroyo; had F.G. attempted to leverage his knowledge in order to advance himself, he would almost certainly have only ruined himself instead. By burying the *expediente* and allowing Arroyo to pass out of public life and into memory—that is, by literally re-repressing the real (the verb *sepultar* is far from casual)—, F.G. remains the ostensible master of his own "cowardly" destiny, and permits the symbolic order to continue functioning.

CONCLUSION

In the hands of the authors we have considered in this chapter, the dead body as an undesirable symptom of the Lacanian real has been deployed to open a space in which to question, contest, and correct notions of Mexican nationhood as they are located in the symbolic. By becoming an accidental historical novel, *La paz de los sepulcros* shows how we as

188. "[O]ne man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subject to him. They, on the other hand, imagine that they are subjects because he is king" (Marx, *Capital: Volume 1* 149). Ignoring whether this is historically true or not, it is certainly the case in *Expediente del atentado*, where Díaz wields almost no power.

subjects are constitutively duped into the role we play in the symbolic order, a role that simultaneously establishes our relationship with power and conceals its formation and execution from us. As dupes we are bound to misread the meaning of the signs scattered throughout the reality we inhabit, haplessly playing the roles assigned to us by the symbolic but utterly unable to discern its operation upon us or to predict the consequences of our necessarily incomplete readings. Even Agustín Oropeza, with unparalleled access to the corpses that operate as symptoms of the real's governance of his reality, is only able to cast about blindly in search of what by its very nature *cannot be seen*. Likewise, *Expediente del atentado* examines the lack at the heart of the construction of power and the excesses produced by the usurpation of justice. The destructive itinerary of Arnulfo Arroyo's dead body, as it inverts the intentions of anyone who would put it to purposeful use, demonstrates how historical novels can reclaim and reframe lost or inadequate historical narratives to creatively address relevant contemporary questions.

CONCLUSION

“Dios me libre de creerme historiador”
—Álvaro Uribe

“The past is never dead. It's not even past.”
—William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

“Permítanme presentarme,” solicits the disembodied head of Josué Nadal, protagonist of Carlos Fuentes’s 2008 novel titled *La voluntad y la fortuna*. “O más bien dicho: presentar mi cuerpo, violentamente separado [...] de mi cabeza.” Nadal’s head finds itself, in a sense, caught between two deaths. Though divorced from his body, there remains a story he wishes to tell the reader, “those who [still] live.” It is a story he must urgently tell —“me voy quedando sin palabras para contarles” (12)—, a last bequest to his body, lest it become merely another unburied corpse (17). Fuentes’s novel, appropriating the urgent, waning voice of his dismembered protagonist, goes on to interrogate the tribulations of a contemporary Mexican society defined by violent criminal activity. Nadal’s head, leaking encephalic tissue onto the beach where it is situated, typifies the power of the grotesque body to collapse inside and outside, unify past and present, and couple gruesome real death with generative symbolic storytelling. The tale commences with the not-so-unlikely sentence that frames the novel: “Aquí está mi cabeza cortada, perdida como un coco a las orillas del Océano Pacífico en la costa mexicana de Guerrero” (12 and 541).

Like Fuentes's severed head, the bodies inhabiting Mexico's historiographic metafiction enjoy (or endure) a full and troublesome afterlife. Not content (or not permitted) to fade into the fabric of history, they haunt, upset, and call into question modern notions of nation, national identity, *mexicanidad*, and the authorized historical narratives and epistemologies upon which these notions are founded. Which is to say, they tell their stories about the past, but inscribe their lessons on the present. Many of these bodies occupy center stage, as bodies have in the past, as though flaunting their grotesque character; others inhabit the periphery, rearing their ugly heads only when the opportunity presents itself or when they are called into the service of players in the symbolic. Indeed, bodies in this latter category do well to remain hidden, symptoms of the Lacanian real whose most essential characteristic is remaining out of view, covered up and smoothed over by the symptoms it produces. When these symptoms move from the periphery to the center and the real flares up in the symbolic, received notions of reality's configuration and the narratives designed to support them break down and must be rebuilt so as to assimilate the foreign element. Regardless of its position, then, the grotesque body reshuffles and reorients our perception of the world, and by extension the matrix upon which we inscribe our identity. Previously excluded data must be taken into account, and truths previously taken for granted must be interrogated, qualified, rewritten, discarded.

The grotesque body represents a postmodern, political form of the 19th-century national romance. Rather than sketching out the foundations of the nation and national identity based on the improbable union of beautiful bodies who stand in as metaphor and metonymy of the nation's citizenry, historiographic metafiction systematically deconstructs

and explodes the expired definitions handed down by its predecessors. Where the national romance, and the novel of the Mexican revolution after it, sought to define what Mexican and Mexican-ness were, grotesque bodies intervenes to propose alternatives to describe a new national reality. Crucially, the alternatives they propose are strictly polyphonic and non-hierarchical; that is, in discarding unproductive old narratives, they opt not to replace them with any single alternative, but rather to leave to the reader the task of selecting between multiple options, or of producing his or her own. The reinscription of Mexican identity at the turn of the 21st century is likewise decidedly polyvalent, flexible, unseizable, and unconquerable.

