

Beyond Referentiality:
New Language and Meaning in Spanish Avant-garde Novels
of the Twentieth Century (and Beyond)

By

Katherine Mary Lambe

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Committee in charge:

Professor Alexandra Saum-Pascual, Co-chair
Professor Dru Dougherty, Co-chair
Professor Lyn Hejinian

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Abstract

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Beyond Referentiality: New Language and Meaning in Spanish Avant-garde Novels of the Twentieth Century (and Beyond) examines how language is treated as material (rather than medium) in Spanish experimental novels of the twentieth century. Chapter One centers on *Cazador en el alba* by Francisco Ayala and *Vispera del gozo* by Pedro Salinas, two key figures of the Spanish historical avant-garde. I demonstrate how these *novelas líricas*, using uniquely poetic language that embodies the rebellious artistic impulses of the period, rebuff narrative convention and thus compel a reconsideration of meaning. In the absence of plot, these richly sensorial works invite the reader to truly see language not as avenue to story, but as a carefully crafted art object that is itself inherently worthy of appreciation. Taking us into the future of Franco's dictatorship, Chapter Two analyzes *Volverás a Región* by Juan Benet, an exemplar of the (revolutionary) *nueva novela* whose painstakingly dense language obscures narrative action even as it tackles the tragic (and long-lasting) destruction of the Spanish Civil War. I argue that Benet uses linguistic opacity—for him, the zone of the irrational—as an alternate way of comprehending the incomprehensible. In Chapter Three, I study *Larva: Babel de una noche de San Juan* by Julián Ríos, a product of the lighthearted *Movida* (and a newly democratic Spain) that nevertheless engages in its own intensely objectifying formal transformations. I show how narrative structure and language are (playfully) mutilated beyond recognition, leaving the reader to contend with an incredibly complex textual labyrinth in which signifiers do not straightforwardly (or reliably) signify. Here, as in the earlier instances, meaning is not a matter of interpretation, but instead attention, a shift that accentuates language's (innately) material identity.

I conclude my consideration of Spanish narrative objecthood by turning to the future, the (decidedly contemporary) concept of literary archaeology guiding me through a closing (and again, contemporary) counterpoint—the *Proyecto Nocilla* by Agustín Fernández Mallo. How do these twenty first century avant-garde novels compare (and contrast) with the earlier examples? What objectifying strategies do they share? What is new? And lastly, how do their particular

formal innovations inform—and alter—my understanding of the previously discussed experimental works? In all cases, radical form makes narrative language distinctly dimensional. How does such dimensionality manifest differently in these different historical periods? These are the questions I answer in order to demonstrate the shared, yet singular materiality that characterizes the language-focused novels of Francisco Ayala, Pedro Salinas, Juan Benet, Julián Ríos, *and* Agustín Fernández Mallo.

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Introduction

Spain in the mid-nineteenth century was—like the later periods discussed in this dissertation—in a state of modernization. In this case, the middle class was growing along with the capitalist economy. *La burguesía* was increasingly better-off and more educated, with an appetite for (accessible) cultural production. With such a population, the *folletín* fulfilled this need, its readily available serialized narratives captivating a more literate public. To this end, it is a genre distinguished by melodrama and intrigue. Its characters, their actions, and feelings, are exaggerated to engage and excite. Anticipation, often anxious, is central to the reading process. These *novelas por entrega* are thus novels from any angle, conforming to (even contemporary) stereotypes about the genre. They are novels in the sense of a story, because they develop plots and characters. They are also novels in the sense of a soap opera, their sequential nature and emotional turbulence their defining features. At the time, the category was so widespread that even Benito Pérez Galdós, Spain's most recognizable Realist author, early on published *literatura folletinesca*. And despite their completeness, the (nonserial) novels that would follow (and establish his reputation) were similarly *novelesque*. Works like *La de Bringas* and *Fortunata y Jacinta* also gave their readers contemporary tales of love, jealousy, and social stature that unfold conventionally with action that climaxes before reaching a resolution. Moreover, the Realism and (later) Naturalism that would characterize the Spanish literature of the late nineteenth century—and, in some respects, the novel more broadly across time and space—is explicit in the artistic objective such a structure promotes: mimesis.

La cuestión palpitante by Emilia Pardo Bazán, a leading Naturalist, highlights such intense focus. The work—itsself a series of theoretical reflections published in 1882 in the newspaper *La Época*—disputes scandalized reactions and looks to Zola for inspiration. Rejecting Naturalism's tendency toward *determinismo*, she defends a (uniquely Catholic) Spanish take on a literary movement that, by maintaining space for *libre albedrío*, is designed to examine its world critically. Its roots, she contends, extend as far back as ancient Greece and (locally) include *La Celestina*, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, and *Don Quijote*, three novels foundational for Spanish literature (and, arguably, the development of the genre as a whole). For Pardo Bazán, Realism—and its most modern form, Naturalism—is not simply the novel's current iteration, but rather its innate state. Realism, with its emphasis on an “accurate” representation of the (often dramatic) events that shape the (often difficult) lives of characters fleshed out with the well-detailed complexities of their individual psychological realities and histories, *is* the novel. And in many ways—even now—that vision of novel as human story holds¹. Today, the long literary form is still popular, in all senses—widely read *and* conventionally appealing. And in the popular novel, the public anticipates action and description. In the popular imagination, the novel is a genre dedicated to drama. It is a space in which lives, relationships, and feelings unfurl themselves, a space whose humanity on some level (physically, culturally, emotionally, or otherwise) reflects our own, in this way allowing us to lose ourselves in its story.

But, despite its prevalence, the popular novel is not the only kind of novel. Three decades after Emilia Pardo Bazán's passionate defense of Naturalism, experimentation abounds,

¹ Obviously, Emilia Pardo Bazán's almost-200 page treatise on Naturalism cannot be reduced to the phrase “human story”. Indeed, in *La cuestión palpitante* she aligns Naturalism with science, a connection that some might see as contradictory to my own focus on the human. Nevertheless, both her descriptions of Naturalism and her novels (*La Tribuna*, for example) focus on human travails. For Pardo Bazán, science is the key to narrative *technique*, but there is always a *story*—of human struggle—to be told.

the brashly rebellious historical avant-garde producing novels that bear little resemblance to their institutional (and still very realist) peers. One figure on the forefront of such challenges to literary precepts is Viktor Shklovsky, a Russian Formalist whose 1917 “Art as Technique” paved the way for (decidedly *unpopular*)² narrative revolutions. The essay (later the first chapter of *Theory of Prose*³) opens by identifying a common misunderstanding –that poetry is born when a poet creates a new image. In actuality, images repeat across the ages. What distinguishes poetry is instead the particular way in which it cultivates prolonged perception. The best literature, Shklovsky says, should escort us outside the everyday, a stultifying state characterized by habituation. Here, we are blinded by routine, the things that surround us so familiar that we stop truly seeing them. It is a kind of utility-focused *prose perception*. We are in the realm of economy; communication should be fast. Consequently, parts replace the whole and “[the] object passes before us, as if it were prepackaged. We know that it exists because of its position in space, but we only see its surface” (5). For Shklovsky, the effects of such pragmatism are deadly. When one does not see, “life fades into nothingness. Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war...” (5). It is therefore the task of poetry (and art more generally) to wake us from our stupor by allowing us to *see*.

Art is therefore a “tool” (5) for perception, its most successful examples working through a process Shklovsky calls defamiliarization.⁴ When a writer defamiliarizes something, they “[complicate] form” (5) and thus lengthen perception. The object can no longer be perceived as the shell of its actual self –it is not immediately recognizable, and so the act of looking becomes “long and “laborious”” (5). In order to grasp what is in front of me, I must really *look*. And this, Shklovsky argues, is in fact the point. It is not *what* the artist creates that matters –“*[the] artifact itself is quite unimportant*” (6). Instead, it is the uniquely defamiliarized manner in which the reader encounters it. “The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. *Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity*” (6). And to truly experience it requires *time*. It is only when one “dwells on [a] text” that has been “intentionally removed from the domain of automatized perception” (12) that the actual “purpose of the image” (10) (and art) emerges. We do not read in order to casually (and habitually) glance at the incomplete outline of “what the image stands for” (10). We read to notice in new (and revolutionary) ways, “to return sensation to our limbs,...to feel objects, to make a stone feel stony” (6) –in short, to see rather than just recognize.

What is the impact of such prolonged perception on the object perceived? How does the reader’s newly enriched experience change the material with which they interact? In a poem (or a novel), after all, images are built of words. So what does it mean to really see language? When we look long enough, it is not just the content of the uncommon description that holds our gaze. Eventually, it is the words themselves. Their strangeness catches our eye as we realize that they are not doing what they “should”. They do not paint a clear picture of the world, and so we return and reread, trying to make some sense. But the more we look, the more deeply

² Again, the novel of the historical avant-garde is unpopular in both senses of the word. As we shall see later in the writing of Jose Ortega y Gasset, they are (explicitly) not created for nor enjoyed by the masses

³ *Theory of Prose* was published in 1925. All quotes are taken from a 1990 Dalkey Archive Press edition of *Theory of Prose* that was translated by Benjamin Sher. Notably, Sher does not translate the essay as (the more common) “Art as Technique”, but rather as “Art as Device”.

⁴ Defamiliarization, a central tenet of Formalism, is alternately translated as *estrangement* and even, in the case of the above translation, *enstrangement* –a neologism from the translator that he believes more accurate. This dissertation will use defamiliarization and *estrangement* interchangeably.

entrenched the *estrangement* becomes and the farther we get from conventional meaning. As Gerald Bruns⁵ points out in his prologue to *Theory of Prose*, “[the] task of Russian Formalism was to emancipate the work of art from the theory of expression” (xii). It is thus not simply a matter of seeing a *story* differently. More importantly, it is about noticing—and appreciating—words for exactly what they are—words. Indeed, “. . .to make the stone stony is to chip away at the inscription someone carved on it; it is to turn it back into things. Formalist poetry (not to say a good deal of modern writing) does this by foregrounding the materiality of language, disrupting the signifying function in order to free words from the symbolic order that rational people say we construct from them” (Bruns xiii).

Emilia Pardo Bazán utilized words methodically, harnessing their capacity *to signify* in order to engage critically with the world they so painstakingly depict. The recalcitrant writers that would follow in the many *-isms* of the early twentieth century would (flagrantly) do just the opposite, using techniques like Shklovsky’s famed defamiliarization to deliberately distance signifier from signified and thus compel a reconsideration of language’s purpose and value. If we really want to “make the stone stony”, we must make *everything* more clearly visible, language included. It should no longer be hidden behind tales of woe—such a shroud only perpetuates the habitually half-hearted perception that has come to define daily life. Our ability to see language therefore matters. Referentiality released, words—not plots or people—reveal themselves as sound and as icon. Their physical identity emerges. Rather than invisible medium, they are an artistic *material* in their own right, a *thing* whose contours capture my awareness. And as their strangeness begets sensuality, the act of reading is similarly transformed. No longer restrained by (institutional) novelistic convention (which dictates narrative action to be interpreted by the reader), it becomes a sensory experience. I see, I hear, and I feel an (art) object as it is. Instead of an exercise in analysis, it one of attention, that attention altering not only how I see language, but also what it means.

When Shklovsky describes this heightened poetic perception—“the very hallmark of the artistic” (12)—he explicitly distinguishes poetry from the practicality of prose. Even so, his exemplar of *estrangement* is not a poet, but a novelist. Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy, he explains, relies on two key techniques to defamiliarize: “. . .he does not call a thing by its name, that is, he describes it as if it were perceived for the first time. In addition, he foregoes the conventional names of the various parts of a thing, replacing them instead with the names of corresponding parts in other things” (6). He then offers (many) concrete examples, like an *estranged* description of flogging “that changes its form without changing its essence” (6) as well as a story “told from the point of view of a horse” (7). Tolstoy’s work, he explains, abounds in defamiliarization, but he is not alone. “[Enstrangement] can be found almost anywhere (i.e., wherever there is an image)” (9).

And so we return to the Iberian Peninsula and to instances of modern Spanish literature—the novel specifically—that also prolong perception and reimagine the reader’s relationship to language. The Spain of the 1920s is famous for the *Generación del 27*, a group of primarily poets (including Rafael Alberti, Federico García Lorca, Gerardo Diego, and Ernestina de Champourcín) whose new verses find inspiration in surrealism and folklore. Yet they are not the only Spaniards engaged in *estrangement*. There is in fact a less well known, but no less radical group of novelists whose startling—and striking—creations just as forcefully contest institutional norms. The *novelas líricas* of authors like Benjamín Jarnés, Antonio Espina, and Rosa Chancel

⁵ Gerald Bruns is a scholar of Modernism whose formative *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language: A Critical and Historical Study* appears throughout the dissertation.

are heavy on figurative language and stylized description and (for some, shockingly) light on plot. So it is with the elegantly insubordinate novels of Francisco Ayala and Pedro Salinas, the fleeting genre's most illustrious practitioners (and also members of the *Generación del 27*) who would go on to write for decades, establishing their respective positions in the Spanish canon.⁶ Ayala's *Cazador en el alba* and Salinas's *Vispera del gozo* are the pinnacle of Spanish historical avant-garde narrative, their astonishingly ornate accounts drawing us in with their beauty while, in the absence of plot and character development, they simultaneously repel. As we shall see in Chapter One, which is dedicated to this richly defiant period, they are an exercise in verbal splendor rather than human adventure. To this end, they defamiliarize—and objectify—everything in their path—the modern city, music, automobiles, excursions, young love.

The Spanish Civil War would suppress this experimental impulse, but not extinguish it. After decades of dark and heavy literature dedicated to the harsh social realities of life under dictatorship, the (decidedly *material*) avant-garde novel returns in the 1960s with Juan Goytisolo, Luis Martín-Santos, Juan Benet, and the *nueva novela*. The difficulties of Spanish life remain at the center of their innovative works, but once again, literary dictums are challenged by language that is hard to read and hard to understand. Adjectives (again) abound and sentences meander. There is a density to the words of these novels, especially Benet's *Volverás a Región*. The subject of Chapter Two, *Volverás a Región* is mind-bogglingly complicated, its report of war-torn life so painstaking that it often feels as impenetrable as the foreboding forest it describes. A single reading is simply not enough to comprehend, such perplexity (again) uncovering the inherent plasticity of language. The viscosity of *Volverás a Región* is at times frustrating, the refrain “What does this say?” repeating in the (irritated) mind of the reader. But on the other side of that irritation is (again) beauty—when one finally surrenders to the flow of the words instead of battling each sentence for signification. In this *estranged* novelistic space, words—as distinct from their literal (or even figurative) meanings—are sometimes all one can see. The signifier, in its extreme intricacy, is distanced from the signified, in this way demanding consideration in its own right. It is, we come to realize, a carefully crafted linguistic object worthy of our attention and admiration.

So too is *Larva*, another example of a (now, later) twentieth-century Spanish novel whose avant-garde sensibility results in a distinct verbal tactility. *Larva* by Julián Ríos is a structurally and linguistically complex work that playfully recounts the adventures of one wild night at a London masquerade ball. It is also so defamiliarized that it is at times literally incomprehensible, whether because a word is made up (there are many) or because its outbursts are so disjointed that one simply cannot string them together to make sense (a common occurrence). In either case, one definitely feels the *weight* of its impishly baffling language. Chapter Three will examine this particularly postmodern plasticity, both as the effect of its Spanish vanguard heritage *and* as the uniquely physical product of a very specific moment in Spanish history—*la Transición*. Published in 1984, a few years after the start of the official transition to democracy and at the heart of the *Movida*, the corresponding cultural renaissance, *Larva* engages with contemporary concerns regarding subjectivity while also forging an aesthetic path that in many respects more closely resembles the historical avant-garde. It feels different, its convoluted language (again) leaving little room for plot or character. In *Larva*, language

⁶ This is especially true for Francisco Ayala, who lived until 2009 (and the age of 97). Ayala published prolifically until the end, abandoning his avant-garde roots while in exile after the Spanish Civil War. Salinas, who wrote more poetry than narrative, only lived until 1951, but he also published regularly after the war—both in Spain and exile.

takes center stage, its rich theatricality generating linguistic dimensionality and upending conventional notions of narrative meaning.

After examining the above examples, I will close with a look to the future of not only objectified narrative, but also critical approaches to its understanding. As we will see, there are many ways for a novel to resist signification. Its words can be obscure or untranslated. Its sentences can be long or strangely punctuated. Its chapters can be absent or incessant. Its style can unusually poetic or surprisingly technical. In every instance—no matter the technique—narrative language loudly proclaims its presence, refusing to subordinate itself to story and consequently growing in physical stature. In every instance, it does not act like I expect, and as I instinctively pause to notice, it rises up—dramatically—in front of me. It becomes a *thing* to be encountered rather than a (transparent) gateway to narrative action. Habituation having been shaken loose by any number of strategies, I can finally *see* (and feel) language for what it really is, an artistic material whose nature is fundamentally *material*.

That does not mean, however, that these works all look, sound, or *feel* the same. To the contrary, the effect of each is *different*. In the end, I hope to understand these differences—of historical periods, of style, of feeling—by using a new (and more contemporary) tactic. Rather than simply tracing a lineage of Spanish experimental narrative, I will instead examine each of my selected examples as an artifact that reflects a moment in time. I will not outline how one turns into another, I will instead seek out points of contrast *and* contact. In this endeavor, literary archaeology, and Agustín Fernández Mallo’s *Proyecto Nocilla*, will be my guides. Literary archaeology, as Alex Saum-Pascual succinctly explains, is a method of study that treats “la cuestión literaria y sus objetos emergentes... como si fueron elementos arqueológicos, no históricos, fuera de la reacción en cadena de la historia literaria” (#Postweb 12-13). In this way, they can be observed not only as what they are (words, language, and books), but also as *material* evidence of their context. And that linguistic material will, when subject to *prolonged perception*, inevitably reveal evidence of continuity and rupture. Erkki Huhtamo’s (archaeological) notion of the topos, a paradoxically static *and* shifting literary entity, provides a way to grapple with these opposing (yet coexisting) tendencies.

I will thus take this archaeological approach to one last example of Spanish avant-garde narrative, which will serve as a (forward-looking) counterpoint. Three decades after *Larva*, *Nocilla Dream* would make a similarly *physical* splash. Published in 2006 as the first novel of the *Nocilla* trilogy⁷, *Nocilla Dream* is undoubtedly distinct. The product of the (as we shall see, *transmedia*) age of the Internet, the radical work incorporates (many) outside sources. It also carries the reader beyond the books cover to other media with which it connects *rhizomatically*. It is exceptionally expansive, an obviously twenty-first century phenomenon. Nevertheless, it still shares much with the other (pre-digital) artifacts, if only because it too rejects traditional narrative form so vehemently that even some of its advocates question its place in the genre.⁸ Now, such rejection manifests (again) as extreme fragmentation. Like its predecessors, there is no plot to speak of, but this time that is not because the words hide the view. Now, it simply is not there. What instead fills the pages of the *Proyecto Nocilla* is an assortment of people, places, and ideas, each chapter moving from one scientific treatise to another vignette to another philosophical reflection without any explanation of how they are related. There are some

⁷ *Nocilla Experience* was published in 2008 and *Nocilla Lab* in 2009.

⁸ In *La luz nueva*, Vicente Luis Mora states: “Tenemos nuestras dudas para considerar a *Nocilla Dream* una novela; pertenece más bien a esa órbita de libros imprescindibles que construyen sus cimientos en el terreno pantanoso de la cuestión sobre la propia identidad” (180). He does not say this disparagingly, but instead as a matter of fact.

recurring characters, but no story to speak of. There are also topics that repeat, but such thematic overlap—especially when so centered on the decidedly *unliterary* physics—does not create narrative, at least in any traditional sense. We may get glimpses of lives and thoughts, but we do not accompany a protagonist on their journey. Such radical fragmentation undoubtedly feels unfamiliar. There is no automated perception with so much movement, nowhere to get comfortable.

And so, once again, language moves beyond referentiality, establishing its artistic independence *and* a final (and important) continuity. One point of (avant-garde) contact that reaches across time, from Shklovsky, Ayala, and Salinas to Fernández Mallo (and beyond), is the outcome of *estranged*—and consequently objectified—language. There is a (shared) transformation of the reading experience, which becomes a distinctly sensual encounter with another (this time, literary) body. When words are akin to sculpture, when (like me) they occupy space with weight and volume, comprehension cannot simply be a matter of cognition. As the following chapters demonstrate, interpretation is not enough. I must instead (fully) engage my senses. I must slow down, see, and even touch. In this way, a new kind of meaning reveals itself. Language goes beyond the bounds of signification and I too am taken somewhere else.

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Chapter One:
Materiality, Beautifully Wrought:
Francisco Ayala's *Cazador en el alba* and Pedro Salinas's *Víspera del gozo*

El Arte Nuevo. Novela lírica. Novela poética. Narrativa deshumanizada. There are many labels for the Spanish avant-garde narrative of the 1920s and early 1930s. Some are self-designations; others critics coined after the fact. Some are intended as praise; others are meant to denigrate. But whether past, present, positive, or negative, all strive to capture the same essential quality of difference. And one need go no further than the opening paragraphs of Francisco Ayala's *Cazador en el alba* to understand this impulse to categorize as *new* the novels of the Spanish historical avant-garde.

Before meeting Antonio Arenas, the work's protagonist and a peasant in Madrid for military service, the reader must first navigate a debris-filled landscape in which nothing is as it seems. Piles of broken bottles and cast-off cans line city streets alongside "un ramo de flores mojado y un peine sin púas" (Ayala 17). The objects enumerated are unmistakably modern in character, but the language used to portray them surprises. Spent light bulbs occupy "grandes osarios" (17). A snake-turned-flat bicycle tire lies "estrangulado en el borde" (17). A hungry storefront stuffed bear menaces passersby, not only generating a surreal air, but also stimulating an emotional response the narrator assumes his audience will recognize. "Todos nos hemos conmovido un poco... ante esos montones de escombros" (17) he declares, presupposing a shared relationship with (and reaction to) the fantastical waste produced by the modern metropolis. And the strangeness of this opening scene only intensifies with what follows. Set in stark contrast to an apparently universal urban experience, the Spanish countryside—the birthplace of Antonio Arenas—remains largely unknown. After all,

no todos han visto los latidos del cielo furioso, espoleado por los erizos brillantes que clavan en sus hijares largas espinas; ni oído a los gallos aldeanos cuando tocan diana con las agrias trompetas de la Caballería española. No todo el mundo ha saboreado la carne rosa de las auroras boreales—tan parecida al jamón de Chicago, ni ha galopado hacia los amplios horizontes de azufre, en cuyo límite se deshilachan madejas de humo...(17)

Adjectives, synesthesia, and unexpected associations abound as once again a sense of place is established through a series of peculiar images. While in the city familiar discarded merchandise evokes nostalgia, in the country exotic natural phenomena inspire awe. In both instances, a sense of irreality is cultivated through abundant and unusual description: a storm is a prodding sea creature, the northern lights a succulent ham, and distant curls of smoke an unraveling skein of yarn. Through language, the objects that populate *Cazador en el alba* are transformed; the ordinary made extraordinary by way of surprise.

This is the case not only from the point of view of the reader, but also from that of the work's protagonist—we first meet Antonio Arenas in a hospital bed suffering from hallucinatory fevers after a fall from a horse. And like the introductory paragraphs, the high temperatures have turned his mind into a kind of disconcerting movie house, displaying all the supplies, sensations, and people that surround him as "descabalados trozos de *film*" (18). Yet again, the predominant characteristic of these "vientos tráfugas... imágenes rotas... ideas sueltas" (18), as seen filtered through the blistering lens of illness, is their weirdness. They too are highly stylized and

incredibly rich sensorially. Sunlight is simultaneously portrayed as “[tiasas] enaguas de sol, tendidas en las cuerdas del aire” (18) and as an assailant that “lanzaba dardos, introducía espadas por las rendijas, hacía impactos en la pared frontera” (18). Distant screams alternate with a filtered and dripping silence—“(un silencio de hospital: químicamente puro)” (19)—as the steps of nurses and doctors transform black tiles into piano keys. Cotton balls are clouds at dawn. The doctor’s smooth face is an advertisement for shaving cream. Even the patient’s own body is oddly foreign, his blood solidified into a “pez cautivo [que] quería romper a coletazos la red circulatoria, y evadirse” (18), while his limbs, “licuados, huían como huye el agua por una tubería rota” (19).