The grotesque as described by Bakhtin has its roots in Medieval carnivalesque tradition, where it functioned as a release valve for the controlled expression social of tensions that permitted the perpetuation of authoritarian systems of power and autocratic social mores. By uncrowning and debasing political and religious figures of power in a controlled environment, the lower classes were allowed a vent for their frustrations, a momentary escape in a heterodox world upside down after which conventional social structures would reassert themselves, renewed. The versions of the grotesque body proposed in the novels dealt with in this dissertation, on the other hand, act definitively against the consolidation of existing social and political structures, negating the notions on which national social cohesion and shared identity are founded. The heterodoxy of historiographic metafiction does not lie in temporarily inverting social structures, but rather in laying waste to the hierarchical structures that organize reality and supplanting them with heterogeneous horizontal alternatives, a landscape devoid of the vertical structures required for hierarchies to exist. While authors may look to deformed, dead, and mutilated bodies in order to describe modern Mexico, we should not

confuse their powerful denunciation of the failure of contemporary sociopolitical institutions as pessimism regarding the future of the nation. On the contrary, the work of these authors presupposes a forcible rejection of ossified, univocal narratives in favor of a decidedly post-modern approach to foundational fictions. The grotesque body fractures tyrannical History into its constituent democratic and polyphonic histories.

Apart from the reorientation of Mexican socio-political identity, in the preceding pages I have also shown the extent to which the body remains a potent image in opening discursive space for a sustained dialogue regarding the status of the Mexican nation, the subject's relationship to power, and the manner in which that power is created, concealed, wielded, and distributed. Such questions are increasingly germane in a sociopolitical climate regimented by horrific violence and presided over by a government incapable of leveraging its power to combat it, and whose commitment to democratic ideals is already being called into question. Add to this the notion that power ceaselessly eludes and escapes the grasp of those who would wield it to their own ends, sooner duping its would-be masters into performing its perpetuation than consenting to bend to their will, and the situation appears dire indeed. The new narratives permitted by the intercession of the grotesque body are capable of fracturing the paralysis engendered by power, leveling the brittle and stagnant hierarchies that sustain it, and reaffirming the possibility of reappropriating power to forge a future in which we tell different stories, more appropriate to our experience of reality, more transparent about the ideologies they espouse and the compromises that they make in order to do so, and less tyrannical in their attitude toward the value of alternatives.

In addition to the critical value one finds in these conclusions, it is my hope that the abiding significance of this work will rest in demonstrating the merit of reading contemporary historiographic metanovels not only as important works of historiography, but as worthy works of fiction. As Álvaro Uribe makes clear in the epigraph to this conclusion, we would err to classify authors of historiographic metafiction as an unusual species of historian. Aside from the notion that fiction may have access to some truths unavailable to pure history, we adversely restrict the range of interpretive possibilities that these novels offer by reading them solely (or primarily) from the optic of historiography. By focusing on a recurring literary image, I posit my research as a hypothesis on which to base future investigations of historical fiction. The grotesque body asserts itself as the latest incarnation in the body's long literary itinerary, and while I have elected to focus my attention on the generative potential of bodies nearing or at the threshold of death in four representative novels, I have scarcely exhausted the supply of grotesque bodily images that historical fiction has to offer.¹⁸⁹

Grotesque bodies exist in myriad other forms as well. Pedro Ángel Palou's treatment of the revolutionary hero in his celebrated *Zapata* (2006) is worthy of study, as is Rosa Beltrán's satirical treatment of ridiculous bodies that adorn themselves in grotesqueness in *La corte de los ilusos* (1995). Nor should we resign ourselves to the grotesque as the only image common to recent historiographic metafiction, or to a longitudinal study of the persistence of a single image across multiple disparate texts as the only appropriate methodology. An investigation of the ways in which the literary tropes of historical fiction have evolved over the

189. I think primarily of Eduardo Antonio Parra's *Juárez: Rostro de piedra* (2008), whose rendering of a dying, remembering Juárez serves as a fine and historically appropriate counterpoint to Del Paso's "grotesquing" of Maximiliano and Carlota in *Noticias del Imperio*.

last three decades (in response to changing literary or ideological conditions) may prove fruitful for our understanding of this genre, as would a survey of the commonalities between novels written in close proximity or set during a single historical period.¹⁹⁰

Just as the grotesque body topples expired regimes, unsuitable myths, and univocal narratives, so does it topple the supremacy of history in historiographic metafiction. This act of subversion does not invert the relationship between history and fiction, nor does it substitute one hierarchical structure for another; rather, it levels the critical landscape and posits limitless horizontal relationships, infinite variations on the theme of imaginable configurations of the terms immanent to the denomination “historiographic metafiction.” The conjugation of the two highlights the salience of the grotesque body as a wedge through which to open a space to interrogate the historical record. The body furthermore becomes itself a stage on which to inscribe the problematic epistemology presupposed by the questioning of national narratives. William Faulkner’s maxim that “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” is powerfully borne out by these narratives. When the dying remember and the dead speak in Mexican historiographic metafiction, the past endures, more alive than ever.

190. A comparison of the abundant historical novels set during the Colonial and Independence eras, for example.

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