His ailing body commandeered by feverish “pensamientos sin brida ni freno” (18); physical and perceptual boundaries between objects, people, and places are blurred in the mind of the injured soldier. The limits of narrative language undergo an analogous distortion: rather than simply recounting his altered consciousness mimetically and from without, Ayala reproduces its disturbances textually through a reliance on extensive description so rich with rhetorical figures that it is (rightfully) labeled *poetic*. *Cazador en el alba* does not only not look, sound, or feel like the novels that came before it, it also seems like poetry. Indeed, simile and metaphor are everywhere, on every page, inducing a linguistic and literary bewilderment that parallels the disquiet of the narrative’s main character. One does not just read about it, one also feels it. For Antonio Arenas *and* the reader, the world is not exactly as it appears—everything is in fact best captured as something else. The whiteness of hospital staff uniforms is “como la luna de la madrugada” (19). The voice of the doctor is “normativa, como los alambres del telégrafo al margen del camino, autoritaria, implacable...” (18). The patient’s swollen abdomen is an “aeróstato impaciente” (20) and his heavy eyelids are “lentos glaciares” (21). And the novel is a poem, its stylized words embracing unexpected ambiguity.

Moreover, Antonio’s distinctly *poetic* confusion extends beyond the confines of the hospital to the very heart of his new home—Madrid. We soon learn that the rapidly modernizing city is the ultimate source of the protagonist’s unease. Shipped in on a train that quite literally speeds him toward an unknown and unimaginable future, he struggles to digest what he sees: “El tren militar le había incorporado sin transición a un ritmo veloz que no conocía. Todo en él estaba hecho al paso suave, palmípedo, del campesino. Allá, en el campo, las estaciones tornan, como las cuatro pintas de la baraja, despacio: hasta apurar la última copa, hasta quemar en la chimenea el último basto...” (22). And as farmland becomes the suburbs becomes the city center, the recruit’s introduction to the cosmopolitan is unexpectedly compared to the nature he has left behind. “Tensas redes del teléfono, cauterio de la ferroviaria, el rastro precario del automóvil” (23)—the first signs of urban life glimpsed from the moving car—are expanding “raicillas” (23), the city a body whose life depends on these “nervios” and “capilares” (23). Observing the bustling sidewalks, the gleaming advertisements, and the people—an “inhumana especie recién salida de los huevos eléctricos que las grandes avenidas incuban...” (25), Antonio undergoes “la ilusión de vivir entre las páginas de una Historia natural inventada. De palpar, como un buzo, entrañas abisales” (25). Rather than experiencing the twentieth-century city as progress, light, and buoyancy, he is a diver plunging into, seemingly contradictory, prehistoric depths⁹. Madrid is thus depicted as a sort of anti-nature, an inverted image of skyscrapers

⁹ Before identifying the city as a living “Natural History”, the narrator of *Cazador* outlines people and places of Madrid that belong to identifiable “ages”. “[La] primera generación –paleolítica– de dioses locales” (24) inhabits the promenade. “La segunda –edad de bronce–” (24) can be found in the more distant plazas. The most recent

instead of open spaces, throngs of humans instead of animals, and concrete instead of soil, whose stages of development paradoxically parallel that of an Earth eons before the industrial era.

But it is remarkably the women of this naturally unnatural urban space that, in the agrarian eyes of Antonio Arenas, most purely embody the modern: “Para un soldado (si procede del campo), las mujeres de la ciudad son un producto industrial, tan perfecto, tan admirable como la máquina de escribir del capitán o la calculadora del comisario. Una maravilla de la técnica moderna: exactas, articuladas” (25). While the city’s true technical marvels are made organic, its actual living breathing residents are mechanized to such a degree that they cease to be human. The paved city streets may be “azules, casi grises danubios de asfalto” (61), but the automated and uniform female figures that travel them are reduced to “un par de piernas arquetipo...una pequeña mano enguantada...una cabeza, un busto...Puras formas de mujer, esquemas de mujer” (25). Totally emptied of their “realidad vegetal” (26), they confound and alienate the naïve recruit, who—when confronted with three options in a second-rate brothel—is unable to identify any variation except that of shoe color. As the refrain “era preciso elegir” (27) reverberates, he finally chooses, “obediente a un impulso soterrado, o quizá a una casualidad. Sin saber por qué, pues las tres eran exactas, articuladas” (27).

As previously stated, the surprisingly poetic, and often incongruous, manner in which the changing world of Antonio Arenas is depicted results in a similarly disorienting reading experience. But this is not simply because images equating a bugle’s call with a spear that rips “sangrientos ojales...en la piel de la noche” (35) or a teeming dancehall with “[un] hermoso y lírico prado, donde la pianola –vaca pródica en armonías– rumiaba, paciente, un rollo de verdes y jugosas notas” (28) are inherently eccentric. They are, to such an extent that they naturally startle and confuse. Yet they also befuddle by defying literary convention. The non-mimetic description so typical of *Cazador en el alba* does not just feel different because of the wealth of rhetorical figures, it also leaves little room for an element that traditionally defines the novel as genre –plot. Precious little happens in the work, a curiosity (as we shall see later in the chapter) at the heart of Spanish vanguard narrative. Antonio recovers from his injuries. He meets a woman. He visits bars, stores, and a gym. In short, he tries to adjust to urban life. There is, however, no strong central narrative arc, no dramatic thread for the reader to hold on to as the young recruit moves through modern Madrid. He simply feels out of place in a city that is new to him.

I too am caught off guard in a space that is unfamiliar –a novel without a story whose language sounds more like a poem. Adrift in a sea of metaphors, similes, and adjectives that provide no clear narrative destination, the (very vanguard) goal becomes this very language. How words are understood—their nature and function—is subsequently changed. In this way, the revolutionary style of *Cazador en el alba* is more broadly representative of the Spanish avant-garde novel. Its words rise up, occupying the space of the page (and the mind of the reader) as material rather than simply medium. They are plastic and “thinglike”, to borrow the (objectifying) language of Gerald Bruns in *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language*, which—as we will soon study in greater detail—explores the history of the materiality of words in poetry in order to explain its (decidedly substantial) modern iteration. The pane of glass made visible, they are no longer restricted to unseen plot scaffolding, emerging instead as independent art objects. They are therefore valuable unto themselves. As these aestheticized verbal artifacts take center stage, supplanting a content-centered narrative model with one focused on form, that

generation, embodied in “la estival patrona de la Foto y el dios de las Autopistas” (24-25) and occupying fences and street corners, he labels “planiforme, impresa en bi o tricolor” (24).

form does not simply reveal its fundamentally physical character. It also challenges the notion that meaning is the sole product of the interpretation of language in its referential capacity. When words rebuff their position as sign, they invite the reader to experience them not as stories, but as what they actually are –*words*.

This determination to defy institutional norms and transform the novel's purpose through fresh language is why, decades later, Susan Sontag would praise avant-garde works more generally as model art. As she explains in her formative 1961 "Against Interpretation", modern art criticism, consumed as it is with interpreting, fundamentally misunderstands the objects of its analysis. Tracing its roots back to "the culture of late classical antiquity" (5), Sontag links this "project of *interpretation*" (5) with the (for her, false) separation between form and content. Calling the very concept of content, "a hindrance, a nuisance, a subtle or not so subtle philistinism" (5), Sontag rails against the way in which it compels the reader (or viewer) to ask of a work of art what it *says* rather than what it *does* (5). For Sontag, "real art" (8) simply *is*. It is sensual. It is corporeal. It is "incantatory, magical" (3). And this is where its significance lies. The notion of art as a form containing content to be interpreted, on the other hand, "takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there" (13). It "violates art. It makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories" (10). In so doing, it also cheats its interpreters out of a more meaningful artistic encounter, one particularly needed in the twentieth century. Acknowledging that interpretation's role and impact have shifted across the millennia, she is nonetheless emphatic in her denunciation of its modern variety, which she views as both the product and the cause of "...a culture based on excess, on overproduction..." (13). Paradoxically, "[all] the conditions of modern life—its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness—conjoin to dull our sensory facilities...What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more" (13-14).

Art as a holistic sensuous experience therefore has the capacity to transform and enrich – to sharpen, in other words, what both society and critics have dulled. As Sontag highlights, the works of the avant-garde endeavor to do just that. Abstract painting withholds content, thwarting conventional interpretation. Its poetry includes silence, "to reinstate the magic of the word" (10). And the new *novela poética* reconceptualizes not only language's look and feel, but also its purpose. After all, the experience of reading *Cazador en el alba* is undoubtedly defined by its words. Their role as storyteller reduced, they instead rise above all else as beautifully (and intentionally) shaped art objects. The endless adjectives and strange analogies eclipse the tale of young love. The interminable similes and unforeseen metaphors outshine any personal growth on the part of the protagonist. Words in *Cazador* surprise, delight, and disturb. They also invite reflection on their very nature. In calling attention to themselves, they succeed in highlighting the false assumptions and arbitrary conventions that undergird traditionally "transparent" literary language. In the process, generic boundaries dissolve and something new emerges – a novel (almost) without a story whose language sounds like a poem and looks like a painting. With less content to decipher, this *novela lírica* compels a more sustained observation of the parts that compose its whole. Its language is designed to be noticed and *felt*, rather than overlooked and analyzed. Meaning thus takes on a newly experiential tenor, the result of a sensorial encounter with a text that, in boldly proclaiming its materiality, paradoxically also achieves a modern kind of *transparence*, one defined by Sontag as "the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are" (13). This new state of *transparence*, in which art shines simply for being *art*, is in fact "the highest, most liberating value in art—and in criticism—today" (13)

I. Setting the Scene: A Brief Introduction to Avant-Garde Theory

This vision of language as an inherently worthy artistic substance is also in keeping with the prevailing aesthetic theories of the period, as evidenced by not only Viktor Shklovsky's *estrangement*, but also José Ortega y Gasset's appraisal of *arte intrascendente* in *La deshumanización del arte*. Explaining the rebellious tendencies of young artists in his influential 1925 essay, Ortega describes a dehumanized "arte artístico" that rejects sentimentality and relishes its own materiality through stylization of the natural. It does not feel obliged to disappear into a faithful and unified portrait of the "real" world of human experience. Nor does it conceive of itself as "la salvación de la especie humana sobre la ruina de las religiones y el relativismo inevitable de la ciencia" (Ortega 88). Instead, Ortega and the historical avant-garde understand words as things and art as play. And that is enough to be meaningful. A still life is not significant because of its photographic accuracy. A poem's consequence does not spring from the enduring human emotion it captures. A novel is not important because its characters are believable. To the contrary, their only task, as inherently *material* realities, is to *be*, "sin trascendencia alguna –como sólo arte, sin más pretensión" (Ortega 91). Lighthearted, modest, and childlike are some of the terms Ortega uses to define this newly autonomous artistic vision. More akin to sport than serious academic pursuit, art owes nothing to politics, philosophy, or religion. In this way, art's newfound buoyancy—born of these severed ties—results in another, more literal, kind of weightiness. By eliminating the need for metaphorical gravity, space is created to appreciate a work of art for what it really is—an object.

And this reconceptualization of art as humble plaything goes hand in hand with the dehumanized nature outlined by Ortega. No longer striving for invisibility, these avant-garde works instead openly flaunt their objecthood through purposeful distortion. Describing a window looking out on a garden, Ortega distinguishes looking *at* the pane of glass from looking *through* it: "Entonces el jardín desaparece a nuestros ojos y de él sólo vemos unas masas de color confusas que parecen pegadas al cristal" (Ortega 53). Notably, the vegetation beyond does not vanish completely when it ceases to be the focus, but instead dramatically changes shape. Organic details fade—no petals, blades, or stalks are discernible—into an amorphous field of color as three-dimensional space flattens. The garden is at once visible and invisible, an apparent contradiction that is in fact critical to Ortega's vision of dehumanization:

No se trata de pintar algo que sea por completo distinto de un hombre, o casa, o montaña, sino de pintar un hombre que se parezca lo menos posible a un hombre, una casa que conserve de tal lo estrictamente necesario para que asistamos a su metamorfosis, un cono que ha salido milagrosamente de lo que era antes una montaña, como la serpiente sale de su camisa. El placer estético para el artista nuevo emana de ese triunfo sobre lo humano; por eso es preciso concretar la victoria y presentar en cada caso la víctima estrangulada (Ortega 65).

Employing the very techniques he strives to explain¹⁰, Ortega does not reject the organic outright. Instead, he describes a process of transformation that ultimately impacts form. When

¹⁰ In this passage Ortega employs two quintessentially avant-garde literary techniques mentioned in the above introduction to *Cazador en el alba*—the simile and the metaphor. The cone that emerges from what was a mountain does so "como la serpiente sale de su camisa" (emphasis mine). And the rejected realist works of previous generations are, perhaps not so subtly, lifeless *human* victims-turned-trophies. Both examples also support Ortega's

art is celebrated as art rather than mirror or sublime insight, it is liberated representationally. How best to display this newfound freedom in both purpose and appearance? Mutilation. Rather than simply erase the animate in favor of the abstract, the new artist formally brandishes his or her kill by leaving *almost* unrecognizable traces of what once was in an otherwise alien landscape. Dehumanized but not inhuman, the impact of this “arte artístico” thus lies in exhibiting not only art’s innate materiality, but also the creative processes through which that materiality is made perceptible: innumerable rhetorical figures; detailed, yet surprising description; unexpected lyricism. Like the robotized women that paralyze Antonio, the compositions of the historical avant-garde are self-consciously stylized to such a degree that they can no longer be confused with “life”, laying bare the tools of the artists that so meticulously craft them.

The consequence is another layer of dehumanization. At the level of narrative, a given text is undoubtedly dehumanized through the replacement of an “unseen” account of human experience and emotion with a richly poetic style. But the conspicuousness of this style, the way in which it so boldly displays itself as construction, also serves to dehumanize conceptually. By refusing to erase the evidence of their fabrication—the very language from which they are assembled—these works embrace not only their materiality, but also the *unnatural* nature of that material. They are not naturally occurring. They are not an inherently organic whole. To the contrary, they are objects that have been painstakingly crafted, shaped, and edited by an individual artistic consciousness. They are literally man-made, and each surprising metaphor or strangely flattened protagonist reminds us of this fact. Just as a story should not be confused with life, art more broadly should not be confused with nature—this is the message of the doubly dehumanized creations described in *La deshumanización del arte*.¹¹

Ortega points out, however, that a predictable byproduct of this extreme aestheticization is unpopularity. Acknowledging that shifts in style and taste naturally occur over time, he nonetheless identifies this particular cultural movement as exceptionally and innately isolated. In fact, it is a defining characteristic of the new art, “[que] tiene a la masa en contra suya y la tendrá siempre. Es impopular por esencia; más aún, es antipopular” (49). For the uninitiated masses, a composition is enjoyed when the rhythms, routines, and feelings of everyday life are represented convincingly. Art is understood as a necessarily human exercise in which the force of “[los] amores, odios, penas, alegrías de los personajes” conceals “las formas propiamente artísticas, las irrealidades, la fantasía” (52). When the latter overtakes the former, as in the case of the defamiliarized Madrid of *Cazador*, sentimental distractions are minimized and the creation itself comes into focus. This is why “el arte nuevo divide al público en dos clases de individuos: los que lo entienden y los que no lo entienden; esto es, los artistas y los que no lo son” (55). The uninformed layman, still expecting to “conmoverse con los destinos de Juan y María” (53), does not simply dislike these unfamiliar forms; their unpopularity is more than a matter of personal preference. They also do not comprehend them. Anti-popular in their rejection of the realist norms of representation that in many circles still predominate, they are in turn widely disliked,

contention that dehumanization does not mean the total elimination of the natural. Here, the natural resurfaces within the rhetorical devices themselves. The snake and the strangled body are decidedly organic points of comparison that nonetheless serve to dehumanize via the element of surprise. Taken out of context, they too become unfamiliar, in this way shifting the vision of the reader from garden to glass.

¹¹ Such a *dehumanized* message undoubtedly recalls Viktor Shklovsky’s “Art as Technique”, which was discussed in the introduction.

the pleasure of their dehumanized shapes reserved for “una minoría especialmente dotada” (50) – those rare ones capable of seeing a portrait instead of a person and a simile rather than a story.

Later scholarly endeavors to theorize the historical avant-garde share much with the laudatory observations of Ortega y Gasset in 1925. One such example is Renato Poggioli’s *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Just as Ortega labels unpopularity a key trait of the new art, Poggioli identifies *antagonism* as one of four defining characteristics. Again, artists are positioned in opposition to an unknowing public, their perplexing inventions an insurmountable obstacle to communication. Poggioli also attributes this isolation in part to an intellectual elitism inherent in the difficult avant-garde work. To this end, he distinguishes between “accidental unpopularity and substantive unpopularity” (46), the latter an involuntary form that stems not from chance but from the essential core of a given work, artist, or movement. Fundamentally unpopular, the avant-garde is likewise combatively so, understanding itself with an alienated “sectarian spirit” (30) that places it in direct conflict with its ancestry. No longer striving to fulfill established aesthetic norms or achieve “universal” standards of beauty, the avant-garde brazenly rebuffs its creative predecessors. Instead of sources of insight and inspiration, history is populated with aesthetic anti-examples, models of precisely what *not* to do. While “[classical] art, through the method of imitation and the practice of repetition, tends toward the ideal of renewing, in the sense of integration and perfection” (82), modern art esteems the new and the defiantly singular. Rupture replaces continuity. The individual unseats the institution. The future takes the reigns from the past.

And this multi-faceted antagonism goes beyond mere matters of taste, also reaching art’s ultimate purpose. *Activism*, which Poggioli defines as “a taste for action, a sportive enthusiasm, and the emotional fascination of adventure” (25), is another central characteristic of the avant-garde that is apparent in Ayala’s *Cazador*. Like Ortega’s *arte intrascendente*, the act of artistic creation in this “*activistic moment*” (25) is valued in itself. It is consequently also valued for its dynamism. Celebrated as diversion, art is yet again untethered not only aesthetically, but also ideologically and philosophically. Its roots cut, an embrace of change logically follows. Poggioli highlights this devotion to movement in the modern love of sport¹² as well as “the exaltation of the automobile, train, and airplane” (29)¹³. The physical speed of technological advancements thus reflects a parallel “[activism], or psychological dynamism” (28) inherent in the avant-garde impulse to continually create. Constantly evolving artistic forms embody modern progress. But this creation for creation’s sake inevitably has its conclusions, as activism when combined with antagonism results in *nihilism*, a “transcendental antagonism” that reveres destruction.

¹² The brother of Aurora, Antonio’s eventual love interest, introduces him to boxing. Antonio jumps at the modern suggestion: “Ya era un deseo: el deseo de hacer un alarde de fuerza ante la multitud, ya sin rubor. De volcar su alma hercúlea por los puños vendados de los púgiles” (34). Notably, what draws him to Antonio as a potentially successful fighter are his rural roots. His first question, before inviting him to the ring, is “¿Eres tú del campo?” (34).

¹³ While discussing this characteristic love of technology, Poggioli also observes that “[concepts] stemming from the machine aesthetic, especially the cult of the vehicle, imply the reduction of art to pure emotion or sensation” (29). Although he makes his case using Marinetti’s praise of speed in his futurist manifesto, this conflation of art’s ultimate purpose with raw sensorial experience also supports a central claim of this dissertation, which argues that a reconceptualization of *meaning* is key to understanding the experimental form of the Spanish vanguard narrative of the 1920s and early 30s. Meaning in these richly lyrical works is not simply an interpretive undertaking in which one thing stands in for another. Born of the encounter between text and reader (and all the sensations and surprise that entails), meaning should instead be viewed as more holistic and experiential in nature.

For Poggioli, nihilism occupies the intersection of activism and antagonism because to construct is also unavoidably to demolish. Originality is only a temporary state. The innovations of today, artistic or otherwise, supplant those of yesterday. The avant-garde not only accepts this duality, it also embraces it, “[finding] joy not merely in the inebriation of movement, but even more in the act of beating down barriers, razing obstacles, destroying whatever stands in its way” (26). If that “whatever” is one of its own? No matter, declares Poggioli in his description of *agonism*, the avant-garde’s culminating characteristic. Conscious of their position in a present that will soon be past, these rebellious young artists are willing to exterminate even themselves “in the febrile anxiety to go always further” (26). Only the future is sacred. Accordingly, self-destruction is viewed as a noble act, one that clears the path for the newer, the younger, the more radical. That the future as such will never arrive intact only strengthens its position as the source of the movement’s often-paradoxical impulses. Idealized yet unrealizable, the *ultra-space* of the future is both ultimate inspiration and limit. As an unreachable archetype it not only generates, but also symbolically represents the relentless push of creation and pull of destruction that define the ideology and aesthetics of the historical avant-garde.

Yet despite this tension, Poggioli’s vision of the early twentieth century’s many *isms* is at its core a ruinous one. A strong creative impulse notwithstanding, it is the willingness to annihilate and be annihilated that most clearly distinguishes the movement. Belligerence, defiance, denial, and demolition are more than just the artistic order of the day in 1910s and 20s. They are also the avant-garde’s “anticlassical” legacy, as “avant-gardism has now become the typical chronic condition of contemporary art” (230).¹⁴ This destructive characterization, which in fact culminates in the final indignity of institutional acceptance and banishment to the annals of art history, shares much with more recent takes. For example, Richard Murphy’s 1998 *Theorizing of the avant-garde*, a retort to Peter Bürger’s renowned 1972 *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, describes a similarly negative outlook. Like his precursor, Murphy differentiates the rebelliously “inorganic” avant-garde from an “organic” realism that, in its obedience to mimetic principles, serves an “ideologically affirmative function” (17). The organic piece “[serves] as a means of socialization, presenting the illusion of a harmonious world into which the individual can be integrated effortlessly” (17). By limiting themselves to one representational model, these “institutionally-supported” (15) works exclude alternative interpretations and maintain the status quo.

The avant-garde, on the other hand, strives to expand expressive potential. Rather than restrict experience by offering the fantasy of a “rounded and continuous whole” whose natural appearance “covers up the traces of its own construction” (13), these formally innovative works foreground their own artifice, noisily resisting false impressions of totality and transparency. Even so, for Murphy it is not the daring shape of their compositions that ultimately defines the avant-garde. Rather, it is their shared ideological aims, more specifically their desire to harness art’s critical capacities and expose the invisible “social and institutional constraints” (32) that shape artistic production and reception. Murphy identifies this impulse to evaluate art as an

¹⁴ Poggioli presents “the *anti-roman* of Nathalie Sarrute, Michel Buor, and Alain Robbe-Grillet and the *theater of the absurd* of Genet, Ionesco, and Samuel Beckett” (230) as cases in point. It should be noted, however, that although several decades have passed since *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* was first published in 1962, Poggioli’s observation regarding the lasting impact of the historical avant-garde still holds true. The very premise of this dissertation is evidence of this, as its examination of radical experimentation with narrative form is not limited to the historical avant-garde (nor to any specific historical period), but rather extends the length of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

institution from within a given concrete work as a mode of “ideology-critique” called “self-criticism” (9). It is achieved through disruptions in form and content intended to subvert readerly expectations rooted in institutional norms, thus compelling their reconsideration (or at least their observation).¹⁵ Though taken for granted as “natural” or “correct”, they are in fact arbitrary.¹⁶

And in revealing the arbitrariness of both of these institutionally imposed definitions and of the generally accepted aesthetic values, the avant-garde points to the institution’s tendency to legitimize only *certain* meanings, truths and codes to the exclusion of other possible values: in short the avant-garde demonstrates the institution’s use of convention to privilege a particular set of dominant social discourses (24).

Murphy’s analysis of this desire to unmask the often-unseen forces guiding how a work of art looks and what it says is what most clearly links his vision of the movement to Bürger and also distinguishes it from that of Poggioli. All three describe a similarly iconoclastic “poetics of negation” (Murphy 23) that valorizes experimentation and rejects convention. But while Poggioli perceives this antagonistic inclination as inevitably ending in the self-ruin of agonism, Murphy agrees with Bürger’s more constructive explanation. From Bürger’s perspective, it is not a matter of destruction for destruction’s sake; to the contrary, the avant-garde’s call to destroy even itself is a strategy for social change. In order to evolve, aesthetically, socially, or otherwise, one must first be aware of the powers at play. After all, that which merely reproduces dominant ideological structures leaves little room for the discernment of their presence, let alone their critique.

That the avant-garde’s radical explorations of form strive to bring these consciousness-shaping frameworks into view in order to challenge them is further supported by the nature of the experimentation. Rather than simply substituting one unifying organic aesthetic for another, they offer an assortment of “...mere perspectives, conjectures and provisional meanings which are foregrounded as ambiguous, unstable and open to doubt” (Murphy 44). The previously (apparently) whole has been fractured and scattered, leaving a multitude of manifestos and techniques in its wake. This embrace of heterogeneity is, according to Bürger, an essential trait of the avant-garde, whose anti-hierarchical privileging of “the principle of construction” (81)

¹⁵ One of Murphy’s examples of this phenomenon is the “object trouvé” of Marcel Duchamp, whose “fountain” famously made a splash. As the vulgar (and unmediated) reality of the urinal enters the sacred space of “art”, the viewer is invited to question how one defines art in the first place. Rather than pondering what Duchamp is trying to tell us in this specific instance, we are inspired by bigger questions: Is this art? Why or why not? In this way, a new level of meaning emerges within the expectation-negating works of the avant-garde, one that looks more broadly at the assumptions dictating the nature of art and that Murphy therefore calls “meta-aesthetic”. The works of *el Arte Nuevo* are similarly “meta”, with frequent references to acts of writing and creating more generally as well as rhetorical figures replete with artistic references. They also delight in double entendres. After spending a few moments reviewing the samples in a photography studio, they decide against a portrait because, in the words of Aurora, “[todas] tienen algo extraño” (37).

¹⁶ Peter Bürger also uses the term “self-criticism” to define the avant-garde. For Bürger, self-criticism differs from the “system-immanent criticism” that came before. While the former launches its attacks directly at the institution itself, the latter is a more conventional form of literary critique that works *within* the institution. Judgments are directed at a certain aesthetic category (novels, for example) or technique, but never question the institutionally imposed norms guiding artistic production. Like both Poggioli before him and Murphy after, Bürger understands this shift as fundamentally linked to late-capitalist bourgeois society and the previously discussed “compensatory” role it assigns the work of art.

makes it the first movement “not defined by a period style” (18).¹⁷ Thus, while the vanguard break with tradition is at its core institutional, it is enacted and embodied aesthetically in its varied and—quite literally—fragmented individual works of art. That collages pieced together from a variety of materials and perspectives have come to define the period across genres is thus no coincidence.

Crucially, however, this technical and philosophical abundance yields deliberately negative results in the shape of an aesthetic and ideological vacuum. In its double refutation of institutional influence—art need not be organic nor obey a homogenizing “period style”—the avant-garde also problematizes what that institution imagines and sustains, namely a coherent, unified, and singular vision of the world. Negative in the sense that it is *anti*-affirmative, Bürger’s avant-garde is nonetheless constructive in nature because of its ultimate aim—“the reintegration of art into the praxis of life” (Bürger 22). From Bürger’s standpoint—one that would agree with Sontag’s—art that embraces defamiliarization, “discontinuity[,] and decenteredness” (Murphy 18) maintains a more honest relationship with its surroundings and is therefore better equipped to shift consciousness and inspire change. That it does not look like the “real world” as we are accustomed to seeing it represented is in fact the point, as that world is itself an institutionally maintained illusion. Reality, even within the bounds of prevailing social and aesthetic discourses, is much more multifaceted, diverse, and subjective than a realist novel would have one believe. In this way, the historical avant-garde strives to radically reconfigure the relationship between art and the “real” social spaces it both occupies and represents through the destruction of the institution. It is indeed a curious, but essential twist: the avant-garde distances itself aesthetically in order to more freely penetrate those spaces and aid in their reedification. This process—variously labeled “cynical sublation”, “desublimation”, and “deaesthetization” (Murphy 34)—is not just of an ideological sort. As demonstrated by the collage’s incorporation of actual artifacts of the “real” into the “previously sacrosanct space of art” (Murphy 23), the encounter is also material. Thus, although the rise of social realism amid the political turmoil of the 1930s points toward the mission failure of this *arte intrascente*, its impact nevertheless endures. By fostering fragmentation, ambiguity, and multiplicity, it succeeded in illuminating underlying institutional structures and nullifying organic claims to “universal validity” (Bürger 87). While the institution may remain intact, there are fissures in its once steadfast foundation, openings in which alternative aesthetic and social visions have and continue to take root—uneven growth born of destruction as “the lasting achievement of the avant-garde” (Murphy 10).

II. The Narrative of *el Arte Nuevo*: A Legacy of Language as Material

Roughly a century later, the historical avant-garde is mostly remembered as a plastic and poetic phenomenon, with Picasso’s fragmented nudes and de Torre’s graphic verses having largely prevailed in the popular imagination. Even so, a quieter legacy of the Spanish avant-

¹⁷ For Bürger, this lack of a period style does not just describe the diversity of the historical avant-garde, it also fundamentally alters how art across history is understood in the present by creating an entirely new category—“artistic means”—with which to describe it: “It is... a distinguishing feature of the historical avant-garde movements that they did not develop a style. There is no such thing as a Dadaist or a surrealist style. What did happen is that these movements liquidated the possibility of a period style when they raised to a principle the availability of the artistic means of past periods. Not until there is universal availability does the category of artistic means become a general one” (Bürger 18).

garde novel persists, of which Francisco Ayala's *Cazador en el alba* is the supreme example. Ayala's stylized and cinematic lyricism is part of a broader movement of experimental narrative that emerged in Spain in the mid-1920s alongside the dehumanized descriptions of Ortega y Gasset. In fact, in *Idle Fictions*, his critical exploration of this *Arte nuevo*, Gustavo Pérez Firmat identifies its inaugural work as *El profesor inútil*. Published just one year after the formative theoretical text as part of the *Revista de Occidente*'s "Nova Novorum" series, Benjamín Jarnés's 1926 tale of professorial seduction is an early illustration of this newly language-centered model. The circumstances of its publication are notably no coincidence—Ortega also founded the esteemed literary magazine in 1923 before establishing its collection of avant-garde prose three years later. As Pérez Firmat points out, Spain's *nueva narrativa* had a comparatively brief lifespan, ending after a gradual decline in 1934 with the dissemination of a revised *El profesor inútil*. In the intervening years, many of Spain's preeminent authors crafted similarly defamiliarized works under the "Nova Novorum" banner, most famously Pedro Salina's 1926 *Vispera del gozo*¹⁸ and Antonio Espina's 1927 *Pájaro pinto* and 1929 *Luna de copas*. Even more did so later with the *Colección Valores Actuales* of *Ediciones Ulises: Estación. Ida y vuelta* by Rosa Chancel, *Viviana y Merlín* by Benjamín Jarnés, *Efectos navales* by Antonio Obregón, and *Cazador en el alba* are just some examples. All were published in 1930 with an autobiography and photograph of the author as well as a shared notice that:

En esta colección, EDICIONES ULISES, agruparán a todos los escritores de lengua castellana que puedan representar un claro exponente de los "valores actuales" literarios, es decir, a todos aquellos escritores de esta generación de 1930 que tienen acento propio, que se han desligado, desprendido de los credos estéticos que forman el gran tópico literario anterior...¹⁹

It is a clear, concise, and times contradictory literary manifesto that echoes not only the sensorially rich narration of *Cazador*, but also the ruinously antagonistic vision of later theorists.

The past is again understood as adversary as opposed to forefather; and the consequence is a kind of anti-novel, a work that self-consciously persists under the label "novel", but that nonetheless bears few of the genre's historic hallmarks. Firstly, the Spanish avant-garde novel is short: *Pájaro pinto* is 78 pages and *Cazador en el alba* is 40. Even more surprising is that, despite insisting on the term, its format at times does not resemble a novel at all. For example, *Vispera del gozo* is a collection of seven short stories with no linking central narrative²⁰, *Luna de*

¹⁸ In *Francisco Ayala: el escritor en su siglo* (2009), Luis García Montero cites *Vispera del Gozo* as the first work issued by "Nova Novorum". However, another Salinas short story also classified as an example of avant-garde narrative, "Un conocido por conocer", actually bests both *El profesor inútil* and *Vispera del gozo*—it was published alone in the third issue of *Revista de Occidente* in 1921.

¹⁹ While this quote was taken from an original copy of Antonio Obregon's *Efectos navales*, an identical page appears in each of the novels printed under the *Colección Valores Actuales* label.

²⁰ In *Poetas y narradores: la narrativa breve en las revistas de vanguardia en España (1918-1936)*, Francisco Javier Díez de Revenga highlights Salinas's insistence on including the subtitle "Novela" in the original edition of *Vispera del gozo*. For Díez de Revenga, the purpose was likely twofold. He understands it firstly as a quintessential avant-garde attempt to shock the reader. Beyond that, however, he sees in it the desire to ensure that the work is correctly classified as novel rather than "poema en prosa" (111). Implicit in this desire is paradoxically an acknowledgement of *Vispera del gozo*'s difference, as both form and content in fact point so strongly towards other genres (specifically poetry and the short story) that without the label it may be unrecognizable as a novel to the uninitiated. Pérez Firmat also addresses the confusion, giving examples of the many reviewers of the period who

copa sometimes takes the shape of drama rather than prose, and *Efectos navales* employs unconventional line breaks. What is more, the dissimilarities only intensify within the tales of these noticeably leaner volumes. Character development is thin. There is no penetrating the psyche of the protagonist; no delving into particularized romantic crises; no exploring intricate family histories. Narrative action is also conspicuously absent. Often reduced to the slimmest slice of life at its most mundane—a stroll down a busy city street, a leisurely train ride spent scenery gazing, a quick visit to a nearby church—it lacks the complex storylines and theatrical plot twists of its rejected realist predecessors. Instead, language is the focus, as lines once dedicated to emotions, relationships, and even political strife, are replaced with metaphor-rich meanderings that more closely resemble poetry. The flatness of characters is thus counteracted by the fullness of the words themselves, and also by the dawn of a new protagonist—modernity.

Indeed, the aestheticized and fragmented vision of Spanish vanguard narrative often centers on the rapidly transforming metropolis. More than just a passive backdrop for storytelling, it is itself a complex, vibrant, and ever-evolving organism whose technological advancements, dizzying rhythms, and sensorial abundance alter not only the lives of its fictional occupants, but also the manner in which those lives are perceived and recounted. As highlighted by Antonio Arenas's awe-inspiring initial encounters with the electrified tentacles of an expanding capital city, a sonorous jazz club, and a rising skyline, the modern city is a dazzling, yet disorienting experience—not unlike the new vanguard novel. In this way, a link between *what* is told and the experimental *how* it is told surfaces. Azucena López Cobo understands this rebellious narrative style principally as the product of the generic ambiguity that characterizes the literature of the epoch. When the metaphor—the traditional domain of poetry—conquers vanguard narrative, a fundamental shift occurs. The role of language has changed, and “la palabra [adquiere] protagonismo por sí misma y no sólo por su contenido semántico. La palabra [deja] de ser andamio para aspirar a edificio” (López Cobo 20). López Cobo thus turns to structural imagery to capture this newfound significance. Rather than serve as secondary support system, as a mere conduit for content, language emerges as the heart of the *nueva narrativa*. It is no longer the means through which the novelistic building is constructed. It is now the building itself.

In *Idle Fictions*, Pérez Firmat also signals that the edifice as a metaphor for the novel has a long literary tradition deeply rooted in all that the Spanish avant-garde version rejects. It represents permanence, solidity, and strength. Its weight and size convey not only an innate steadfastness, but also a seriousness of mission. The novel is a building because it remains big, important, and relatively unchanged across time and space. It is also similarly constricted, and so, “. . .supposes. . .that the novel is a discrete genre, clearly cordoned off from contiguous forms. Just like an edifice, the novel occupies a limited and well-defined space” (Pérez Firmat 50). And the nature of that well-defined space, whose foundation ultimately “rests on the material world, from which it is also constituted” (50), also speaks to the novel's earthly underpinnings. “Architectural metaphors suggest. . .that the novel is firmly entrenched in reality” (50), and as such, that “[realism] and mimesis are generic imperatives” (50). It is for these reasons that Pérez Firmat identifies this structural conception of the novel as institutional. Institutions quite literally occupy buildings, therefore making them the ideal “material symbol” (48) of this traditional narrative form. Just as buildings are erected via the painstaking accumulation of brick and mortar, so the standard novel is constructed piece-by-piece. Thus, the “ideology of fabrication”

resisted the terminology used by Salinas, instead opting for “narración”, “relato”, “prosas”, “fragments”, or even “elements of stories” (10).

(49) that defines this officially sanctioned model sits in stark contrast to the rebelliously modern “ideology of deconstruction” (48) advanced by the historical avant-garde and embodied in *Cazador en el alba*.

And while López Cobo strives to capture this revolutionary impulse by inverting the classic architectural metaphor in which language scaffolds story, Pérez Firmat opts instead for its opposite. His *pneumatic* account of Spanish avant-garde narrative is one characterized by air and ambiguity rather than materiality and durability. It is as if the weighty realist tome has been vaporized, and its once rigidly structured molecules cast off into the literary atmosphere. They disperse themselves haphazardly, their shapelessness and buoyancy disavowing the heaviness of convention. What is more, this new novelistic haze is so varied and diffuse that Pérez Firmat labels it an *isotopy* after rejecting the term metaphor as too narrow. He defines isotopy as “a cluster of images that revolve around a shared semantic nucleus” (42) and designates the nucleus around which *el arte nuevo* orbits the *pneumatic effect*, a phrase he underscores is “purposively vague, for it spans a wide and variegated range of items. In the most general terms, the pneumatic effect shows through in images, which, in one way or another, convey a sense of dissolution or weightlessness. It represents an ascensional movement and a centrifugal force: up, and away” (42). Given this vaporous nature, it is not surprising that the *pneumatic effect* manifests itself in a preponderance of gaseous images; mist, clouds, soap bubbles, and inflated tires are a few of Pérez Firmat’s examples. It also encapsulates the key changes in narrative style, as well as character and plot development that distinguish the Spanish vanguard novel. Its brevity signals not only a literal, but also a psychic lightness –works of such small stature suggest playfulness as opposed to gravity. Its two-dimensional characters are too doubly “disembodied” (44), their scant physicality reflecting a parallel “obliteration of individuality” (44), as the discrete consciousness is dissolved into “a fluid, undifferentiated matrix of character traits” (44). Lastly, its narrative action is similarly insubstantial, the once mimetic stronghold having been reduced to mere trace of its former size and importance. In this way, “the pneumatic effect figures a novel that is weightless, agile, incorporeal. The novel as nebula or phantasm” (49).

Crucial to this conceptual shift from massive “monolith” (49) to amorphous mist is a reconsideration of the institutionally imposed content-form hierarchy implicit in the architectural metaphor and also emphasized by Susan Sontag. For although the dehumanized goals of Ortega’s disciples do not isolate them completely from their artistic ancestors²¹, they undoubtedly entail a negation of “ciertos principios considerados esenciales hasta ese momento...” (del Pino 33). As Peter Bürger famously signals, the categories we use to describe and critique our world will ultimately determine (and diminish, Sontag would say) our understanding of it. The rejection of the prevailing structural imagery is therefore also a rejection of “the view that the novel is fixed genre” (Pérez Firmat 51) necessarily and clearly divisible into form and content. Rather than form supplanting content *as* the building, the *pneumatic effect* obliterates the building altogether, along with “the analytical categories to

²¹ As José M. del Pino points out in *Montajes y fragmentos: una aproximación a la narrativa española de vanguardia*, a refutation of mimesis does not in fact translate into a total denial of the human. The link between these defamiliarized works and the human is simply aesthetic rather than sentimental: “...el concepto de estilización formal, repetido en el arte desde sus orígenes, pretende conectar las nuevas tendencias con aquellas tradiciones en las que la forma artística adquiere perfiles antimiméticos. Son parte de esta tendencia desde los jeroglíficos egipcios hasta la poesía barroca o el cubismo. El arte deshumanizado, por lo tanto, está lejos de ser una práctica antihumana, pues conecta con tradiciones artísticas anteriores” (33). For Sontag, it is precisely their aesthetic nature that makes them significant.

which this conception gives rise..." (51). Vapor, after all, is defined by its free-flowing and uncontainable nature, which does not allow for hard and fast borders. To summarize, "[a] gaseous novel dissolves...polarity" (51). Here, form more clearly blends into content, just as narrative drifts into poetry. (In)action and rhetorical device occupy the same hazy—but more unified—literary space.

What both López Cobo and del Pino describe as a seizure of power, Pérez Firmat thus sees as an equally defiant, but much gentler blurring of boundaries. To this end, he dubs the *pneumatic effect* an "informing unforming principle", in which "informing" speaks to the isotopy's purpose and "unforming" to its essential meaning (42). As a guiding sphere of imagery (or one that "informs"), it paradoxically leads to a distinct generic ambiguity, one that self-consciously "unforms" the traditional novel. Undoubtedly, this ethereal portrait of the atomization of form speaks to just how avant-garde antagonism manifests itself aesthetically in Spanish narrative of the period, not only theoretically positioning itself in opposition to institutional norms, but also willfully destroying those norms within each individual work. It likewise captures the classificatory and interpretive difficulties presented by these *novelas líricas*, and therefore eloquently articulates certain aspects of the unfamiliar reading experience they offer. Yet the utter shapelessness of this vision, aimed as it is at a subset of language-centered novels, also elides their declared focus on form. While formless in their renunciation of clear generic boundaries that, among other things, dictate form serve content, their carefully crafted prose nevertheless conveys a unique solidity. After all, Ortega's classic windowpane metaphor celebrates art precisely *as* object. And Ayala himself, in a reflection on quality, extols the primacy of form, curiously by way of an architectural image doubly recognizable in its inverted configuration:

En una obra de arte, el argumento constituye mero soporte sobre el cual han de organizarse los materiales manejados por el artista para darle forma; y su calidad, el grado de su logro, dependerá del uso que él haga de esos materiales. Así como la pintura es un arte de los colores, y la música de los sonidos, la literatura es el arte de las palabras, en cuanto sonidos articulados y cargados de significación. Por tanto, será en el lenguaje donde habrá que centrar el esfuerzo interpretativo encaminado a establecer sus méritos (582).

Novels composed of language centered not on narrating, but on displaying themselves as linguistic art object, can hardly be said to be formless, despite the nebulous character of that language or the protagonist it describes. Although they may no longer stack themselves neatly into the foundation or wall of a compelling and complex human life, the words of *el Arte Nuevo* nevertheless take on a definitive shape. Like clay molded in the hands of a sculptor, they exhibit an unambiguous plasticity born precisely of their newfound autonomy. Freed from the obligation to serve primarily as medium for plot, they reemerge as a space-occupying artistic material that defies the genre's inherent two-dimensionality. For Joseph Frank, this spatiality is *the* defining trait of "modern literature"²², which has rejected its innately consecutive nature in

²² Frank uses this term in his classic 1945 essay, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" to denote the mostly English-language Modernist texts he explains and analyzes. Even so, the rather broad term reflects a parallel broadness in scope, as he certainly does not limit himself in space or time. For example, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is central example of this spatializing phenomenon. And although he never uses the term "avant-garde", the revolution of

favor of works conceptualized and organized dimensionally. Attributing this rejection of a traditional narrative progression (that simultaneously promotes and is promoted by institutional realism) to the spiritual angst of the period, Frank identifies a “principle of reflexive reference” (11), which calls for a new mode of comprehending the words of vanguard poem and novel alike. Rather than presenting information sequentially and building significance through time, modern literary language should be regarded as a series of discreet symbols, images, and references whose meaning is founded upon juxtaposition in space. Like the fragmented cubist nude that reveals multiple angles with a single glance, the countless similes of *Vispera del gozo* are to be perceived simultaneously and as the arranged parts of a whole, in a manner more akin to the plastic arts. This notion of novel as literary constellation, as an assortment of verbal points of light positioned spatially (across the page *and* in the reader’s imagination), surely recalls the nebulae of Pérez Firmat. It also insists on a comparably ambiguous generic identity. But in the end, Frank’s rhetorical stars align into an intentionally well-defined unit instead of a formless haze. He considers metaphors, and the shape they together take, as objects to be viewed, not just read. He does not hesitate to use terms like “autonomous structure” (15) to describe even the most disjointed modern narrative²³. In a word, Frank *sees* language as a conspicuously three-dimensional material.

Nowhere is this tension between form and formlessness more apparent than in “Entrada en Sevilla”. The second piece of the *Vispera del gozo* narrative puzzle, it relates an excursion by car over six pages of disconnected images and startling similes. Opening on a narrow residential street, the work offers none of the typical introductory fare. There is no presentation of the protagonist. No background information. No motivation for the trip is offered. Instead, the reader must navigate an exhaustive and often opaque account of sunlight attempting to penetrate impervious and “recatados interiores domésticos” (141). After a morning of unsuccessful incursions, the afternoon sun, “ya un poco cansado”, desperately seeks shelter, “en un patio, en una cámara, en cualquiera de aquellos lugares umbrosos que tan excelentemente le defendían contra su mismo ardor y donde se debía estar tan a gusto, sin sol” (141). Despite trying every possible access point—“velas y cierros, zaguanes y ventanos...[los] toldos dorados en los patios, los macizos portones entornados, y en los balcones y miradores, visillos rígidos y blancos...” (141)—the forlorn astral body is again denied respite and must resign itself to its blistering fate.

Salinas’s Andalusian sun is thus doubly personified: its intangible rays concretized in a human form “[que] se [desliza] furtivamente” (141), it too is granted a human consciousness capable of expressing preferences and pain. It also meets a distinctly human end. After being obliged to spend “todo el día en una calle soleada, melancólicamente derribada por tierra su rubia melena leonina, y tan olvidado y desdeñoso...[,] las sombras avanzaban con paso quedo de traidor melodramático, afilando el frío puñal del crepúsculo, sin que él las sintiera” (141). Nightfall takes the shape of an impending murder. And the supreme physicality of this image—sharpened metal dagger threatening flesh—notably contradicts light’s incorporeal nature, in this way highlighting the strange beauty of “Entrada en Sevilla”²⁴. In the opening paragraph, light is

form he describes is undoubtedly the same one that concerns Poggioli, Bürger, and Murphy, and that occurs across Western Europe, most forcefully in the 1910s and 20s.

²³ Frank in fact uses the term “autonomous structure” for the most extreme example of his spatializing phenomenon. *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes, he says, is “a collection of striking passages” no longer bound by an adherence, no matter how loose, to verisimilitude. Significantly, it is this autonomy that provides the novel with a new kind of structure, one born of symbol rather than story.

²⁴ In so doing, it also serves as a counter example to the nebulae of Pérez-Firmat.

a mirror-fleeing fugitive deterred by curtains “como vírgenes fuertes” (141). Adjectives and adverbs also abound. Sentences amble through clause after clause as comparisons befuddle. In short, there is much to see, feel, hear, and touch, most of which also surprises. It is a highly sensorial narration whose incredible level of detail underscores the uniquely vanguard pleasure taken in the language itself. In order to reach even the most rudimentary plot development, one must first unearth countless rhetorical strata whose depth and complexity demand complete attention. The care with which each of these descriptive units has been crafted is apparent, so much so that storyline—the (once) ultimate purpose of narrative—is easily forgotten. One literally loses oneself amid an arrangement of devices no longer linked sequentially via plot. Instead, they stand beside one another in space, their density proclaiming their autonomous objecthood and their beauty compelling new modes of comprehension and interpretation like that of Frank’s “principle of reflexive reference”.

What is more, the minimal content that can be gleaned from Salinas’s intricate descriptions actually serves to reinforce the story’s richly spatial character, doing so by way of another avant-garde trope—the automobile. The action of “Entrada en Sevilla” is after all a car ride around Seville, a most modern tour of this most quintessentially Spanish city. Crucially, the Seville that most intrigues Claudio, the protagonist, passenger, and visitor, is not the Seville “de trazado moderno, con altas casas grises...” (146), but rather the flamenco-inspiring version of the popular imagination, home to ancient alleyways lined with starch white buildings, flower-filled balconies, and gurgling Moorish fountains. Decidedly *un*-modern, the constricted and tangled spaces of old Seville seem a strangely apt metaphor for the very language used to capture them here—both city and text containing untold details whose individual powers of attraction make them a potential end in themselves. It is a case of the trees obscuring the forest. Notably, it is also a counterintuitive location for an outing by car, particularly one aimed at knowing this “ciudad codiciada” (142). Firstly, its narrow lanes can barely accommodate the oversized sedan, which presses itself up against the surrounding buildings “sin dejar casi espacio para el paso de una persona” (142) as it waits for Claudio to descend. Having arrived late the night before and thus truly meeting it for the first time, “...el primer paso que dio Claudio en Sevilla no tuvo para sustento blanda tierra andaluza, sino una faja neutral de nacionalidad lejana, un estribo de automóvil” (142).

What is more, the rapid nature of vehicular travel is similarly incompatible, distorting “la Sevilla convencional de los panoramas...” (144) to such an extent that sky, patio, and passerby are reduced to “...formas, líneas, espacios multicolores y cambiantes, rotos, reanudados a cada instante, sin coherencia alguna...” (143). As his driver Robledo ironically declares, “Fíjate bien, esta es Sevilla...” (143), the longed-for city visually crumbles, leaving disconcerting modern ruins and a frustrated spectator in the automobile’s wake:

...por ahora no se veía ni ciudad, ni calle, ni siquiera sus últimos elementos, casas. Todo lo que aprehendían los ojos eran fragmentos, cortes y paños de muros, rosa, verde, azul, y de trecho en trecho, como un punto redondo y negro que intenta dar apariencias de orden a una prosa en tumulto, un portal en el que se hundía la mirada siempre demasiado tarde, porque apenas llegada a la cancela y dudosa de por cuál de aquellos geométricos pasajes entraría en el presentido patio, ya empezaba de nuevo otra cosa, dejándose atrás aquella: una pared de colores, la arista de una esquina brusca, una reja, cerrada casi siempre, pero que una vez mostró con patética prisa, cautiva detrás de sus barrotes como una gacela,

una luz tiernísima y sin nadie, de cuarto habitado, de cuarto de donde se acaba de ir, adonde volverá dentro de un momento alguien que nunca veremos (144).

And while the racing streets thwart Claudio's gaze, the reader experiences a parallel disquiet in the quickly passing verbal fragments that resist any notion of sequence beyond the forward movement of the car. There is no sense of plot development, no "knowing" the story or its main character. Like Seville, it remains just outside the reader's grasp, "...algo incierto e inaprensible, como una mujer amada, producto de datos reales, pero dispersos y nebulosos..." (146). Unlike in *Cazador en el alba*, modern technology is not a source of growth. Incompatible with old Seville, it instead vaporizes historically solid urban spaces into a collage of ambiguous and unmoored sights and sounds. They can no longer be assembled into a singular and definitive landscape, a gesture that exemplifies the broader artistic and philosophical concerns of the era.

Like its cubist kin, "Entrada en Sevilla" simultaneously offers up everything and nothing. Every possible angle and adjective is accounted for, yet no story, person, or city survives intact. As traditional narrative space is flattened virtually beyond recognition, myriad perceptual alternatives materialize. Fictional lived space is replaced by the many spaces occupied by language as art object. The world is not as it is represented, Claudio's destructively modern excursion declares via demonstration. It is not so neat: it cannot be reduced to a unified narrative arc; no one perspective prevails; a work of art that totalizes and clarifies is aspirational (and institutional), not honest. Reality, whether aesthetic or otherwise, is much more varied, complex, and *pneumatic*. In "Fenomenología de la vanguardia: El caso de la novela," Luis Fernández Cifuentes connects this tendency toward dispersion and fragmentation with a parallel avant-garde interest in the limits of both perception and representation. The creative goal of "una realidad completa o suficiente" (48) is obsolete. Narrative, and art more broadly, can do no more than present "una percepción limitada a [una] realidad; mejor, una percepción de sus propios límites" (48). And these limits extend to language itself. Contrary to popular belief, language is not a transparent tool uniquely capable of revealing universal truths. As an aesthetic material employed by a single mind with a singular experience, it inevitably reflects and reproduces the particularities of that mind. It also contains biases—structural, cultural, and otherwise—in its own right. Like the unspoiled panorama destroyed by "Entrada en Sevilla", language is not to be trusted. One must instead follow Claudio's lead and adjust their interpretative strategies, for it is paradoxically when he resigns himself to the fast-moving Seville of the automobile that its human side, in all its nuance, emerges: "La ciudad no se definía lejos, depurada y distinta, sino que vivía, cerca complicadísima, esquivaba siempre a la línea recta, complacida como cuerpo de bailarina en gentiles quiebros y sinuosidades" (144). While actual humans and the concrete spaces they occupy are reduced to incomplete and unsatisfying glimpses, the city—as experience (for Claudio) and as representation (for the reader)—arises anew, a counterintuitive gesture that recalls Peter Bürger's case for art removing itself from "the praxis of life" in order to ultimately affect deeper change.

It is also a conceptual shifting of gears that requires language be celebrated as material rather than medium. Thus, as dialogue and description resist the role of part of an action-centered narrative whole, they succeed in redefining their purpose and value. Metaphors now strive for nothing more than the shock and beauty of their own existence. In so doing, they vociferously reject the expectation that they amount to something more or bigger, and instead relish themselves as shape, color, and vibration—in other words, as thing. For Cifuentes, who observes that "[quizá] nada distingue tan positivamente a las vanguardias como esta restauración

del *ingenio*...” (49), it is the playful nature of this self-conscious purposelessness that defines the historical avant-garde. After the outing and its telling have been pulverized, all that’s left to notice, and enjoy, are the words themselves. In this way, the attention with which they are shaped only serves to strengthen their objecthood. The outlaw sun, the “calles...penetrantes como frases nocturnas”, the “automóvil, góndola sin rumbo” (145) are images designed *ingeniosamente* in order to make an impression. Individually, they stand out for their beauty, sensuality, and ability to surprise. The richness of their details invites the reader to linger, whether in admiration or bewilderment. Each descriptive unit is an independent art object that demands careful observation of and from incalculable angles. What is more, this newfound dimensionality extends beyond the novel as a series of discrete images, applying also to the work as a collage-like whole. Despite the absence of strong, and hence unifying, plot or protagonist, the linguistic intricacies of this *nueva narrativa* stitch together a text so vivid, elaborate, and sensorial that it becomes tactile. A verbal textile of sorts, it has a weightiness born of this dense, yet delicate verbosity. So, while the avant-garde vanquishes language’s historic claims to a translucent universality, it also asserts a distinct kind of worth born of this newly substantial nature. As an artistic material formed by a modern “...yo cuya percepción de la realidad y de sí mismo es fragmentada y dispersa, hasta el punto de que no le permite trascendencia ninguna, ni ideológica ni sentimental...” (Cifuentes 50), words are important not because of what they say, but rather because they exist at all.

Cifuentes explicitly links the vanguard objectification of language with the social, political, and cultural realities of the period, stating that “...las novelas españolas de vanguardia no son célebres ni son importantes; lo es, sin embargo, su visión del mundo y el contexto cultural que arropa esa visión” (45)²⁵. Gerald Bruns too signals it a generational hallmark, as demonstrated by his characterization of the works of the 1910s and 20s as substantial and “thinglike”. But, as he outlines in *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language*, Bruns also views the experimental utterances of Salinas and Ayala as part of a broader literary tradition. He first distinguishes between “logical” and “poetic” conceptions of language (13) that are unmoored to any specific period. Inherent in the latter is a heightened materiality, one that appreciates word as word, not just signifier. Like Pérez-Firmat, he cites the preponderance of spatial metaphors used to describe language as evidence of this. Another example of the power of conceptual categories, dimensional associations (a novel as building, for example) do not simply reflect a historical understanding of language as thing. They also realize that understanding by initiating a sort of literary chemical reaction: as the sound of a word is transformed into a visual representation in the mind of the reader, it acquires mass and volume. He thus describes a language that quite literally is “conceived to occupy a ground of its own between the subject and the audience” (21). Bruns traces this more plastic vision as far back as antiquity and the ancient Greek term for the alphabet, *stoicheia*, which identifies not only letters, but also parts of speech, as actual “physical particles” (30). He also highlights the ancient Greek division between *logos*, which captures word as thought, and *epos*, which comprehends it as sound and substance. This rhetorical conception prizes style for its ability to sculpt meaning, in this way showing that language, despite its role as medium, maintains an independent material identity with a unique

²⁵ Cifuentes cites Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, “divulgado personalmente en España...en Marzo de 1923” (51), and the 1923 translation of Freud’s *Complete Works* (the result of a 1922 proposal Ortega y Gasset to the National Library) (51) as part of the broader cultural context with which the works of *el Arte Nuevo* dialogue.

communicative capacity. As sound, "...language does not mean, it is, and being what it is, it generates certain effects..." (17).

It too is an object—an aesthetic object—the artist physically manipulates. Its impact lies in the form taken by those manipulations. As such, it is intrinsically valuable. Again, its significance stems from its being rather than from its telling. As literature has evolved, this substantial notion of language has endured. Bruns cites the “whole handfuls of frozen words” of Rabelais’s *Pantagruel*, which as “[words] reduced to the extended, purely spatial mode of existence of the phonetic alphabet” (37) resemble “rough sugar-plums, of many colours” (quoted on 37). He examines the *agudeza* of Luis de Góngora, for whom “poetry is a formalist enterprise” (23) that toys with language’s propensity to obscure. “Indeed, to the extent that words are said to conceal (and, ultimately, to be separable from) their meanings, they may in turn be said to possess an independent existence” (23). In these meticulously crafted verses, the goal is the perfection of artistic expression, not the transmission of message. For Bruns, this devotion to style “transforms an utterance into an object” (25) intended “to be contemplated for the brilliance of its design” (26). Almost two centuries later, *energeia* will come to describe an ideal Romantic language that is “passionate” and “energetic” precisely because it is “naturally figurative or imaginative” (48). Insofar as Romantic poetry transmits feeling as opposed to reason, it does so through “speaking pictures”, or images compelling enough to move their audience. To this end, Coleridge declares his intention to “destroy the old antithesis of *Words* and *Things*, elevating, as it were, words into Things, and living Things too” (quoted on 43).

Yet despite these diverse and distant origins, it is for Bruns in the modern era when poetic language reaches the zenith of objecthood. What realism has reduced to a “transitive act” is now an autonomous entity with no purpose other than its own, newly physical, being. Its most extreme examples do not simply reject mimetic norms. They turn away altogether from language’s “logical” function, leaving an artistic arrangement of metaphor-objects where a story once stood. This is certainly the case with Claudio’s disorienting spin through old Seville. It also describes Antonio Arenas’s astonished introduction to twentieth-century Madrid. In this instance, the narrative thread remains, but it is slim and predictable, more like pretense than nucleus: a country boy migrates to the big city, marvels at its newness and speed, feels uneasy amongst its beautifully mechanized women, and finally falls in love with Aurora. A “deidad” among “Gracias menores” (30), Aurora “...tenía algo de presidenta de una corrida de toros. Era la mujer ibérica (y bastante romana), barroca, vegetal, rizada y curva. Una castiza” (29). In other words, she is the opposite of, “[las] demás muchachas, ágiles y exactas como compases – telefonistas, mecanógrafas...” (29). Curiously, in this exaltation of modernity, the most natural and traditional female figure prevails. Aurora is not only “ibérica”, “barroca”, and “castiza”; she is “la mujer” that defines these traits. And as one would expect of a goddess, she is more substantial than her contemporaries. Her body is fleshier and more rounded. Her hair is fuller, curlier, and blonder. Suggesting enthronement, she has “[la] arquitectura de mujer sentada” (30). Her forward-looking name aside, Aurora is the (once) ideal Spanish woman, an anachronistic allegory of femininity and *Patria* that are no more.

Yet despite her innate singularity in a sea of female sameness, she does not escape the objectifying forces of modern literature. Like Antonio’s other astounding encounters with Madrid, his time spent with Aurora is characterized by a descriptive richness whose complexity and capacity to surprise distract from character development and plot. Her mane is a “rubia balumba”, her waist an “ingrave, cambiante, reiterada marea”, and her perfume, “un hilo de Ariadna para seguir...” (30). On their weekly excursions, Aurora and Antonio are not just

strolling lovers, but rather “...ríos afluentes [que] buscaban las grandes avenidas. Las calles más abiertas, por donde huían, persiguiéndose de esquina en esquina, los anuncios luminosos” (38). Aurora is solid, confident, and captivating, but she is still not “real” in the sense of a fully formed human being in both body and consciousness. To the contrary, her fullness appears to arise from the substantial nature of the words that depict her. It is in fact their materiality that creates hers.

A surreal moment of physical dismantling highlights this inversion, as Antonio arrives at her apartment and looks up: “Dentro del marco de la ventana se veía su cabeza, planeta fiel alrededor de la bombilla. Su cabeza sonámbula; cérea, hueca y bella cabeza parlante...” (37). For this instant, Aurora literally ceases to be human. Her body erased by the window frame, she is reduced visually to her head, an eerie “planeta fiel” orbiting a light bulb. The dehumanization continues with the equally odd adjectives that follow –“sonámbula, cérea, hueca y bella”. She is unconscious. She is fake. She is a beautiful, but unnerving talking head. And the dual meaning of “hueca”, at once resonant and hollow, only serves to intensify this curious dehumanization. Emanating from a bodiless wax head, her voice may resound, but it ultimately springs from nowhere. In this way, Aurora is an absence, an emptiness, a void. Cognitively and physically, she is nothing. It is an undoubtedly bizarre portrayal of the protagonist’s chief love interest and the figure whose plump physique, “risa...excesiva” (30), and “tiernos ojos de gacela” (38) have up until this point made her the novel’s least modern and (perhaps consequently) most human.

But no matter, Ayala’s fantastical language eventually ravages her too. Antonio’s formerly vibrant sweetheart is transformed into a series of perplexing images that command the reader’s attention, not because of what they say about her, but rather for their very strangeness. Gerald Bruns would identify these extraordinary descriptions as “deviant utterances”, thus placing them firmly within the bounds of a poetic (or rhetorical) conception of language. For Bruns, an utterance is “deviant” when,

...the language of everyday speech no longer functions for the poet or orator simply as a medium for discourse, but constitutes rather a point of departure for the creation of literary art. This means that the very motivation for the act of speech lies to some extent in language itself: language has its own value, quite apart from its function, which is to say its transitive purpose (71).

As Aurora the person recedes, the words that illustrate her emerge as material. They are outlandish, to such an extent that they flagrantly flout their conventional role as transparent storyteller. And as a result, they are also conspicuous. It is, after all, the extended observation this outlandishness requires that dissolves not only Aurora, but also the jazz club and the bustling city block, turning those wild words into objects. The reader first pauses upon noticing the deviance and then lingers to make sense of it, scrutinizing an unexpected metaphor the same way one would a painting or a sculpture. In that pause, language is separated from “its transitive purpose” and announces “own value” as artistic material.

In addition to strange, the inherently worthy dimensional descriptions of *Cazador en el alba* are also novel. References to modern technologies and artistic ideals abound, even in the work’s most intimate moments. The budding romance between Antonio and Aurora is “un amor aéreo que prestara su gracia de hélice a las futuras, vigilantes jornadas” (34). As that love grows, “aumentando en progresión geométrica” (35), Antonio’s boxing improves. While in the ring, he has an epiphany, realizing his punches “...vibrarían con la emoción-esqueleto del telégrafo y con

la emoción ultratelúrica de la radio...” (35). The bedroom, too, is characterized by another state-of-the-art development – flight:

Desde la alta perspectiva de los dioses y los aviadores, el mar no es, como desde la playa, una masa amorfa y caótica. Está lleno de triángulos, de planos, de líneas, de interferencias, de reiteraciones, de pliegues que se doblan y desdoblán como limpias sábanas de agua.

Entre las sábanas de su cama, Aurora parecía una deidad marina. Su cabeza, desmelenada de rubias algas, reposaba sobre la almohada de sus brazos paralelos. El alba dual de su pecho se cubría de espumas de encaje. Todo su cuerpo—presencia de una fuga—se evadía en la indecisión. Surgente, insurgente.

Las piernas, bajo la ropa. La rizada concha del sexo, replegado el vértice entre las ingles... (40-1)

From the vantage point of the pilot—and also that of the gods—Antonio gazes down at his lover, such great heights revealing the infinite shapes that in reality compose both sea and sheets. The “triángulos”, “planos”, “líneas”, and “pliegues” that are visible from the altitude of the airplane offer a quintessentially modern vision of the presence, and importance, of multiple perspectives. It is again a kind of cubist narration, one curiously used to underscore a very different *anti-human* image, that of Aurora as goddess. While the reader earlier starts at Aurora’s detached head, Antonio contemplates it “con arrobó rústico-místico” (37), thus lending another surreal angle to the scene. More than a spooky “hueca y bella cabeza parlante”, she is the saintly picture of herself as deity. Glowing and waxen, she sits elevated in the altar of her urban dwelling awaiting Antonio’s adoration. And when he finally comes into physical contact with his idol, it is from the distant viewpoint of an aircraft, thus lacking the all-important sense of touch. In this way, it is another example of the substantiality of the words that depict a scene eclipsing the scene itself. Despite the deeply intimate nature of the content—nude lovers in bed—the description lacks in humanity. Antonio does not embrace Aurora, nor does she make herself available to be embraced. Her algae-adorned head is too perfectly posed upon “la almohada de sus brazos paralelos”. Her body, “presencia de una fuga”, is too diaphanous. In other words, “[era] una divinidad. Pero como divinidad, inaccesible, inabordable, y siempre en cierto grado de ausencia” (41). And in her absence, beautifully strange descriptions take the spotlight: snow on soiled heels that casts off “decembrinas estrellas” (40), a “niquelado cuello de cisne del gramófono [que bebe] en el disco acentos norteamericanos” (40), a fleeting facial expression, “como un ave fatigada que no encuentra dónde posarse...” (41). These “deviant utterances” demand our consideration, in this fashion transforming the language of *Cazador* from invisible medium to palpable material.

III. A Sensual Encounter: The New Meaning of *el Arte Nuevo*

Like Gerald Bruns in his lengthy history of the “thinglike” nature of words, Susan Sontag opens her argument *against interpretation* in ancient Greece. She, however, locates here the Western shift *away* from art’s innate physicality. What began as “incantatory, magical... an instrument of ritual” (3) was split by Greek mimetic theory, which would define art forevermore as “mimesis or representation” (4). And as the mere imitation of an imitation, art must be defended. Its purpose must be explained and its presence rationalized. Sontag identifies this

defense of art, which began with Aristotle's response to Plato, as the moment "which gives birth to the odd vision by which something we have learned to call 'form' is separated off from something we have learned to call 'content,' and to the well-intentioned move which makes content essential and form accessory" (4). Sontag vociferously declares this divided model a fallacy, as is the subsequent "project of *interpretation*" (5), which both stems from and perpetuates "the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art" (5). As such, it is an act of disfigurement. Although interpretation has become "*the* modern way of understanding something" (9), it too has ancient roots in the need of "the culture of late classical antiquity" (5) to protect myth from science. This meant *interpreting* antiquated manuscripts for a new age; a practice Sontag calls "a radical strategy for conserving an old text" (6). It is also a *translation*:

Directed to art, interpretation means plucking a set of elements (the X, the Y, the Z, and so forth) from the whole work. The task of interpretation is virtually one of translation. The interpreter says, Look, don't you see that X is really—or, really means—A? That Y is really B? That Z is really C? (5)

Inherent in this process of translation is thus the forsaking of the whole for the parts. One is encouraged to look closely and then to dismantle in order to explain a work and so justify its very existence. In this way, "[the] interpreter, without actually erasing or rewriting the text, *is* altering it" (6). While the original intent may have been an "insistent, but respectful" (6) preservation, the modern iteration is nonetheless fundamentally destructive. The first step—disassembly—makes the work virtually unrecognizable by replacing a totality with the details that comprise it. The second—the act of translation itself—obliterates it completely. In other words, it "excavates, and as it excavates, destroys..." (6). What matters has been lost. Those plastic elements that make art *art* because they have the unique power to inspire a fuller sensory experience are sacrificed to a meaning born of the analysis of "content".

"Reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, [and] stifling" (7) are some adjectives Sontag uses to express her disapproval. She goes on to say that "[real] art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting *that*, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable" (8). Art should be left alone, observed—and appreciated—for merely being. Taming it through translation not only destroys the work of art, it also deprives the viewer of one of the few modern avenues for authentic encounter with feeling, both physical and otherwise. We therefore need not "assimilate Art into Thought, or (worse yet) Art into Culture" (13). Quite the reverse, art should strive for *transparence*, and simply be *seen* as it is and for what it is—art, object, sensation. For Sontag, this is a revolutionary act. It is a recovery of sorts, a stripping away of the layers of modern excess that have led to a "steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience" (13). In a fast-paced world full of neon lights, blaring horns, and ever-changing perspectives, "[the] aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art—and, by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us" (14).

How to accomplish this reactivation of art's innate physicality? How to illuminate a work of art as a sensuous and enlivening whole? Is it possible to cast off the millennia-old equation of art equals form plus content? Or the notion that content, as the bearer of *true* meaning, bests form? Not surprisingly, Sontag turns to the avant-garde for her answer. Disregarding "programmatically avant-gardism" because its "experiments with form at the expense

of content” (11) only serve to preserve the illusory separation of form and content, she nevertheless commends attempts to evade standard interpretation. Imagists celebrate the evocative power of the image. Later, the Abstract Expressionists remove content altogether while Pop Art makes it a mockery.

Critics also have a key role to play. Sontag declares it their job to develop a new kind of commentary, one that “would serve the work of art, not usurp its place...” (12). To do so, the field must be leveled. Greater consideration must be given to form, at the expense of interpreted content. Beyond that, a new way of talking about art must be created. “What is needed is a vocabulary—a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, vocabulary—for forms” (12), a vocabulary that serves to spotlight, not interpret. That this is particularly challenging for literature, a historically temporal rather than spatial art form, makes it no less important. Citing specific examples, Sontag does something at first glance counterintuitive to serious literary critique – exalts those that most keep to the surface. Because it is not a novel’s layers that generate its significance, it is not the duty of the critic to peel them back and make sense of them. The critic should instead write to highlight the work itself, to accentuate its contours and uncover its overarching unity, to make it so “that we can see the thing at all” (14). Paradoxically, the sensuous dimensionality of a narrative is not divulged in its depths, but on its exterior. It is on its outside that the reader experiences it as a whole, and so, as an object. Any remaining reflections on content should be “dissolved” into those on form²⁶. Those on form should then provide nothing more than “...a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of [the] work of art” (13). They should “reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it” (13). The clearer vision of art offered by this *transparent* method allows for a sensory, rather than an intellectual, connection between reader and text. And the impact of this focus on sensation is reciprocal. The enriched individual reading experience is broadly restorative, as heightened sensitivity to touch, sight, and sound within a book give rise to more direct, vibrant, and physical encounters with the world beyond its pages. In a parallel turn, literature’s value also shifts. From one based on message to one based on feeling, true worth becomes an aesthetic-emotional matter, rather than an intellectual one. For Sontag, the source of this enhanced psychic state is contact with the materiality of art, which in turn means deeper contact with the “real” world. A novel is not the story it tells, it is the sensual experience one has with the shape, texture, and resonance of that story.

The notable absence of *story* in the narrative of the Spanish historical avant-garde certainly lends itself to this objectified understanding. This was in fact one of the biggest complaints of its contemporaries, and the primary reason the term “novel” was so resisted. Salinas’s “Mundo cerrado”, the inaugural piece of *Vispera del gozo*, provides a case in point. Like “Entrada en Sevilla”, “Mundo cerrado” opens with a winding introduction that extends for two and a half pages of the short story’s six. It again begins with mystery in the form of an abundance of detail, none of which allows us to situate ourselves within a plot. If its first sentence is short and so seems straightforward, the contradiction that immediately follows puts the reader on guard: “Pasó dos horas leyendo. Junto a él, en el asiento, estaba cerrado el libro”

²⁶ Her central example of this ideal methodology is an essay called “The Dickens World: A View from Todgers” by Dorothy Van Ghent. In it, Van Ghent opens with a detailed description of a rhetorical maneuver common to the work of Dickens, the inversion of the animate and the inanimate. She then uses this stylistic trait to examine content *through* form. Van Ghent also utilizes the phrase “total aesthetic occasion” in discussing this overlap, a clear effort to avoid the hierarchy of form and content.

(131). The subsequent meticulous description of that closed book only confirms one's entrance into a new narrative realm:

Un libro de letra clara, amplio margen, asunto intrincado y atractivo, de esos que compramos un día de invierno pensando en leerle aquella noche al amor del fuego, pero que luego, a las primeras líneas, se comprende que ha sido escrito para otro lugar y sazón: para una tarde clara de viaje, y que solo entonces nos dará un placer totalmente exprimido y sabroso. Aunque luego suele ocurrir que en el viaje a que estaba destinado demos con un compañero de buen habla y se pase todo el tiempo en charlar, mientras el libro sigue abandonado, desoído el grito amarillo y pertinaz de su cubierta, como una virgen desdeñada, sobre los almohadones (131-2).

Not only its physical traits—"letra clara, amplio margen"—, but also its character is depicted in this literary-themed vignette whose use of *nosotros* lends it a conspiratorial tone. The narrator too is a reader, and so a kind of mutual understanding is assumed²⁷. The act of reading is also exalted and romanticized. Reserved for "una tarde clara de viaje" rather than a warm winter's fire, the pleasure it offers (when *experienced* in the right place) is undeniably sensorial. That the setting of the *reader* plays this role only reinforces the sensuality of the act of reading, highlighting it as an encounter between mind, body, text, *and* world. What is more, when that pleasure is at its peak, it is "exprimido y sabroso". Like the juice of a ripe fruit, it is something to be felt and tasted. It is a gratification not of the intellect, but the most basic of human needs – thirst. This sensuous, even carnal, image of reading may first seem an odd bedfellow for such an erudite text, but it in fact serves to emphasize the innate physicality of words. Language is the spaces in which it occurs. It is also the fruit from which the very nectar of pleasure is squeezed.

This sensual vision of reading extends to the vignette's final simile –the book, and the language it contains, are a virgin cast aside in favor of pleasant conversation, their "grito amarillo y pertinaz" (132) unheard. Here, synesthesia and personification combine to create the image of text as a demanding future mistress who, although physically reclined, waits anxiously for the attention she desires. It is another highly sensuous description whose allusions to touch and color transform not only the language of "Mundo cerrado", but also the act of reading itself into an intensely physical, even erotic, experience. In so doing, it again broadens the definition of reading beyond contact with a written text, as the portrayal of book as scorned virgin eventually circles back to the inaugural contradiction of an anonymous "reader" with nothing in hand: "Y así pasó esta vez, porque las dos horas de lectura lo fueron sin libro delante, con la vista puesta en un cristal—el de la ventanilla—, y lo leído, imposible de encajar en ningún género literario: Andrés leía un paisaje nuevo, una nación desconocida" (132). With a nod to the generic ambiguity of the narrative its reader has in hand, the use of the verb "to read" surprises. Curiously, it is used to capture not the action of eyes scanning novel, but rather sustained observation of a different sort on the part of Andrés, our now named protagonist. Gazing out the window of what we soon learn is a train traveling at uneven speeds, he "reads" an unfamiliar landscape. At the mercy of a novice engineer, Andrés does not set the pace of his study. He is, for example, only allowed to skim "una página tierna, conmovedora, tan clásica en su sencillez cual la despedida homérica" and laments the quick passing of a striking panorama,

²⁷ In a later "meta" moment, the narrator describes a train whistle as "...tan inoportuno y fatal como esas preocupaciones súbitas que nos asaltan en medio de una lectura, sin saber de dónde vienen, porque un viento de dentro las empuja, e interponen entre nuestra atención y lo escrito un elemento extraño e impenetrable..." (133).

“escrita con cristalina frase por el curso del río—como de acertados epítetos—de arbolado y verdura...” (132). That Romantic chapter is followed by a frighteningly Realist one. “[Una] página de estación de tercera donde una vía muerta, con despintados vagones, una pared gris, de depósitos, al fondo, y un cartel: ‘Lampistería’...” (132) disconcerts Andrés. He can only explain its appearance “tan pobre e insignificante” as the “interpolación apócrifa” (132) of a different author altogether.

Each glimpse of the surrounding countryside is thus a distinct “page” in a “book” whose natural elements are its “sentences”. Andrés’s “reading” of a landscape new to him is more than the mere act of looking. It is instead a more profound kind of examination whose ultimate objective is connection with the world around him. Accordingly, he is annoyed by the “velocidades toscamente desiguales” (132), and with sarcasm mourns the ultimate loss of “un delicadísimo trino de pájaro, salvado por milagro del ruido de la marcha, exquisitamente iniciado como una adolescencia, con un pitido brutal y agudo...” (133). The final straw is the shadowy humiliation of a tunnel:

Y aun lo peor de todo fue aquella vez, cuando se desplegaba en su cimera belleza una descripción de desfiladero abrupto, todo rocas y nácar, y de pronto se cerró bruscamente el relato y quedó el cristal de la ventanilla ilegible, negro, con hosca negrura de túnel, en un túnel. Ya aquello le cansó, le molestó en su dignidad de aficionado rico y ocioso que lee y goza a su capricho. Y sin hacer caso del silbido con que el tren le invitaba, a la salida del túnel, a reanudar la arbitraria lectura, echó mano al maletín y sacó sus dos abultados cuadernos de señas. (133)

The black window is now “ilegible”, to such an extent that it challenges Andrés’s very identity. Without the world (and the words) around him, he is no longer the “aficionado rico y ocioso que lee y goza a su capricho”. He is not himself. Notably, he recovers by referring to “dos abultados cuadernos de señas”, actual notebooks containing actual text. Moreover, what they contain is two distinct, but interdependent, inventories of acquaintances: one that catalogs them alphabetically and another that groups them under the city where they live. For Andrés, the second is the most important, as it is the people who inhabit the locations listed that make them real. It is only when he has someone to add that a city “cobraba movimiento y vida” (134). Once a familiar name has been registered, a formerly timid Andrés can set off, “...a la conquista de la ciudad inmensa, sin más armas que unas señas puntadas en un libreto, pero tan confiado como el multimillonario que acaricia la llave minúscula y acerada gracias a la cual se abrirá sin obstáculo y sin pena la enorme puerta de su departamento de caudales” (135). It is thus not only the friend that occupies it, but also the list itself that materializes the unknown space: “Y al escribir en el segundo cuaderno los dos nombres—ciudad, amigo—juntos, maridados, como en esas tarjetas de los nuevos matrimonios, un punto concreto del mundo se desnudaba de aprensión, de velada reserva y amenaza...” (135). Like the landscapes “read” previously, written language also has the power to unite, serving as bridge between internal perceptions and the external world.

The yearning these spaces inspire in Andrés also points away from the intellect as the source of this newfound bond between person, place, and text. As the train zooms by a particularly alluring page, Andrés frustratingly finds himself, “sin tiempo apenas para leerla completa, cuando menos para aprenderla de memoria y llevársela adentrada, como deseó al ojearla, el corazón” (132). In the end, one discovers his is an affair of the heart. The

understanding that comes with an ever fuller *cuaderno* is not one that can be extracted from atlases and history books. Rather, it is born of the roots that extend from individual to world, whether in reality or on paper. It is the "...cartografía geográfico-sentimental, completa y sin huecos..." (134) towards which Andrés strives. And at the intersection of "geográfico" and "sentimental" is the sensory, both in the form of tangible encounter and enhanced psychic connection. Felt by the body, art also expands the mind and soul, thanks to the space it creates for sensuality more generally. Sontag's closing rallying cry—"In place of a hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art" (14)—reminds the reader that this will in the end be accomplished by revolutionizing how we think, talk, and write about art.

Let us then take a page from her playbook and, after (perhaps mistakenly) analyzing some of its "content", return to the highly decorated surface of "Mundo cerrado". Predictably, it shares much with those of *Cazador en el alba* and "Entrada en Sevilla". There is again a profusion of description, dependent clauses, and uncommon observations. Hardly a sentence passes without a figure of speech. Many, if not most, contain some degree of hyperbaton. For example, passing billboards are "...alocadas, aleteando, como esas gaviotas terreras que nos indican que el mar está aquí, aunque no le veamos, palabras heráldicas y anunciadoras, escritas en grandes carteles..." (137). Smothered in adjectives, commas and comparisons, the subject of the sentence, ironically "palabras heráldicas y anunciadoras", does not appear until its conclusion. The protagonist's final destination is similarly embellished. Initially unknown, and so considered from a (physical and emotional) distance, it is "una isla codiciada e inaccesible, apresada en un cuadro de primitivo, ya fuera del tiempo, sin navío que le llevara" (135). Later, after the all-important inscription, it becomes, "*Icosia*. Capital menor de Europa, de un encanto elegante, tímido y reposado, como el de esa hermana pequeña de una beldad famosa, menos guapa, menos inteligente, pero que, sin embargo, tiene siempre un semblante sonriente y feliz, una expresión secundaria y muy suya." (135-6). Upon his arrival, it reaches its fullest expression as an overtly sensual *thing* that Andrés literally tastes: "Ya le pareció a Andrés que sentía en la boca un sabor deliciosamente nuevo, el zumo de Icosia" (137).

Even the (rare) less complex statements display a distinct linguistic richness, often in the form of lists of adjectives. Will the friend that inspired Andrés's note-turned-journey, the now Lady Gurney, still have that "[andar] suyo, breve, enérgico, y quizá hoy conquistado..." (136)? And what of her "...ademanos ondulados y menudos, como de pluma" (135)? Or her "...sonrisa de ayer, seca, intermitente, sin misterio, quizá, agrandada, expresiva y honda, clavada siempre en el rostro..." (136)? The station in which he finally disembarks also greets him "con un ademán acogedor, gris y eléctrico" (138), but on the letter that awaits him upon arrival he notices, "una escritura angulosa y extraña" that sits in stark contrast to the "letra redonda y muelle, tan familiar de Alicia" (138). In "Mundo cerrado", details abound. Each element of the narration, whether great or small, is depicted with the utmost care, and usually a lot of words and punctuation. Details consequently also matter. Their intricacy ensnares, directing attention outward to the surface where those words themselves rest. They are as a result closely observed, as the reader must pause regularly, whether to digest complex syntax, ponder a new term, review an unexpected metaphor, or marvel at a particularly striking image. The act of reading is irregular, and so repeats itself. It is only on second, third, or even fourth go-round that one comprehends with any fluidity. In this way, words are more clearly seen *as* words—because they must first be acknowledged as such. They must be looked at and studied thoroughly before any sense of conventional meaning emerges. They therefore stand up as art objects in their own right. They exist independently of any story that lies behind them—as text, object, and sensation.

That no strong narrative arc buttresses the many words of this *novela poética* only serves to strengthen their substantial status. Here, any semblance of plot must be painstakingly extracted from myriad layers of rich and opaque text. And one does not unearth much. There is, in fact, virtually no plot at all, as the majority of “Mundo cerrado” occurs before a traditional narrative would even begin. Here, the journey, or rather, the *description* of that journey, is the story. After his extended reading of the surrounding countryside, we learn that Andrés is en route to visit an old friend. The newly married Lady Gurney has invited him to spend time in her city, and so he adds her to his notebook and sets out for a new place, *Icosia*. Along the way, *Icosia* literally takes shape, finally emerging as a ripe fruit ready to be experienced. It is, however, not to be. When Andrés arrives, scanning the crowd for his hosts, he is met instead with the previously mentioned letter in an unfamiliar hand. As a driver speeds him through an unseen “avenida corta y voluptuosa, toda florida de acacias, como esa airada con que una mujer o una ciudad nos invita a seguirla, a ir más allá” (138-9), he opens it to learn that “Alicia ha muerto anteayer. Le espero aquí, en el campo...” (139). The story then concludes with a final objectification on the part of the protagonist—a rejection of that now rotten fruit:

Icosia, al primer contacto con los labios, apenas mordida le daba el sabor más amargo de todos, sabor a tierra mortal. Se la arrancó de la boca, la tiró por la ventanilla al valle verde, donde se quedó toda brillante, como una fruta pútrida y engañosa. Porque el automóvil, sin penetrar en la ciudad, habiéndola también mordisqueado apenas, corría ya hacia el campo, volviendo la espalda a los adioses inclinados de los cipreses del cementerio, en la colina (139).

Playing with the grammatical uncertainty produced by shared gender of “carta” and “ciudad”, Andrés removes from his mouth and tosses an unidentifiable “la” out of the moving car window. Simultaneously the letter and the city-turned-spoiled fruit, its bitterness shocks his senses into a visceral reckoning with mortality.

It is thus a moment apt for “[dissolving] considerations of content into those on form” (Sontag 12), as it is precisely through the story’s form that the reader comprehends its protagonist. Andrés experiences the destinations he records as both books to be read and a bounty to be smelled, tasted, and felt. Likewise, the reader has a supremely sensory encounter with a narrative whose words stand up as things. Just as Andrés processes the very idea of death with his taste buds, so the reader assimilates the notion of world as text (or text as world) through the perception of words as sight, sound, and touch. Because they are not easily read as a translatable medium, they must be seen as an autonomous artistic artifact worthy of appreciation in its own right. They become a series of objects that unite as one to offer otherwise unattainable sensorial abundance. In this way, “Mundo cerrado” is an invitation to not only understand Andrés, but to become him. By “reading” (and writing) his surroundings, he integrates them in a manner akin to Sontag. He sees. He hears. He reflects. In other words, he engages with his world erotically. Even his thoughts are dimensional. While toying with the idea that he does not *know* Lady Gurney because she is no longer Alice Chesterfield, “la acariciaba sin miedo, como un revólver descargado y de lujo, que no puede hacer daño” (136). As a gun, he holds “esta realidad” (136) in his hands and without fear feels its weight and power. Later, contemplating that same contradiction, “la hacía volar al modo de un humo de cigarrillo impulsado por su aliento en la atmósfera tibia y recatada del vagón, siguiéndola voluptuosamente, invisible, con la vista” (136). While certainly of a distinct material consistency, curling smoke is also physical,

engaging the senses on multiple levels. It too can be glimpsed, felt, and smelled. It can fill a train car, soothe an anxious mind, and irritate a sensitive nose. In “Mundo cerrado”, even the abstract is objectified (and eroticized) in such a way that accentuates the language that describes it as thing. It is this thing, with its unique sensorial properties, that opens the door to enrichment.

What then to make of the fact that *Icosia* ultimately remains undiscovered? How to grasp that, despite his best efforts, our enlightened explorer in the end fails, his journey bearing nothing but the literal decay and bitterness of rotten fruit? To do so, one must look more closely at the source of the disappointment—death. Perhaps the putrid crop is a physical manifestation of the young Lady Gurney’s premature fate. It could likewise be read symbolically, as the confirmation of those fears embodied in the unloaded pistol and the winding fumes. Andrés was right; he does not know Lady Gurney. The demise of what once was—a maiden, a friendship, a flirtation—is thus repeated, and so substantiated, in the demise of her replacement. In either case, it is death that thwarts Andrés’s earthly desires to see, touch, and connect. He will never know *Icosia*. He will never study its pages, nor notice a remarkable turn of phrase. That book is forever closed. Does this therefore point to a failure of method? Does Andrés have it all wrong? Is a surface reduced to its materiality doomed by the fleeting nature of that material? Not if one remembers its essential purpose. By helping its readers “to *see* more, to *hear* more” (14), it also helps them “to *feel* more” (14). And Andrés certainly *feels*, the intensity of the bitterness a reflection of the depth of his experience rather than the ultimate triumph of death. Andrés flings the rotten fruit because to see, touch, and feel is painful. It is *real*. But it is also in our interest as readers to return to the outside, to examine *how* (and not *why*) the produce is thrown, to perceive similes, struggle with syntax, and lose ourselves in the beauty of the story’s words. After all, if *we* are to feel as profoundly as Andrés, mustn’t we learn to “read” with the same sensual attention to detail? That would not be accomplished by immersing oneself in the romantic woes of the protagonist or by simply explaining his curious habits. We must instead, through interaction with the narrative as a piece of art, experience it for ourselves.

Meaning thus takes on a different character. Born of the surface, it is the outcome of *transparence* rather than translation. It is an encounter between reader and art object; a rare moment of authenticity when one truly sees “the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are” (13). As follows, it defies analysis and explanation. It does not involve simply supplanting the words of the artist with those of the critic. It does not conceal and obscure, but instead illuminates the inherent dimensionality of language. In this way, it is a kind of meaning that cannot be apprehended vicariously. It demands direct contact with its readers. If *I* want to feel, then *I* must be the one to observe and experience. *I* must notice the synesthesia; *I* must hold the strange simile; *I* must feel personally the material richness of words. And “Mundo cerrado” is a means to accomplish this. By navigating its unexpected imagery, the reader learns to see language as substance rather than medium. Repeated negotiations with its structural complexities force words to be reckoned with as words. The story recedes as the text ascends. Form has positioned itself where plot and character development once stood, at art’s center as its central purpose and primary source of significance. Accordingly, meaning is no longer a matter of interpreted content. It is now an event, an experience between book and reader capable of sharpening vision and altering perspectives. In place of an academic investigation of historical contexts, frustrated desires, or surprise endings, it is a flash of genuine engagement. By appreciating a word, a metaphor, and a book for what they are, one can more easily do so with the world around. Imitation of sensation is just that—a replica of what is real

only elsewhere. But an object that simply *is* stimulates *real* sensation independent of itself is something more. It is art.

IV. Conclusion

Let us conclude by returning to the now not-so-formless literary nebulae of Pérez Firmat. Amorphous references certainly abound in the radio waves, aerial perspectives, and half-glimpsed landscapes of *Cazador en el alba* and *Vispera del gozo*. Yet the essential source of their *pneumatic* character is ultimately their extreme generic ambiguity. In the end, they remain undefined not because of their “airy” imagery, but because of their open defiance of institutional narrative norms. After Francisco Ayala and Pedro Salinas destroy the building, they replace it with much more than swirling dust and debris. Like their plot-driven counterparts, the beautiful words of *el Arte Nuevo* are thoughtfully arranged. Unlike those standard models, it is an arrangement in space rather than time. Their words—surprising, lyrical, and complex—stretch out across (and beyond) the pages that display them. Their abundance and detail overwhelm. Many moments are difficult to understand. The strangeness of others disorients. The expected is also absent: action is reduced; characters are flattened; emotional intrigue is thinned. And so the reader must find a new way of making sense. At the height of the historical avant-garde, Ortega y Gasset made the case for such an alternative—a *dehumanized* narrative dedicated to art, not storytelling. Four decades later, Susan Sontag would demand an end to artificial divisions of form and content that weaken art by limiting its transformative powers. Both philosophies call for a reimagining of the nature of language. The new focus is the text itself in its capacity as artistic material. No longer the invisible pane of glass through which the reader gazes, words are now, to use those of Ortega, the “masas de color confusas” that reveal themselves on the other side. *Pneumatic* in their lack of definition, they nonetheless stand out for their *physical* traits, brilliant colors and indistinct contours. That *what* they are is not identifiable only fortifies their status as object. They are not signifiers for flowers, meadows, or streams. They do not reference skyscrapers, electrified advertisements, or piles of modern refuse. They are simply shapes.

And so, what it means to comprehend must also change. Because these *things* are not transparent, they insist on being noticed—not for the intrigue, but for the very forms they trace. Rather than understood, they need only be seen as what they are—art object. Their metaphors are to be appreciated, their winding sentences considered. On an astounding adjective the reader should pause. From this examination emerges a broader and deeper material awareness. Observing a strange simile teaches one to experience their surroundings more fully. The innate sensuality of synesthesia will attune one to that same sensuality in the world around. Being able “see more, to hear more, to feel more” (Sontag 14) in a book means being able to do so in life. In mechanized modern society, art is uniquely “incantatory, magical...” (Sontag 3). Its sensory richness has the rare ability to shake one awake and shift perspectives. Art enriches, even after it has been put down. It is, after all, *Vispera del gozo*. The forward-looking title does not describe what *is*, but what *will be*. So the narrative itself is a prelude; a forward to what comes next. Notably, what follows is pleasure, a state of sensory delight. Pleasure implies indulgence and gratification, in this case just not *yet*.

So it goes for the work’s protagonists who spend their pages awaiting unmet desires. Andrés foresees a visit that will never pass. Claudio’s yearning for old Seville goes unrequited, thwarted by modern technology. The final “chapter” of the Salinas narrative, aptly named “Livia Schubert, incompleta”, announces its hero’s inevitable disappointment in its first line (if not in its

very title), stating, “Está escrita la hora de mi infelicidad” (181). Joy is *possible*, but scarce. And what fills its absence is longing, sadness, and separation. That separation would eventually be the undoing of *el Arte Nuevo*, as dramatic shifts in the Spanish political landscape of the 1930s gave credence to the critics labeling it “un ejercicio superficial, lúdico, elitista y burgués, que no mereció ser considerado más que a la sombra de los brillantes poetas que formaron parte de la Generación del 27” (Vara Ferrero 24). The dawn of the Second Spanish Republic in the spring of 1931 brought the promise of reform. Later that year, a new constitution was ratified that pledged freedom of speech, legalized divorce, and (in 1933) granted women then right to vote. But despite—and because of—that progress, it was also the start of a tumultuous period rife with social and political divisions that would culminate in the Spanish Civil War. When Socialists won the republic’s first elections, conservatives, buoyed by the Catholic Church, revolted. The public was starkly divided and political allegiances were precarious. Strikes and uprisings, like that of the miners of Asturias²⁸, led to violent confrontations between citizens and the military. It is thus not surprising that in this incendiary climate, there was little room for *art for art’s sake*. When fighting for their lives, literature so focused on itself seemed frivolous and self-indulgent.

So it went with these experimental *novelas líricas*. *Vispera del gozo* brims with ominous endings. Even Ayala’s celebratory works contain the seeds of the short-lived genre’s impending demise. Antonio eventually thrives in the new Madrid, but *Cazador* nonetheless concludes forebodingly. While dozing on Aurora’s lap, he awakens with a start: “Había sufrido un repeluzno semejante al de las cuatro treinta de la madrugada. Había sentido en las sienes los dedos fríos de esa hora a que los cazadores suelen apostarse en el alba” (49). A year later, “Erika ante el invierno” paints a much chillier image of life in the metropolis²⁹. Erika is “una hermosa y deliciosa muchacha. Que sonreía” (50) in spite of the difficulties of growing up. Compared with a childhood spent on her bicycle, life is now “[más] veloz y menos lírico” (51). She has left behind the wonder of “sensaciones vegetales, horas luminosas, humedad de tierra y raíces” (52), only to discover a dreary adult world in which “[cada] día era igual a los precedentes. Y ella, al salir del trabajo, era también igual a todas las muchachas que salen del trabajo a las seis de la tarde” (51). As Erika goes to and from her family’s store, which conspicuously sells *dry* goods, she wearily observes her surroundings:

Dos veces al día viajaba Erika en el autobús o en el metro; dos veces diarias compartía durante media hora la suerte de unas decenas de personas extrañas. Fisonomías nuevas e iguales siempre, siempre repetidas, que permitían catalogar a la humanidad (los judíos, agrupados aparte) con relación a cuatro o cinco—o tal vez unos pocos más—tipos-patronos... Ella misma se sabía perteneciente al modelo: *ojos azules, corpulencia, tez tierna y pelo casi albino...*” (52).

²⁸ On October 6, 1934 miners in Asturias rebelled after a failed general strike to protest the new government of leftist Alejandro Lerroux and the right-wing *CEDA*. Attacking local *guardias civiles*, they took control of Oviedo, the provincial capital, and attempted to establish an alternate government. The miners received support from the country’s communist and socialist factions. The future dictator Francisco Franco was brought in to subdue the uprising, which he did with extreme bloodshed. Over 3,000 miners were killed and 30,000 more were imprisoned.

²⁹ Despite the stark difference in tone, “Erika ante el invierno” was published just one year after *Cazador en el alba* in the October 1930 edition of Ortega y Gasset’s *Revista de Occidente*.

Referencing the isolation of the Jewish population as well as Erika's perfectly Aryan traits, Ayala clearly breaks with the avant-garde imperative to separate art from life. It is an uncommon acknowledgment of the period's political volatility, and an eerie prefiguration of the brutality to come, both in Germany and in the Spain of a young (and soon exiled) Francisco Ayala. Beyond that, however, the picture is still bleak. In this "tenue película gris" (53), each day is like the next. Everyone looks and acts alike. Life is utterly routine, even robotized.

The words with which Ayala captures Erika's tedious reality share much stylistically with earlier examples of *el Arte Nuevo*. A young man's introduction on the metro is "como el anzuelo en el agua" (54). Erika studies people "como si hojease un gran libro" (56). Rich language still abounds, but what it creates has changed. The world is now heavy and colorless; technology is not a source of hope, but despair. The element of surprise remains, but it generates shock, not wonder—without explanation the reader is in the country. A little boy³⁰ hikes along a frozen canal with "regularidad mecánica" (56) and an icy "sonrisa artificial" (56). His body hidden beneath thick winter clothes, "sólo los ojos vivían; unos ojos chicos, duros, negros y brillantes como botones" (56). The landscape is equally lifeless. Boats frozen in place are a "triste rebaño acuático" submerged in the "carne muerta" of the waterway. Trees are skeletal. The sky is a "lana sucia" (57). Another leap and the reader is in the shop of a butcher, who sits "solo, como la baraja en la mesa, y pensativo, como los garfios sin carne" (57). The carcass-filled space he occupies is frightening and surreal, literally dripping with violence. Even his own knife,

dueño de la luna de enero, hubiera deseado cortar sus dedos redondos, rojos, iguales, en rodajas sobre el tablero. La boca se le había quedado abierta y los ojos se le habían quedado azules. ¡Qué dulce la muda queja del venado! ¡Qué idílico el lamento imposible de la ternera. Gruesas lágrimas de sangre enfriaban el frío mármol, escurriendo sobre él, sin morder, su blancura de cisne (58).

When Friaul (again) unexpectedly appears in the doorway, spooky "...reses, desnudas, le miraban con miradas densas, interminables, de hospital, implorantes sus manos trucas bajo la vigilancia de un hacha, de roja savia mordida" (58). Instead of the saintly head of beautiful lover, dismemberment takes the shape of slaughtered animals in this dark tale. The body returns, but it has been reduced to flesh incapable of communicating anything but pain.

The description of the butcher shop is menacing and strange, a peculiarity that both conceals *and* contributes to the scene's palpable horror. When little Friaul is slain in the next paragraph, nothing is said directly. It must instead be pieced together from unnervingly eloquent imagery: a "sonrisa malvada"; a young face that flutters "como un pájaro capturado"; a floor suddenly full of "rosas carmín" (58). The world is no longer new; it is dangerous and deadly. Erika reads of Friaul's death in the newspaper and is stung by the lack of detail, unaware that she soon awaits a similar fate. On a trip to the snow with three childhood friends—a supposed brief moment of joy—, there is a final cruel twist. Under a sky "desconchado, sucio de algodones y bilis" (63), Erika leads a parade of young skiers. The desolate setting "resplandecía fúnebre" (63), a menacing foreshadowing of the impending accident. And again, without warning: "El

³⁰ Inexplicably, Erika's tale is interrupted after two brief "chapters" with a story about Friaul that (almost) stands alone. The reader knows nothing of the boy or his circumstances because no context is given. At its end, the reader returns to Erika in her apartment.

cuerpo de Erika se dobló, viró con el ímpetu y la ceguera de su pecho abierto. Hubo un ruido agrio, de tablas rotas. Una piña, un corazón seco, había rodado sobre la nieve” (63).

Throughout “Erika ante el invierno”, a phrase repeats: “Nunca se sabe nada, nunca”. Both a statement of fact and a lamentation, it punctuates the shocking accounts of death, creating a propulsatory rhythm. Within the story, it references any number of details –the homogenized city dwellers, the ambiguous train passenger, the nebulous winter months, the paltry obituary, and even the unexpected ending. On its outside, it serves as a note of caution. The future is uncertain. The spaces we occupy are undefined. The people we meet are unknowable. The message is stark and sits in uncomfortable contrast with the beauty of the language itself. How to square the senseless murder of a boy with a bouquet of “rosas carmín”? How to enjoy the image of people crowded around Erika as “[jazmines] rotos, fríos soles sin sol” (64)? To do so is to recognize the inherent value of words, apart from whatever ugliness they convey. It means truly seeing them, not as mere signifiers, but as objects in their own right.

In this way, the words themselves reveal a path forward, a mode of overcoming the stifling, and often violent, sameness of modern life. Like Erika, one wakes up, gets on a train, labors, and returns home, only to repeat the cycle the following day. Narrative, particularly that of the avant-garde, thus offers an outlet. It is an escape from this routine, but not in the way that Ortega’s masses might think –not because it imagines distant places or captivates with familial intrigue, but because it enlivens the senses. In foregrounding their inorganic nature, *Cazador en el alba* and *Vispera del gozo* force the reader to observe the language from which they are constructed. It is conspicuous in its complexity, and so is recognized as material rather than medium. But what begins as an obstacle, a physical impediment to recognizing content, eventually softens into an equally substantial, but more indefinite presence. And so the nebulae of Pérez Firmat return, now paradoxically to describe the *effect* of the avant-garde’s tangible language. Like the bright lights of *Cazador*, the fast pace of “Entrada en Sevilla”, or the gray haze of “Erika”, it obscures and encompasses. Form is *what* the reader first sees and so impacts *how*. Words engage sensorially. The reader does too. Life imitates art, and so (ideally) art is absorbed more fully into the *praxis of life*.

That this technique fell out of favor with the upheavals of war and the deprivations of dictatorship does not indicate its total destruction. In the decade that Susan Sontag pens “Against Interpretation”, an ocean apart Juan Benet publishes *Volverás a Región*, a maddening linguistic thicket whose complexities far outdo even *Vispera del gozo*’s longest passage –this time to reflect upon the intense suffering of life in post-war Spain.

Chapter Two:
Impenetrable Abundance:
The Linguistic Density of Juan Benet's *Volverás a Región*

That the onset of the Spanish Civil War was an intractable blow to the nation's literature is surely no surprise. Destruction of the physical landscape as well as the political, economic, and social fabrics inevitably led to a corresponding cultural unraveling, with energies formerly dedicated to the creation and consumption of art now focused on survival. The oppressive nature of the dictatorship that followed only exacerbated these dire artistic straits, as Spain saw many of its creators flee in search of safer waters. Pedro Salinas left for Wellesley College in August of 1936, only a month after the July 18 military coup. Throughout the conflict, Francisco Ayala worked for the Republican government's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He also saw his father and brother jailed and killed by Nationalist forces. So when Francisco Franco took power in 1939, Ayala absconded to Buenos Aires, eventually moving to Puerto Rico and the United States mainland in the 1950s. He did not return to Spain to live permanently until 1978. Other notable literary exiles include Rafael Alberti, Luis Cernuda, and Jorge Guillén.

Predictably, the fiction that did appear after the brutal rise of the totalitarianism sits in stark contrast to that of the youthful, modern, and celebratory historical Avant-garde, with much of what outlasted censorship taking a more traditional (and pro-dictatorship) tack. Today, critics commonly regard Camilo José Cela's 1942 *La familia de Pascual Duarte* as the first post-war masterpiece. Offering a shocking first-person account of the violent and sordid life of its namesake, Cela's inaugural novel launched the era of *tremendismo*, a literary movement of the 1940s characterized by its abrasive language and unvarnished portraits of life in the early years of the Franco regime. The *tremendista* narrative presents a dark world on the verge of caricature in which cruelty, poverty, and despair predominate. Three years later, a young Carmen Laforet's *Nada* would also take up a prominent position in the literature of post-war Spain. Recounting a girl's return to her (now) penniless (and violent) middle-class family in Barcelona with evocative description, *Nada* is similarly dark—and experimental—, exemplifying Spanish *existencialismo*. What ensues in the 1950s—a neo-realism committed to a photographically faithful representation of contemporary Spanish life—is formally less distorted, but owing to its subject matter, still quite harsh. It is, after all, a literature dedicated to effecting social change through the “invisible” lens of an “objective” narrator who “accurately” conveys the everyday struggles of an individual and his or her community. Subjectivity, individual opinion, and personalized perspectives are out. Truth, clarity, and real life prevail in works like Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio's *El Jarama* (1954), which recounts a single day in the life of (at least initially) carefree young people unaware of the violent history and social strife that surround them. It is a third-person account in which dialogue and narrative action abound at the expense of the development of the inner life of its characters. A textual experience that ultimately strives to represent honestly in order to inform, it transforms its reader into a witness of the struggling post-war Spanish society from which it emerges.

Stylistically and philosophically, neo-realism reigned until the 1962 publication of *Tiempo de silencio* by Luis Martín-Santos. Although thematically in keeping with the *Generación de medio siglo*—presenting the impoverished brutality of life in modern Madrid—, it does so with a language whose poetic intricacy defies any notion of transparent objectivity. Social critique abounds, but so do interior monologues and narrator musings rich in description

and rhetorical flourish. An aesthetic turning point, the experimental novel helped pave the way for the literary *contraola* of the 1960s, as many of Spain's preeminent authors would soon follow suit, producing works of greater structural and linguistic complexity that again place a highly visible, even tactile, language at narrative's center. Four years later, Juan Goytisolo's *Señas de identidad* appeared. A fragmented, disordered, and highly personal tale of an exile's quest for belonging, it defied his previously declared commitment to social realism³¹ and placed Goytisolo at the forefront of a newly avant-garde moment in Spanish narrative. And in 1967, a relatively unknown Juan Benet—up until this point he had self-published just one collection of short stories, *Nunca llegarás a nada* (1961)—finally found an editor willing to take a chance on what would become a defining novel of the decade.

Recounting the enduring impact of the Spanish Civil War on the fabled northwest territory of *Región*, Benet's *Volverás a Región* is a textual and temporal labyrinth whose mind-bendingly dense prose thwarts understanding at every turn. An exceedingly original literary web, *Volverás a Región* rejects standard linear and action-driven plot development in favor of complexity and ambiguity. Its puzzling multi-voiced storyline emerges only hazily and in disorganized pieces, clouded by the individual impressions of an extended dialogue-turned-monologue that simultaneously bombards the reader with detail while leaving out elements essential for understanding. But the disjointed and incomplete nature of the tale is not just the result of this radical subjectivity. Its very form also obscures, with seemingly endless description and erudite vocabulary permeating a wholly nonsequential narrative structure. Hyphens, commas, and parentheses abound. Periods and paragraphs are scarce. To read *Volverás a Región* is to confront a language transformed almost beyond intelligibility, one whose impact lies precisely in the confusion it sews and the linguistic plasticity that confusion produces. Like its predecessors in the historical avant-garde, Benet's trailblazing novel foregrounds words as *words* by obscuring their referential function. In this way, they too are transformed into a material whose aesthetic impact far transcends the literal or figurative meaning of a particular term, sentence, or passage. After a period of renewed belief in literature's capacity to represent a lucent and impartial reality, the pendulum has swung back, returning to language the status of art object. Rather than mere medium for story (and truth) telling, it is again recognized as an inherently worthy artistic material. As such, language reemerges as the novel's rightful protagonist.

It is then not coincidental that *Volverás a Región*, along with *Tiempo de silencio* and *Señas de identidad*, form the heart of what would be christened the *nueva novela*³², opening an extended period of renewed formal upheaval. Some critics direct their gaze inward to explain this stylistic shift, attributing it to a growing disillusionment with neo-realism and its ability to truly represent and impact the difficult realities of life under Franco³³. Others seek its origin

³¹ After a succession of realist novels, in 1959 Goytisolo published a book of essays, *Problemas de la novela*, in which he makes the case for realism and its revolutionary capacity. By the mid-sixties, however, he had gone in a different direction. As Gonzalo Sobejano signals in an essay comparing Goytisolo with Benet and Martín-Santos: "La interpretación de lo que la novela es o debe ser cambia a partir de *Señas de identidad* (1966), la primera de Goytisolo que se ve en su hacerse y que carga el acento sobre el discurso más que sobre la historia" (13).

³² Other examples of this (re)emergent avant-garde include *Parábola del naufrago* by Miguel Delibes and Camilo José Cela's *San Camilo*, 1936, both published two years after *Volverás* in 1969.

³³ José Ortega offers such a perspective in a chapter on *Volverás* in *Ensayos de la novela española moderna*. From his view, it involves not only conscious rupture with literary tradition, but also a shift inward on the part of the author after recognizing social realism's inability to effect true change. Tracing recent Spanish literary history,

beyond national borders, as the loosening of censorship laws³⁴ resulted in increased contact with modernist forbears like Faulkner and Joyce, the contemporary linguistic experimentation of the *nouveau roman*³⁵, and the fantastic realities of the Latin American Boom.³⁶ Audacious publishing house *Seix Barral* (whose subsidiary *Ediciones Destinos* would also release *Volverás*) brought the innovative works of authors like Mario Vargas Llosa, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and Gabriel García Márquez to an opening Spain³⁷ at a parallel moment of literary restlessness. *Volverás a Región* is thus part of a broader experimental impulse, one visible across the Western and Spanish-speaking worlds. Yet even from within this framework of a pervasively resurgent avant-gardism, *Volverás a Región* stands out as uniquely opaque. Its tortuously windy prose and frustratingly indecipherable plot continually and forcefully rebuff. If the readers of *Cazador en el alba* experience language as simply language because it overflows with sensation and beauty, those that venture into Benet's gnarled and dangerous *hinterlands* will confront text as thing

Ortega explains how “[el] realismo crítico-social de los componentes de la ‘Generación de Medio Siglo’...pierde vigencia en la primera parte de la década de los sesenta por la imposibilidad del esperado cambio en las estructuras socio-económicas españolas. Esta nueva toma de conciencia proyecta al escritor de la ‘Generación de 1950’...a la exploración de orbes intersubjetivos mediante la impugnación y superación del pasado instrumental literario. De un naturalismo, basado en las motivaciones y acciones del hombre externo, se pasa a la existencia psíquica, al hombre interno. La actitud de estos escritores obedece, pues, a los condicionamientos históricos del país que provocaron...el abandono de una literatura de denuncia, ‘antiestética’, a favor de una narrativa basada en la búsqueda del sentido de la personalidad humana, ahondando en el fondo del caos donde subjetividad y objetividad han desaparecido” (138).

³⁴ David Herzberger also reflects on the shift away from neo-realism in *The Novelistic World of Juan Benet*. He specifically mentions that “the gradual reduction of strict censorship laws enabled both Hispanic and non-Hispanic works to be published in Spain for the first time...” (14). He also places these changes in censorship laws within a broader context of increased connection with the world beyond Spain's borders: “The massive tourist industry in Spain bolstered the economy, and industrialized growth increased substantially. The emigration and subsequent return of hundreds of thousands of Spanish workers also influenced the changing attitudes and social conditions in Spain. Returning immigrants brought with them new life styles and growing demands for changes within their own culture” (13-14).

³⁵ Scholars have long noted (and debated) the parallels between the Spanish *nueva novela* and the French *nouveau roman*. In his 1971 *La novela española actual*, Jose Corrales Egea describes the many “contravalores” of the latest *contraola* (including the “rehabilitación del arte por el arte” (202)) that are shared with the *nouveau roman*. Five years later, Herzberger generates a similar list: “the rejection of traditional psychological elements; a disregard for chronology of events; prominence given to objects and space; an unorthodox treatment of dialogue; the substitution of pattern for plot; an intense concern for literary craftsmanship” (18). He also cites an explanation of the *nouveau roman* by M. García-Viñó that boils down to a desire to “reinventar la novela” (19) before declaring: “Clearly, the novels of Juan Benet, and the recent works of Cela, Delibes, Goytisolo, and others coincide with this definition” (19).

³⁶ Herzberger observes that preeminent Latin American writers like “Mario Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes, and Guillermo Cabrera Infante all won important literary prizes in Spain during the 1960's” (17). He also says that *Volverás a Región* employs *realismo mágico*, which—like Benet—intends to “capture the mysterious elements which lie beneath surface reality” (48). Two of his techniques for accomplishing this, “the juxtaposition of “real” and “unreal” elements” and “the use of specific symbolic objects which recur in the narrative” both “clearly pertain to the world of magical realism” (48).

³⁷ A 2015 *New Yorker* portrait of Seix Barral powerhouse literary agent Carmen Balcells notes the connection between Spain's literary and economic *aperturas* in the 1960s. Publishing was a profitable enterprise, one in which Carlos Barral saw an opportunities, both cultural and financial. He even went so far as to dazzle Spanish authorities with a “series of prizes for edgier contemporary works that otherwise might have piqued the regime's censors”. In order to pave the way for their official acceptance, promising Latin American novelists were often among the winners—Mario Vargas Llosa's *La ciudad y los perros* won the 1962 *Biblioteca Breve* award before being printed by *Seix Barral* the following year.

because of its utter impenetrability. While the words that capture Antonio's love affair blossom, inviting sustained admiration, those that recount the painful stagnation of war-torn Región repel. They too become objects, if only through a seemingly opposing process defined by the gulf of bewilderment that persists between reader and text.

And so, as a sort-of literary matter of survival, one must retreat and observe *Volverás a Región* from a distance. Trying to master a given page, or even a given sentence, word-by-word inevitably results in disappointment, significance slipping away like grains of sand through the cracks of a clenched fist. The work's complexity instead forces the reader to hold it more loosely, accepting the many gray areas that unavoidably preclude a sense of mastery, of being able to achieve an understanding of the novel that is both comprehensive and absolute. Accordingly, *Volverás a Región* is a narrative whose ultimate import is bound up with the reading experience it offers. Like its avant-garde ancestors, it is not simply a windowpane that makes clearly visible a story with a message to be interpreted. As Susan Sontag would undoubtedly underscore (and praise), *what* its multiple narrators recount of their lonely and languishing lives cannot be separated from *how* they do so. There is therefore no true division between content and form, no point in separating a particularly dramatic moment or evocative image from the language that describes them in order to infer. Those (false) acts of translation only serve to distract from and undermine art's uniquely revelatory role in a sensorially deadened modern world. And while this should be true for *all* novels (and poems and paintings), the impossibly complicated language of *Volverás a Región* especially enlivens this holistic vision of art as an object designed to be encountered, and *felt*, with the senses. After all, what else can one do with a work that so forcefully rejects clarity? How does one decipher the deeper meaning of a plot so hidden that it reveals itself only upon close and repeated examination? Or describe the motivations of an indistinct protagonist immersed in contradiction? *Volverás a Región* defies not only literary precedent and readerly expectations, but also explanation, relishing itself as mystery and so compelling those that dare enter to reimagine the nature and purpose of literature—and significance—more generally.

That it is, however opaque, a Civil War novel only accentuates the weight of this reimagining. We are no longer in the (vanguard) realm of art for art's sake; the mutilation of content is not a beautifully empty act of youthful rebellion. To the contrary, it is a search *for* meaning, an endeavor to identify a *new* kind of understanding that transcends the pain of Spain's recent memory. The nonsensical violence of fratricide (and dictatorship) did not just do away with families, towns, and dreams. In Región, it also obliterated reason, in this strange way necessitating *and* offering alternate avenues of making sense. There is no narrative logic or sequence that can truly capture the prolonged suffering of the Spanish Civil War, and so Benet gives us something else entirely—an impenetrable linguistic *hinterland* whose capacity to obscure also allows us to *feel*.

I. *Volverás a Región*, Textual Tangle

With a brief, but knotty introduction to its remorseless terrain and solitary inhabitants, *Volverás a Región* disorients from the start, its countless clauses and ample adjectives refusing access to even the most intrepid literary pioneer. It is as if, like Numa—the territory's mythical and ever-vigilant guardian—the novel's very language works with its natural surroundings to expel outsiders and annihilate any hope of transcendence. As evidenced by the opening observation that any traveler attempting to reach its peaks, “se ve obligado a atravesar un

pequeño y elevado desierto que parece interminable” (7), it is a land (and a text) rife with contradiction and uncertainty. What follows is an overwhelming sensation of perplexing impossibility: “la lejana gloria del Monje, esa cima con forma de mascarilla que de tanto en tanto envía su soplo desdeñoso y esterilizador” (10) seems to recede as one approaches; its windswept slopes and their “vegetación...rala y raquíca” (8) are dangerously dry, “—excepto los días torrenciales que pasa una tumultuosa, ensordecedora y roja riada...” (8); the surrounding valleys, simultaneously “pantanosos y yermos” (8), are crisscrossed with rivers and tributaries that make them all but inaccessible. And when one finally reaches the elusive mountain meadow, thick with “espaciadas y delicadas de color, esas flores de montaña de complicada estructura, cálchicos y miosotis, cantuesos, azaleas de altura y espadañas diminutas...” (9), the joy does not last long, as shortly thereafter, “un desordenado e inesperado seto de salgueros y mirtos parece poner fin al viaje con un tronco atravesado a modo de barrera y un anacrónico y casi indescifrable letrero, sujeto a un palo torcido: Se prohíbe el paso. Propiedad privada” (9). Even the wildlife, “...pequeños reptiles, esa raza extraña...de hermosos, negros, hambrientos y silencios pájaros...y una multitud de insectos tan abigarrados de corazas y erizados de armas que siempre parecen dirigirse a Tierra Santa” (10), disconcert and repulse, denying any hope of sustenance or survival.

Just as the countryside, at once forebodingly dense and perilously sparse, prevents progress at every turn, so too do the abundant, ambiguous, and confusing details that depict it. In Región, the inevitably entangled explorer—whether of land or story—quickly loses his or her way. And as we soon learn, the results of such disorientation in this unforgiving terrain are deadly. For although the decaying notice prohibiting passage may appear outdated and inconsequential, “la realidad debe ser algo distinta porque aun cuando a la gente le consta que un cierto número de personas ha tratado de subir allí, no se sabe de nadie que haya vuelto...” (10). It is thus with this ominous observation that the first resident of Región—“un anciano guarda, astuto y cruel” (11)—is indirectly introduced. The next page reveals that his name is Numa, and if the geography “salvaje y desierto” (10) does not put an end to you, he will. “Cubierto de lanas crudas como un pastor tártaro y calzado con abarcas de cuero” (11), Numa is both ever-present and invisible. No one has actually seen him, nor is he discussed aloud, yet his existence and his purpose go unquestioned on account of the gunshots that periodically reverberate through the nearby forests of Mantua. “[Recorriendo] día y noche con los ojos cerrados” (11) and “disparando con infalible puntería cada vez que unos pasos en la hojarasca o los suspiros de un alma cansada, turben la tranquilidad del lugar” (12), Numa relentlessly purges the woodlands bordering Región of unsuspecting outsiders, be they curious scientist, adventurous hunter, or reckless adolescent.

So it goes that when the few town dwellers, “[medio] centenar de personas, todo lo más...” (12), spy the rare, but telltale sign of a car en route to the wilderness, a macabre ritual ensues. It too remains unspoken, but “el presentimiento se extiende—ese estado polar del aire y ese súbito aroma a pólvora virgen, salitre y algas marinas, esa repentina vitrificación del silencio en una mañana de otoño preparada a recibir el viajero, empavesada de augurios y muecas y susurros funerales—...” (13). And when it does, the elderly residents gather silently and without acknowledgement in the bell tower of an abandoned church. There, they wait through the night until “el sonido del disparo llega envuelto, entre oleadas de menta y verbena, en la incertidumbre de un hecho que, por necesario e indemostrable, nunca puede ser evidente” (14). After the echoes have faded and the bystanders returned to their secluded and crumbling homes, the only (paradoxical) proof of Numa that remains is “el silencio continental de la sierra, testimonio del

disparo que lo desgarró, y las huellas de unas cubiertas gastadas...que se pierden bajo un bosque de helechos gigantes y bromelias de color de sangre” (15). Tellingly, all that endures of this sporadic and strange sacrament are absence and acquiescence. There are no bodies, no abandoned automobiles, and no encounters with their ruthless protector. There are no attempts to prevent the fatalities nor are there reactions, whether in celebration or lament. This exercise in radical passivity, positioned as it is in the earliest pages of *Volverás a Región*, thus reveals much about the character of the “comarca abandonada y arruinada” (11) as well as the novel more broadly. Defined by isolation, impotence, and disillusionment and ruled by vagueness and myth, Región is a place in which nothing quite makes sense—not the inconsistent topography, the ghostly inhabitants, nor the convoluted descriptions that capture it.

The second figure to come into focus after the account of this deadly custom only augments one’s disorientation, as a vehicle approaching in the present-day of the novel—an unspecified year of the 1960s—without warning triggers a flashback in the life of an observer who goes not only unnamed, but also unnoted by the (at this point, third-person) narrator. Suddenly, the reader finds him or herself in a past identified only as “[un] día del antiguo verano” (15), which one eventually understands is during the Spanish Civil War, in a residential garden with a lone “él...en compañía de unas bolas de barro y unas chapas de botella de cerveza con combate entre un yo incierto, torpe y tímido y un adversario desdoblado, idealizado y magnificado...” (16). A woman appears, “vestida con un traje de calle, ofreciendo en la mano su merienda” (16) and whispering warm promises of a swift return. Thus emerges the first image of a solitary, fearful, and bewildered boy who will spend the novel—and his life—eagerly awaiting the homecoming of his vanished mother. The pages immediately following their farewell are dedicated to the child’s confused and limited experience of the conflict, with loneliness—the term “soledad” appears again and again—as the central theme. In addition to those spent in the “solitario combate” (17) of a ball game, the narrator describes endless hours of confinement with Adela, an ancient caretaker always alert to the sounds of the street. Woven in with the direct observations of wartime life are deeper and more nuanced reflections on the boy’s incomplete perceptions and their ultimate impact on his development:

Pero hay horas sin duda en que la soledad lo es todo porque la memoria, alejada del juego, no sabe traer sino las imágenes del hastío y los signos de aquella condición: los débiles reflejos de la calle en los cristales húmedos, los pasos bajo la lluvia, los coches que pasan sin detenerse y el sonido del agua que cae en la pila mientras Adela cose; sin saberlo empieza a uncir con odio todos los síntomas de aquella condición: la cama, la estampa piadosa que refleja luz de debajo de la puerta y el ruido del agua, los suspiros de la vieja Adela y el plato de arroz cocido, sin apenas sal, que parecía surgir en el centro de la mesa de color hueso, fregada con asperón, con la luz propia de su oculto poder, y todo el orden fantasmal de la casa medio vacía que—como el templo abandonado, saqueado y sumido en las sombras y reducido al laconismo de sus piedras y sus enigmáticas inscripciones—parecía imponer con mayor severidad su propia disciplina y su propio ceremonial que en los días de sus fastos (17-18).

For a child separated from his mother in far-off Región, these years of battle are experienced not as fear, but as an uncomprehending emptiness, a desolation that is as equally devastating as any physical violence because it too takes lives. Rather than a complete annihilation, it slowly destroys any possibility of vitality and growth, leaving only the

“crecimiento deforme” of an “alma atónita” (18) in its wake. And what persists in the (forever uncomprehending) mind of this uniquely dazed soul are paradoxically the *things* that make up that void—the falling water, the passing cars, the tasteless rice, and the hopeless sighs of his only elderly companion. In this way, Región is a land subsumed in perennial contradiction: utterly vacant, it nonetheless brims with the many sensations that curiously create such vacancy. Even the nature of those sights, sounds, and objects—themselves often pallid or intangible—seems to intensify this strangely contradictory condition by accentuating the continued hollowness of its spaces and inhabitants. The rain-muffled footsteps, feeble window reflections, and bone-colored table are thus much more than perplexed childhood memories of a war long past. In their manner of recollection, often in the present tense and always without sufficient context, they are conjurers of sorts. They not only keep the past alive for those that (in the physical sense, at least) survived it, they also reconstruct its stupefying isolation for the uninitiated. One does not just read *about* “el hedor polvoriento de la guerra, el aroma acerbo de las viejas tapicerías, las habitaciones deshabitadas y los pasillos en penumbra” (19), one experiences them as the boy did, and as we soon learn, decades later still does—in the unsettled and unsure state of one whose “primeras y últimas energías...no vacilaron en sacrificar su razón para mantener la integridad de una persona balbuceante, desorientada y abandonada” (19).

That the war’s end brings no resolution to the child’s wait further heightens the parallel confusion of the reader. In place of “los pasos de su madre” (19), he is greeted at its conclusion with an anonymous and panting figure, “cubierto de polvo, vestido con una cazadora de cuero oscuro y una gorra de chófer” (24). The boy watches as the unidentified visitor silently burns “un montón de cartas y papeles arrugados y mugrientos” (24) before menacingly unloading his gun and taking refuge in the basement. Again, there is no explanation for the mysterious arrival. Is the man Adela’s long-anticipated son, returned from a Republican mountain hideaway? Is he the missing brother of whom his mother went in search? The narrator reveals nothing, instead focusing his attention, “[los] ojos del niño, aumentados por los cristales de las gafas...encerrados tras el cristal y deformados por el aumento” (24). Inexpressive and melancholy, they are likened to a fish that, unaware of its captivity and therefore unable to hope for anything more, “sólo sabe mirar con esa muda, profunda e impenetrable seriedad en el fondo de la cual un brillo apasionado, pugnando por atravesar mil tardes de abandono, se traduce en la superficie en una expresión de asombro” (25). It is (again, paradoxically) only in the depths of his blank stare where one can,

...[medir] la soledad que sólo el niño—no interesado en dar un nombre a cada cosa e incapaz de expresar con el gesto el estado de ánimo—puede medir; allí está la respuesta no a la ausencia aceptada dos años atrás ni a la nueva moratoria; ni siquiera a la orfandad impuesta por el destino con la misma falta de explicaciones y escrúpulos con que la naturaleza le impuso la miopía y las dificultades para el habla, sino a la recusación del anhelo de libertad y al deseo de olvidar ese anhelo a fin de, en la reclusión o en el abandono, edificar sus propias leyes y su código propio y su propia razón de ser aunque sólo sirvieran para hacer correr unas bolas por un pasillo en penumbra (25).

His physical and mental handicaps—elements which certainly contribute to his (and our) lack of understanding—are registered along with the trials of war, but once more there is no clarification, no threads with which to weave the straightforward story of a life. Instead, we are offered snippets hidden amongst lengthy and poetic ruminations rich in rhetorical device, which

in another contradictory twist, sit in stark contrast to the simplicity of a boy whose comprehension of war can be reduced to “el intervalo de alboroto provocado en las habitaciones traseras por las personas de edad para mudar su traje de niño por las ropas de un hombre” (26). So it goes that the thematic and linguistic complexities of these musings ultimately add another layer of obfuscation between reader and text. They are not the building blocks of a narrative designed to be easily absorbed. To the contrary, this succession of eloquently hazy observations fuses together to create an atmosphere of impenetrable mystery and futility³⁸ that is only reinforced by the bafflingly sparse and fractured storyline. It is thus confounding, but not surprising, when the boy’s tale without warning concludes with “un hombre vestido de militar... apoyado en el quicio de la puerta” (27), a long delay in an unidentified house, and the introduction of a new caretaker (and the novel’s eventual protagonist), “el doctor Sebastián” (27).

What follows in the second half of the first of four extensive chapters—without any transition, naturally—is a painstaking explanation of the unfolding of the Civil War in Región. Here, countless figures and dates are specified, starting with “[los] primeros combates en la Sierra de Región [que] tuvieron lugar a comienzos del otoño del año 1936” (27). For the time being, the third-person narrator remains, outlining the many bloody, but fruitless clashes that occurred before the Nationalist insurgents finally entered the long-abandoned town in November of 1938. Interspersed with these deadly chronicles are equally meticulous descriptions of the local geography that trace the prehistoric origins of its “formaciones eruptivas y cristalinas” (37), reading more like scientific journal than experimental novel:

Pues bien, los esfuerzos hercinianos del momento westfaliense han tomado forma (al parecer) en la región astur-leonesa a lo largo de un geosinclinal cuyo eje debe pasar por algún punto de Galicia para resolverse en una familia de arcos de plegamiento de dirección E-W que paralelos entre sí en el occidente de Asturias se van cerrando al contacto con el macizo resistente para mostrar una acusada convexidad en su extremidad gallega. Se supone, en resolución que con anterioridad al plegamiento existían y convivían dos macizos que han funcionado, durando el paroxismo, como los cratones del geosinclinal... (37-38)

Even in this short sample, the level of specificity overwhelms, as does the exceedingly technical vocabulary, both of which belie Región’s truly fictional status. The minutiae continue for tens of pages, bewildering the inexpert reader with facts like its highest peak reaches “2.480 metros de altitud en el vértice del Monje...” (36). Or that its base takes “esa forma de vientre de violín, cruzada por un puente de formaciones detríticas y carboníferas que la enlaza a los arcos de plegamiento que apuntan hacia el lejano Eo, que al estrecharse... cobra con el Torres, el Monje y el Acatón, la importancia y la envergadura de una cordillera” (39). One also learns that its two main rivers, *el Torce* and *el Formigoso*, “[situados ambos] en el límite septentrional de los terrenos cretáceos y miocenos característicos de la meseta” (40), are the traditional the point of entry for exploratory expeditions that without question fail at the same location,

³⁸ That such haziness coexists with linguistic plasticity undoubtedly recalls the *nebulae* of Pérez Firmat. Once again, there is a tension between the weight of words and weightlessness of the atmosphere they create. The words of *Volverás* are hard to understand. Our noticing generates dimensionality, but our incomprehension also results in an air of indistinctness that can only be felt. Literal understanding escapes me; I am enveloped in incredibly dense verbal fog.

“aproximadamente en el paralelo 42° 45” de latitud N, a los 800 metros de altitud...” (40). The “complicada topografía” (41) that rests above this point remains largely untouched, as “solamente las guerras, de cincuenta en cincuenta años son capaces de liberar [la] de su merecido olvido” (41).

After a meandering depiction of two impossibly (and often, fatally) demanding courses through the territory, this precise geographical survey gives way to narrative action in the form of a date and a name. In the spring of 1938, *el coronel Gamallo* selects the mountain pass—the safer, but more difficult path—to launch a second campaign to “liquidar la bolsa de Región que hasta esas fechas, asilada del resto de la República y reducida a sus propios recursos desde finales del año 1937, había logrado mantenerse y aun rechazar dos ataques sucesivos” (53). Despite doubts from above and below—at one point a soldier quietly (and given the lack of context, somewhat mysteriously) attacks “su carencia de principios, sus fracasos en la vida familiar, su escaso sentido táctico, su falta de maneras, su mano agarrotada, su afición a la lectura y, en cualquier caso, su poca adaptación a la vida del monte y su manifiesto despego hacia los ideales caseros...” (54)—the enigmatic military figure presses on, eventually doing what his comrades could not and taking Región by November of the same year.

But *el Plan Gamallo*, as the reader soon learns, is much more than disinterested military strategy, in fact containing the key—and deeply personal—pieces of this impossibly complex narrative puzzle. Alongside the particulars of a proposed “ataque a Región en gran estilo” (63), inexplicable references to disloyal lovers, a mangled hand, and pursuits on horseback appear. Words like “orgullo”, “honor”, and “venganza” infuse descriptions of a circumspect, silent, and unpopular leader who spends his days in a locked room “empapelada con todos los 50.000 del valle del Torce...pintarrajeados de cruces, rumbos, elipses peludas e inscripciones enigmáticas: «Montón de fichas», «el burro muerto», «aquí la pastora», «volvemos»” (66-67). Yet nothing is explained outright and again the reader is left to (try to) distill the slightest semblance of narrative from a heap of utterly unclear details. Yes, for Gamallo the battle is uniquely defined by its “carácter personal” (69). And yes, the land itself plays a role as, “el mismo terreno en que una mujer adúltera, un donjuán de provincias y una moneda de oro sobre una mesa de juego destruyeron su carrera y arruinaron su porvenir” (67). Nevertheless, the actual story remains hidden—even after we discover some pages later that the colonel is himself a native of Región, raised by a bevy of unmarried aunts who saw in the family’s sole male heir their route to respectability. When we are suddenly returned to the (more recent) past of Gamallo’s successful 1938 military operation, which is methodically outlined in the chapter’s final twenty pages³⁹, all

³⁹ Similar to an earlier Republican victory at Burgo Mediano that is recounted over eight paragraph-free pages, this lengthy chronicle of Gamallo’s victory overflows with technical detail, like the fact that his forces first “clavaron...su bandera en el collado de la Requerida, a la cota 1640, tras seis días de marcha y sin otras bajas que los enfermos y lesionados de costumbre, un par de muertos y siete heridos de bala de fusil, caídos en una escaramuza nocturna con elementos republicanos no identificados” (73). Broader historical context is also included—there are references to actual battles of the Civil War, “en los campos del Jarama y el Tajo, en Brunete y en Teruel...” (75), as well as commentary on the influence in Región of contemporary political parties like *la CEDA* (78-79). Naturally, this is all interspersed with the more poetic and subjective intrusions that will come to define *Volverás a Región*. For example, as Gamallo advances, the narrator remarkably observes that: “En el curso de aquella última y dramática semana de octubre Región quedó desierta; desierta quedará para siempre, comida por la lepra de los disparos, las cubiertas agujereadas y las alcantarillas abiertas, el viento que remolinea y susurra por los huecos abiertos, los lienzos rasgados, las puertas que chirrían en sus goznes y golpean en sus marcos, incapaces de cerrarse sobre una edad de vergüenza y estupor; hundida en el polvo y rodeada—como la Nínive de Jonás—del fuego, la ceniza y los pedernales, emblema desgraciado de aquella voluntad fratricida” (86).

we know for sure is that it is an intimate act of retribution only apparently connected to the complex political realities of the moment.

In summarizing the content and function of each of the four chapters of *Volverás a Región*, José Ortega identifies the first as establishing the “clima físico-histórico” (142) of the novel. With the appearance of *el doctor Sebastián* and an unidentified woman caller, the next three will be something else completely—an exploration of the devastating local impact of the previously outlined Civil War. As David Herzberger has underscored, here there is no standard plot, but rather “...a soliloquy-like dialogue in which [the doctor and his guest] evoke their past and examine their destinies” (43-44). As their innermost thoughts unfold in lengthy, grammatically complex, and highly figurative passages, so do their (incredibly opaque) stories, both of which are closely connected to that of *el coronel Gamallo*. The mysterious guest—mistaken by the long-ago orphaned boy as his mother—is revealed as the daughter of the vengeful military leader. She has returned in search of Luis Timoner, a vanished lover and Republican combatant last seen fleeing her father’s troops into the mountains. Her first stop in Región is the decaying house and former medical clinic of the elderly *doctor Sebastián*, the longtime caretaker of that still lonely and bespectacled boy who has resigned himself to awaiting death in the fraying armchair of his medical office in a liquor-induced haze.

Over the course of the next two hundred pages, fractured and incomplete allusions set amid circuitous laments expose the deep links between the three tragic figures, all of which center on one woman—María Timoner. The mother of longed-for Luis and wartime resident of the medical clinic, María Timoner is also the once bride-to-be of the colonel who abandons him in favor of that infamous “donjuán de provincias”. The loss is in fact twofold, as the pair absconds only after a weeks-long card game instigated by an enchanted gold coin that ensures victory for its owner. After witnessing its power in the hands of the shadowy stranger, an infatuated Gamallo is willing to give up anything—even the ring of his beloved—to possess such magic. Blinded by his passion and unwilling to accept inevitable defeat, the contest ends with a knife through his hand and a flight into the wilderness. A frantic search on horseback by Gamallo and his men reveals nothing except a future defined by a mediocre military career and an overriding “sensación de futilidad y estancamiento” (70). It also signals ruin for the dedicated doctor. Himself enamored of the already spoken-for patient, the young medic had in fact planned an escape of his own. However he too is misled by the indecisive María Timoner who leaves him standing alone with suitcase in hand on a dusty roadside. He will see her again several times in a rustic mountain cabin—first delivering his godson Luis and later attending to her unspecified incurable ailments—but his resignation to a life of solitary decline will remain unchanged. Like his forsaken charge, the disfigured Gamallo, his probing daughter, and María Timoner, *el doctor Sebastián* inevitably succumbs to the devastating weight of his circumstances and surroundings. Incapable of overcoming a catastrophic past set in an equally destructive landscape, he relinquishes himself to the empty melancholy of a Región “sumergiéndose lentamente en las tinieblas de la historia” (86).

For Vicente Cabrera, this tale of the “young gambler” runs parallel to that of “old Numa”. Again, they are not plots “in the traditional sense, [but rather] two integrating and integrated situations which are briefly mentioned at the beginning of the novel, laconically developed throughout, and never clearly revealed in their entirety” (83). Yet even this pared down characterization of the limited narrative action in *Volverás a Región* overstates their “integrating” impact. Not only do the unexpected interlocutors remain markedly distant throughout their nightlong “discussion”—often either not acknowledging one another at all or responding with a

non sequitur—, but the reader too is unable to assimilate these only partially revealed “situations” into any sort of lucid whole. Lost amid two diverging streams of consciousness that are themselves impenetrable, they deny any sense of integration with the characters, the spaces they inhabit, their histories, or even their emotions. The above-described action, however compelling, is not what propels *Volverás a Región* forward because it is not actually what one sees while reading, only becoming (vaguely) evident after countless examinations of both the novel and outside critical sources. There is a plot, but grasping it requires study⁴⁰ because the obstructive material that comprises it—those maddeningly incomprehensible words—thwarts access at every turn. In this way, the very language of *Volverás a Región* becomes its focus. In the absence of coherence, it is all there is to hold on to while trying—and generally failing—to make one’s way through the tangles. This textual lifeline, however, likewise does little to advance its explorers through either land or story, instead merely serving to keep them afloat in a sea of utterances that, cut off from their referential function, are inevitably transformed into objects just as dense and impassible as those that populate the shadowy terrain they so ambiguously describe.

II. Style as Substance: The Literary Theory of Juan Benet (and Susan Sontag)

The stylistic complexities of *Volverás a Región*, embodied in its protracted passages, obscure adjectives, and shattered storyline, are a hallmark of the *nueva novela* of the 1960s, a newly language-centered literary period that again privileges the *how* over the *what*. And Juan Benet, as arguably the movement’s most extreme exponent, does not simply show by example. He also speaks and writes extensively about his personal literary theory, his reflections highlighting the importance of style. For Benet, style is *the* defining characteristic of literature, distinguishing not only the parlance of a given author, but also literary thought more broadly from its scientific and philosophical—in other words, more rational—counterparts. There can be no narrative without style, its role and value outweighing that of plot, character development, theme, or purpose. Benet first elaborates his conviction in the sovereignty of style in *La inspiración y el estilo*, a collection of critical and theoretical essays notably published by *Revista de Occidente* in 1966. In it, the intrepid author begins by establishing what he sees as one of style’s primary functions—bestowing inspiration. Contrary to popular belief, it is not the “soplo divino” (33) of inspiration that elicits a distinctive style, but rather the presence of an “estilo único y depurado” (23) that rouses an author to create. Exploiting the ambiguities inherent in both terms, Benet defines inspiration by what it is not, the product of rational and deliberate thought. It is instead “aquel gesto de la voluntad más distante de la conciencia” (41), and as such, it requires the vessel of style in order to take shape. Only style can channel this elusive “estado de gracia” (33), whose very existence in fact depends upon a delicate balance between the structure of style and the indistinct corners of the human mind. Inspiration “...solo puede surgir en el seno de un estilo, pero no en un clima donde la intención ha quedado encerrada entre los paréntesis de la voluntad (como cabría pensar con rigor escolástico), sino más bien como reacción al silencio impuesto por esa voluntad que no se ha decidido entre varios

⁴⁰ Indeed, my synopsis of the (always obscured) plot is built upon many re-readings of *Volverás* as well as the accounts of its action from academics like David K. Herzberger and Vicente Cabrera. And strangely (although perhaps fittingly in the enigmatic world of *Región*), even Benet himself helped me *understand* in a more conventional manner. In 1974, *Revista de Occidente* publishes an article by Benet titled “Breve historia de *Volverás a Región*” in which he describes not only the circumstances of its creation, but also some of its key characters.

compromisos...” (28). Style gives voice to silence. It crystalizes the obscure, the unresolved, and the inexpressible. As a result, style is what sets literature apart. It is what makes literature powerful. “Rara vez le es dada al hombre de letras la inmensa fortuna del tema original...” (16), but no matter. Benet leaves the novelty of fresh subject matter to journalists and academics. What poets and novelists are after is the eternal, which can only be found within the contours of a singular style.

What follows is a fierce critique of what—in the alleged absence of style—Benet regards as a largely failed modern Spanish narrative. For him, the decline of “la literatura (la vieja metrópoli)” can be traced to the age of Enlightenment and the rise of reason, particularly “las ciencias literarias (las nuevas repúblicas)” (108), which strive above all to inform. Under their influence, there is a marked “cambio de la actitud recreativa en actitud docente” (108), making literature an instrument for instruction rather than one of beauty and exploration. Taking specific aim at nineteenth-century Naturalism⁴¹, Benet labels the fact-focused movement a substandard “vicio” from which “arranca toda una rama del tronco—que en nuestros tiempos se sigue prodigando con sorprendente inocencia—que aborda la novela con un sesgo informativo y que por consiguiente con harta frecuencia subordina cualesquiera otros valores a los estrictamente documentales” (117). As art, narrative need not fulfill such a narrow objective. It ought not act as recorder of history, nor—notably given the subject matter of *Volverás a Región*—should it serve as moral guide. It’s worth lies elsewhere, in those less tangible realms occupied by feeling, sensation, mystery, and the subconscious. By limiting itself to this educational role, its impact is actually diminished across time,

... porque tarde o temprano el componente de información se evapora para dejar un residuo que solo puede tener sabor literario. La única fórmula capaz de asegurar la estabilidad es la de fijar indisolublemente aquel componente volátil al residuo, para constituir una única molécula organizada alrededor de la estructura artística. Eso quiere decir que el interés no puede radicar en la información en sí (que un día lo tiene, pero que al día, al año o a la década siguiente lo puede dejar de tener), sino en aquel estilo narrativo que haga permanentemente interesante un conocimiento que ha dejado de tener actualidad (120).

Of the two “hilos heterogéneos” (120) that for Benet comprise literature, only style lasts. Information and the interest it elicits cannot endure, thus creating a dependency that Benet underscores in order to differentiate his conception of “la información y el estilo” (121) from the more traditional content and form so disparaged by Susan Sontag. When compared with content, information “es un concepto más específico y reducido” in that it only refers to material “con

⁴¹ This is not his only explicit attack on Naturalism. A 1970 special issue of *Cuadernos para el diálogo* (XXIII) in fact contains several more. “Reflexiones sobre Galdós” is Benet’s response to a request for an article about the author which he is unable to provide because his “aprecio para Galdós es muy escaso” (13). Galdós, he goes on to explain, is “un escritor de segunda fila elevado... al rango de patriarca de las letras” by a country whose academics and *burguesía* accept economic and political decline while still holding on to the “esperanza de que pueda producir genios” (13). His work—hardly literature “porque literariamente emociona poco y representa mucho” (13)—is merely “pasto” for sociologists and evidence of a broader “perversión del gusto literario [que] recae hoy sobre la sociología” (15). His fierce critique continues in the transcription of a (now infamous) *mesa redonda* about the state of the novel. He again laments the infiltration of science and sociology, emphasizing his vision of literature as something separate and apart. The projects of realists like Galdós and Balzac are not literary because their goal—“reflejar lo que era la sociedad de su tiempo” (50)—is not a literary one.

cierto propósito de docencia” (122). Style, on the other hand, “es mucho más vasto porque toma sobre sí no solo todas las modalidades de dicción, sino el interés de toda la información” (122). More than a matter of word choice or rhythm, style is the totality of the “estructura artística”, the connective tissue that not only holds the work together, but that also makes it *art*. Style is timeless and so ensures “la continuidad del alimento” (122) across the ages. In this way, the Benetian notion of style is (not surprisingly) founded on paradox. As nothing more than an “añagaza”, an ethereal “esfuerzo” (121) on the part of the author, it nonetheless bears the distinctly physical capacity to bind, fixing not only an immaterial inspiration to a concrete language, but also an eventually outdated history to eternity in the form of literature.

As a fundamentally anti-rational endeavor, literature for Benet is also closely linked to emotion. Citing a mysterious and often misquoted passage in the final act of *Don Juan Tenorio*, the novelist openly declares his lack of understanding⁴². But rather than attempt to analyze his way to a logical interpretation, he simply accepts his bewilderment as “una muestra palpable de esos dones incomprensibles y esotéricos con que tan a menudo nos regalan los estilos maduros” (140). Taking his embrace of inconsistencies further still, he then praises the success of “...una personalidad que sin necesidad de pasar por los controles de la razón busca fuera de los límites del lenguaje habitual la más precisa expresión de una emoción carente de significado lógico” (140). Yet again, style’s unique capacity to communicate the ineffable emerges. In the nebulous realm of the literary, to understand is not always possible, nor should it be one’s ultimate goal, given the highly personal and irrational origins of novel or poem. Adrift in a sea of descriptions, dialogues, and tropes that defy rational explanation,

el lector honesto debe reconocer, con harta frecuencia, que no entiende nada y que, por salirse de los cauces habituales del lenguaje hablado, la comprensión de la poesía solo puede hacerse en el terreno elegido por el poeta, haciendo uso, sintética e inversamente, del mismo mecanismo del gusto que le permitió a aquel ponerlos sobre el papel pasando por alto los controles de la razón (141).

The reader thus has no recourse but to follow the author’s lead and to immerse him or herself not in facts and exploits, but in the verbal flesh that contains and connects them. And what one finds here, amid the distinctive cadence, idiomatic atmosphere, and particular vocabulary of a subjective style, is feeling. It is this feeling born of style that the reader can reliably grasp, for if “...el verso no es inteligible la poesía siempre es comprensible...” (141).

What is more, Benet characterizes this ability to *comprender*, even when one cannot *entender*, as a superior mode of knowledge, one that grants access—to author and reader alike—to not only the deep recesses of the mind, but also alternate (and novel) forms of reality. He describes an author moved to “ampliar su campo de trabajo hacia una zona oscura de su razón en la que las ideas—si se pueden llamar así—no se hallan claramente perfiladas, no se corresponden con las palabras del diccionario ni admiten una expresión con las formas normales del lenguaje” (142). This is accomplished through style, which does not generate cogent arguments, or even “ideas”, but “una película con la sensibilidad necesaria para ser impresionada por esas imágenes

⁴² In the play’s final act, *Don Juan* converses with a statue who declares “Te lo doy lo que tú serás”, to which the protagonist eventually concludes “Ceniza, bien; pero ¡fuego...!” (Quoted on 139). The strange dialogue is often dismissed as, “entre dos locos” (139), but Benet’s response is instead to wonder: “¿A qué viene esa insensatez...? ¿Qué significa eso? Yo no lo sé, no lo he sabido nunca ni creo que lo lograré saber mientras me empeño en tratar de llegar a su significado con las luces del entendimiento” (140).

que escapan a las revelaciones de la razón” (142). The impact of such a *película* on the reader is formidable, “ejerciendo...una forma de encantamiento que—con la ayuda de conceptos, palabras, sonidos, reminiscencias—forma una unidad de orden superior a la mera representación escrita de un significado concreto a fin de introducirle en un reino prohibido a las luces del entendimiento” (143). Enveloped in the supernatural mantle of style, the reader is transported—curiously, *by* words—beyond them in their role as signifier to the dark land of the subconscious. Here, in this “segunda realidad que inventa el poeta” (148), the indescribable and the unthinkable reign. Like the crowded bell tower anxiously awaiting the echo of a solitary gunshot, it is an enigmatic (and *poetic*) space that rebuffs logic but brims with sensation. Yet unlike those ancient eavesdroppers who want only to return to the resigned comfort of a Región unchanged, what writer, and therefore reader, gain by immersing themselves in style’s rich and feeling ambiance is ultimately freedom. Carried beyond the limits of language and story, they too are carried beyond the narrow confines of the conceivable. As style develops, what is possible grows. Worlds unfold because, in the words of Benet, “[ninguna] barrera puede prevalecer contra el estilo siendo así que se trata del esfuerzo del escritor por romper un cerco mucho más estrecho, permanente y riguroso: aquel que le impone el dictado de la realidad” (160).

This characterization of literature as especially able to enrich and expand human perception shares much with the “nourishing” vision of Susan Sontag. Like Benet, Sontag argues for a newly language-focused literary criticism that does not subordinate form to content. For Sontag, literature is above all a sensorial encounter in which *what* a work says is inextricably bound to *how*. To attempt to extract from it a concrete message is to not only cheapen an artistic creation, but also to cheat oneself out of a potentially profound aesthetic experience. Just one year after her case “Against Interpretation” (and one year before the publication of *La inspiración y el estilo*), Sontag goes further still, this time using language bearing a striking resemblance to that of her Spanish counterpart. In her 1965 essay, “On Style”, Sontag explores what she sees as a disparity in contemporary literary analysis. Although “a pious consensus prevails” on the inseparability of style and content “*as an idea*” (15), “[in] the *practice* of criticism...the old antithesis lives on, virtually unassailed” (15). Acknowledging the difficulties inherent in undoing a millennia-old method⁴³ “that practically holds together the fabric of critical discourse” (15), she nonetheless maintains the need to do so in order to fully grasp literature’s worth. A piece of art is not a “statement or an answer to a question” (21) and to treat it as such is a fundamental misunderstanding because, “[art] is not only about something; it is something. A work of art is a thing *in* the world, not just a text or commentary *on* the world” (21).

The language of narrative, despite its power to tell, is an object that deserves careful study in its own right. When the critic and reader face novel as *thing*, to borrow from Bruns, a new kind of *poetic* knowledge emerges, one that is not “conceptual...(which *is* the distinctive feature of discursive or scientific knowledge—e.g., philosophy, sociology, psychology, history) but...something like an excitation, a phenomenon of commitment, judgment in a state of thralldom or captivation” (Sontag 21-22). Rather than information in a crude state, literature (as art object) yields a wisdom that extends beyond the realm of reason, (again) taking the shape of a feeling. It is the rare “expressiveness” of this aesthetic *thing* that Sontag labels style, and its

⁴³ In “Against Interpretation”, Sontag traces the origins of the content-form hierarchy Aristotle’s “mimetic theory of art” that assumes all art is “figurative” and thus “in need of defense (4). It is in the process of defending art’s worth that content is separated from form. She goes on to explain that, “[even] in modern times...[whether we conceive of the work of art on the model of a picture (art as a picture of reality) or on the model of a statement (art as the statement of the artist), content still comes first” (4).

exceptional capacity to enliven is why, when contemplating art, style “rightly takes precedence over content (when content is, falsely, isolated from style)” (22). Sontag’s definition of style is, like that of Benet, anti-rational, intangible, and often paradoxical. Style is “energy” and “vitality” (22). It is “the physiognomy of the work, or its rhythm...” (28). As “the totality of a work of art” (17), style is all-encompassing. It is also distinctly singular, since “...from a technical point of view, [it is] nothing other than the particular idiom in which [the artist] deploys the *forms* of his art.” (34). Form individualized, “[style] is the principle of decision in a work of art, the signature of the artist’s will” (32). “In the final analysis, “style” *is* art” (30).

In this way, Sontag surely would concur with Benet’s (perhaps contradictory) assessment of style as both author’s inimitable fingerprint and his or her connection to literary perpetuity. For after spending much of “Against Interpretation” establishing art’s autonomy and intrinsic value as thing, “On Style” also tackles its function. While in general agreement with Ortega y Gasset’s avant-garde vision of a dehumanized art that self-consciously removes itself from the “praxis of life”⁴⁴, Sontag nonetheless objects to what she sees as the Spanish critic’s reduction of art to “a kind of irrelevant, impotent toy” (30). Distance from the world is undoubtedly essential to style. And she in fact declares that “[it] is the degree and manipulating of this distance, the conventions of distance, which constitute the style of the work” (30). Even so, distance and dehumanization do not mean the total renunciation of function. To the contrary, it is precisely *because of* its identity as independent art object that a given novel (or poem, sculpture, opera, etc.) is uniquely able to influence a receptive reader, viewer, or listener. On this, Peter Bürger would agree, as his argument almost a decade later that the historical avant-garde was (or at the very least, aimed to be) impactful by distancing itself aesthetically in many ways resembles Sontag’s vision of function. Both see in art’s sovereignty an avenue through which to present alternatives to the generally stifling status quo. Bürger describes the stylistic revolts of the 1920s as honest in their refusal to maintain institutional illusions. These bold aesthetic reconfigurations would have their parallels in society more broadly. Sontag, on the other hand, depicts a more personal kind of revolution. The aesthetic “excitation” (27) a work of art triggers “engages the mind in certain transformations” (22), “[inducing] contemplation, a dynamic contemplation” (27). What is contemplated is not a story or a picture, but rather “living, autonomous models of consciousness” (27) in the form of a distinctive style.

Here again we confront that mysterious balance between the universal and the particular that for Sontag (and Benet) define style (and therefore, art). Sontag asserts that “[a] work of art is a kind of showing or recording or witnessing which gives palpable form to consciousness; its object is to make something singular explicit.” (29). Art is perception objectified. It is the essence of the artist made concrete. “What a work of art does is to make us see or comprehend something singular, not judge or generalize” (29). How then to understand art’s function? What role can such individualized material expressiveness play in the wider world? Why should it matter to the outside observer? Sontag’s answer is because it serves as a “mode of nourishment” (28) whose effects are indeed universal. The root of art’s purpose consequently lies in Ortega y Gasset’s (Sontag says, incomplete) conception of artistic distance. As she points out, “...the movement is not just away from but towards the world. The overcoming or transcending of the

⁴⁴ As we saw in the first chapter, this phrase comes not from Ortega y Gasset, but from Peter Bürger’s 1974 *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, a foundational theoretical text on the historical avant-garde whose argument centers precisely on the movement’s intentional separation from “the praxis of life” (22) so as to more fully “reintegrate” itself. By maintaining a distinct representational identity (meaning, art need not *look* like “real” life), Bürger contends that avant-garde art was better able to reveal illusions, shift perceptions, and consequently, effect change.

world in art is also a way of encountering the world, and of training or educating the will to be in the world” (30-31). Like cyclic ocean waves, the subjective style of a particular piece carries us away from our routine surroundings, only to restore us transformed. When we engage a work of art, we do so with “a vibrant, magical, and exemplary object which returns us to the world in some way more open and enriched” (28). The firm grip of sequence (and at times, referentiality) released, so too is the pedagogical objective. We do not read a novel to *learn* in the sense of acquiring knowledge or exercising logic. The goal is now the physical and psychic enrichment of an *experience*. We encounter (and open ourselves up to) the novel’s strange beauty and are revitalized (intellectually, emotionally, and otherwise), our senses sharpened and our awareness expanded. Having exposed ourselves to a content-less and stylized *thing* that is rich in sensation and intentionally removed from our everyday life, doors unlock. Access is granted to the dark and unexplored corners of not only the artist’s mind, but ours as well. Those nebulous and indefinable spaces that so easily go undetected reveal themselves when one pauses to notice (and experience) art as *art* rather than “statement”. In this way, for Sontag and Benet alike the function of a novel ultimately boils down to its relationship—as style and thus as object—to the unknowable. In the concluding words of Susan Sontag, which in one of those alternate realities so lauded by Benet could also have been his own: “In the strictest sense, all the contents of the consciousness are ineffable. Even the simplest sensation is, in its totality, indescribable. Every work of art, therefore, needs to be understood not only as something rendered, but also as a certain handling of the ineffable” (36).

III. Painstaking Plenty: The Specifics of Benet’s Style

How does Benet “handle the ineffable” in *Volverás a Región*? In what ways is his unique style a window into those *zonas oscuras* of the human (and, more specifically the Spanish) (sub)consciousness? How does he transmute language from medium to material? What sorts of feelings predominate? What kind of nourishment is offered the reader? While the complexities of his often incomprehensible narrative style have already been introduced, let us look more closely in conjunction with his and Sontag’s theoretical reflections, returning first to the opening chapter’s meticulous presentation of Region’s geography. Many of the of critics who have braved this merciless terrain set the specialized jargon of its description in contrast to the puzzlingly convoluted prose that will follow. Gareth Thomas calls the “minutely detailed” introduction “factual and straightforward” (210). Vicente Cabrera juxtaposes its “technical and scientific accuracy” with the “intense metaphoric diction” of the novel’s later chapters. David K. Herzberger notes the “scientific objectivity” (47) with which the imaginary landscape is portrayed. Even Benet himself, in a 1991 interview with Marie-Lise Gazarian Gautier, remarks on the lexical precision that defines this chapter, calling it the “posture of a naturalist” (37) and emphasizing that although, “[it] is a region of my own making...it is not mythical” (38) because of its resemblance to a remote territory of northwest Spain where he worked as an engineer designing hydroelectric dams.⁴⁵ He designates it “a very backward place and very picturesque,”

⁴⁵ In that same interview, Benet in fact declares: “I am a man of a single profession, I’m an engineer who writes on Sundays” (31). To the follow up question “Why write?” he responds: The main one is that I have a lot of free time...Up to the present, I have not found any diversion more trustworthy than writing, or capable of competing with it” (32-3).

while also observing: “I was quite knowledgeable about it, since I had to study many books on its geology and biology. I later gave it a fictitious name, so I could move within it at my own discretion, without having to explain anything to anyone” (38).

There is thus *some* validity in the labels “scientific”, “objective”, and even “factual” for the introductory passages delineating “los frutales silvestres—los cerezos bravíos, el mahillo, los piruétanos, el arraclán y el avellano—” that grow in the valleys of Región, “entre salgueros y mirtos, acebos arborescentes y abedules susurrantes, robles y hayas centenarios, confundidos todos bajo el abrazo común del muérdago y del loranto” (43). Nevertheless, any claims to directness seem exaggerated at best when one considers the difficult vocabulary, lengthy paragraphs, dense descriptions, and frequent literary tropes. Many of the technical terms used are not found in the general dictionary (one must delve into more specialized sources) and rare is the sentence without numerous dependent clauses. Adjectives regularly qualify. And the viscosity generated by these stylistic traits undoubtedly contributes to the distinct textual materiality of *Volverás a Región*. Words in Región do not simply describe (or even embody) the mysterious and powerful territory; they also *exist*, populating the pages of the novel just as physically as the trees and thickets that fill those impassable mountainsides. That the exceptionally thick narration of *Volverás a Región* is accompanied by such corporeality is certainly no coincidence, as the origin of the latter lies precisely with those characteristics that make the novel itself so impenetrable.

Lists of obscure flora peppered among technical accounts of ancient geological transformations may lend themselves to visions of dispassionate scientific journals, but they also inhibit understanding for the untrained reader. Having to pause to uncover the significance of an unknown expression like “geosinclinal” (38) is interruption enough, but what to do with the countless terms that cannot be found in dictionary, atlas, or botanical guide? Untethered to a signified, they are released from their role as signifiers and so emerge more plainly as objects in their own right. Rather than two-dimensional transmitters of meaning, they stand alone as enigmatic conjurers of sensation. Unable (or unwilling) to tell, they instead evoke; their sound, rhythm, and shape—in other words, their very presence—rising up to communicate on an extralinguistic plane that, in going beyond language’s transitive function, also goes beyond reason. One does not simply read *about* the eerily dangerous landscape, one actually feels it, thanks to an overpoweringly disorienting reading experience that thwarts comprehension at the most basic level—a word’s very meaning.

The confusion produced by this puzzlingly precise vocabulary is further exacerbated by a more generalized abundance of words. In fact, as the novel advances the sense of bewilderment only grows in parallel with a language that, in the absence of plot, becomes progressively less clear. By the time the reader arrives at the decaying doorstep of *el doctor Sebastián*, any sense of logical narrative development has evaporated. What he or she is left with during his nightlong conversation with the daughter of a former rival is another key stylistic trait of *Volverás a Región* (and Benet more broadly)—frustratingly long sentences and paragraphs. Like the many incomprehensible expressions of the opening chapter, these winding and widely disrupted passages make the extraction of meaning virtually impossible, thus accentuating the inherent materiality of the language that composes them. Take, for example, a page-long sentence in which the solitary doctor, having already opened the door to the unannounced caller, agonizes before engaging her further:

Por otra parte él no tenía la menor duda de que, al hacer uso de su penetración para averiguar los móviles del viaje, aun en una prudente medida y sólo con fines disuasorios, no podría por menos de revelar una serie de opiniones cuyo verdadero origen y fuerza estaba muy lejos de querer—o poder—confesar; así que contemplaba aquella situación en que –voluntaria o involuntariamente, eso al fin y al cabo era lo anecdótico—se había envuelto con esa mezcla de deleite e intriga que al espectador procuran esos cuadros de tema mitológico, bíblico o devoto y cuyo asunto no conoce cabalmente (como el «Paisaje con el velo de Tisbe» o el «Viaje de san Genaro») en la que toda la índole del argumento se centra en una liviana y lejana figura al fondo de un escenario exuberante; y de la misma forma que en tales cuadros la ignorancia estima caprichosos ciertos acontecimientos que se desarrollan en otros planos que, de otra forma, están ligados a aquella enigmática figura por un vínculo que sólo puede descifrar una erudición ausente o la clave de un lenguaje esotérico que el artista utilizó para hacer manifiesta una creencia prohibida, así trataba de comprender la razón de aquella visita y la relación que podía guardar con los augurios del monte y la intolerable calma que parecía emanar de la sierra desde dos primaveras atrás—después de tantos años de desastres y resignación que hasta los pocos melocotoneros supervivientes se habían acostumbrado a producir orejones—y que él, en cuanto hombre viejo y rodeado y protegido de astutos desengaños, intuía que anunciaban el comienzo de una nueva revulsión (141-42).

Here, hyphens are layered upon parenthesis set alongside semicolons that follow more hyphens as the doctor's thoughts, presented via free indirect discourse, carry him haphazardly from one ancient fear to the next. There are rambling (and perhaps ironic) references to cryptic paintings evading interpretation by ignorant observers. In “la intolerable calma que parecía emanar de la sierra desde dos primaveras atrás”, there are veiled allusions to the vengeful Numa. There is even a recollection of the ravages of war contained the surreal image of peach trees producing only dried fruit. Mentioned both at its start and towards its end, his reluctance to ascertain the reason for the woman's visit emerges (vaguely) as the main idea of the passage. Nevertheless, the centrality of this doubt is ultimately lost in a maze of murky thoughts, words, and punctuation that obscure rather than elucidate. It would seem that to *not* understand is indeed the point, as the reader is once again compelled to suffer the doctor's confusion alongside him rather than act as mere witness.

Absent the ability to *entender*, one must instead search for alternate ways to *comprender*, for although it is possible to unearth the outline of a central thesis, the sentence itself still does not make “sense” in any conventional manner. Complex grammatical structure aside, the passage remains curiously elusive even after identifying a “main idea” and interpreting its many references. This is not just because its meandering interiority does nothing to advance a storyline. It is also, as Susan Sontag would surely relish, linked to a connection between *what* is said and *how*⁴⁶. The doctor is, after all, hesitant. And his uncertainty is reflected in the words themselves. Not just in the presence of terms whose definitions imply intangibility and ambiguity (like “intriga”, “augurios”, “enigmática”, “esotérico”, “ausente” and “intuía”), but also in all that goes unsaid. The passage describes his desire to stay silent. Moreover, what holds

⁴⁶ In “On Style” Sontag proclaims: “The great task which remains to critical theory is to examine in detail the *formal* function of subject-matter” (20). In “Against Interpretation” she says something similar, declaring that, “[the] best criticism, and it is uncommon, is of this sort that dissolves considerations of content into those on form” (12).

him back from warning his guest against returning to those woods last seen in the final days of the Civil War⁴⁷ is in fact the need to leave his own depths unplumbed. Penetrating hers, “aun en una prudente medida y sólo con fines disuasorios”, would inevitably provoke a revelation of sentiments “cuyo verdadero origen y fuerza estaba muy lejos de querer—o poder—confesar”. Long buried, his thoughts and motivations are to remain a mystery to character and reader alike.⁴⁸ This is the essential point of the sentence, and the vessel that contains it sustains such secrecy. In its twists and pauses, digressions and inscrutable references, endless commas and conjunctions, narrative content is sacrificed at the altar of style. The will to inform having been cast off, *Volverás a Región* utterly embraces itself as “rendered” (or perhaps, stylized) art object. That art object, crafted to transcend reason and convey the ineffable, must do so outside the bounds of “las formas normales del lenguaje” (Benet 142). Only in this way can the reader experience, and thus truly probe, that which lies beyond consciousness.

Concrete words—particularly adjectives—too aid in this expedition into the *hinterland* of the psyche. Virtually no passage in *Volverás a Región* escapes their presence. In this remote land, nature is “hermética e impermeable” (42). Its summits “erizadas, rotas, atormentadas y escoradas” (40) surround “un desierto de ardiente yeso salpicado de rocas basálticas, descompuestas y afiladas” (9) where “hermosos, negros, hambrientos y silenciosos pájaros” (10) and “moscas zumbantes, azuladas y plateadas” (47) await the explorer who will inevitably succumb to its “...caminos fantasmales y campos baldíos...” (42). The town itself, characterized by its “débiles recursos y agonizantes energías” (28), is populated by nothing more than “...las sombras descompuestas y viciosas de un ayer tantalizado...” (14). Thus explains the victory of “...el viejo y lento Gamallo” (74) with only “...la ayuda de un par de divisiones de navarros entusiastas y pugnaces, de vallisoletanos de honra y de flemáticos y reticentes gallegos...” (65). And as we learn in the chapters that follow, what the war has left in its wake, is an “ingrónimo y abortivo presente” (93) in which the “conciencia indefensa, sensible y medrosa” (93) of *el doctor Sebastián* survives through its insistence on remaining outside time, in “un largo y espasmódico instante nimbado por la luz de un arrebato juvenil convertido en desolación, carente de significado, de pasado, de dolor y de esperanza” (94).

Under ordinary narrative circumstances, such a profusion of modifiers would serve to vivify, painting a clearer and fuller picture in the mind of the reader and so allowing a more complete immersion into the fictional world of the author. By providing specificity, adjectives in theory make a place, a person, or an interaction more real and intense. Yet this is not the case in *Volverás a Región*. Rather than contributing to the vibrancy and authenticity of the territory and its inhabitants, adjectives obscure. This is not only a matter of frequency, but also quantity. They appear continuously. They also come in groups. It is not uncommon to see two, three, or four adjectives used to describe a single noun as well as multiple sets coexisting in a given sentence. The doctor’s former clinic—as forlorn as its elderly owner—is “vieja y descartalada, carente de gusto”, a glance through its windows revealing “un largo y sombrío corredor de

⁴⁷ During their dialogue, one eventually (and only after painstaking rereadings) learns that during the Civil War the daughter of *el coronel Gamallo* was taken hostage by Republican forces and held in various locations throughout the territory of Región. After being raped by several soldiers, she falls in love with Luis Timoner and spends the final weeks of the war under his protection at a roadside brothel run by an elderly woman known alternately as *Adela* and *Muerte*. It is from here that Luis flees into the wilderness with his comrades, never to be seen again.

⁴⁸ Why this is so—in other words, why the novel’s protagonists and the residents of Región more broadly so desperately desire to leave the past untouched and live out their days in a state of muted resignation—will be discussed in the following section, which will examine how Benet’s unique style is connected to the message of *Volverás a Región*.

paredes lívidas y desnudas y un piso cerámico con las losas levantadas y un ribete de azulejo de dos colores sangrientos” (94). After hearing the visitor’s steps “en la acera de loseta, agrietada y hueca” (97), his “figura enlutada... rodeada de sombras” (98) approaches the door tentatively. Haunted by a past filled with soldiers “(silbantes, barbudos y apenas visibles)” (94), he is “huraño y reconcentrado” (98). His guest, on the other hand,

era una mujer entrada en años... su cara no era pálida ni delgada pero su sonrisa era de cansancio, sublimación instantánea e involuntaria de un arte del disimulo que desea—pero no quiere—dejar traducir el verdadero estado de su ánimo en un atardecer en el campo; iba enfundada en un ligero abrigo de canela, apretado a la cintura, calzada con unos zapatos de tacón bajo y el pelo recogido bajo un pañuelo de seda cuyos lazos caían a la espalda con displicente y macabra soltura. No parecía impaciente, había llamado sin prisa ni excitación y ahora sonreía entre luces confusas—mientras las briznas del pelo en la frente eran agitadas por la brisa vespertina—con la misma serena, cruel y pedante delectación con que el agente de cobro llama a la casa en crisis... (100-101)

While a given adjective—or even a series of them—may enrich in isolation, their accumulation—sometimes 20 on a single page—eventually overwhelms. This detailed image of the daughter of *el coronel Gamallo* is undeniably striking, but encircled as it is by equally adjective-laden accounts of the doctor, his lone orphaned patient, and his festering house with its adjacent “jardín en estado salvaje” (100), it’s central character is ultimately eclipsed by the language that both composes and surrounds her. Engulfed by words, Marré Gamallo⁴⁹ is not a dimensional figure. Despite her initially vibrant depiction (as well as a youth defined by distinctly human suffering⁵⁰), the now middle-aged woman does not convey depth, whether physical or psychological. To the contrary, she is eviscerated, ghostly, and detached as she embarks on a mission that is doomed from the start. Notably, her extended deliberations often center on absence and lack—those enduring, but immaterial losses that have brought her to the doctor’s door decades after the Civil War’s end. Of the fateful weeks spent with Luis I. Timoner, what she recalls is not the bodily contact of a youthful passion, but his breath—“aquella respiración profunda, acompasada y extraña como el latido de un caballo o el rugido nocturno del mar” (166). Unwashed sheets and closed shutters are also mentioned, but what truly stands out—what she in fact identifies as “mi prueba” (166)—is the short walk between bedroom and bathroom. A spatial no man’s land, “aquel pasillo que permanecía toda la noche iluminado no tanto para delatarme como para dramatizar con su luminotecnía brutal los pasos del aprendiz por encima del abismo” (166), is what best captures her most profound experience of love.

⁴⁹ A few pages after her arrival at the clinic, the name of unannounced guest appears just once in the entirety of the novel. She in fact says it herself. Justifying her return to Región after decades away, she explains: “Y entonces me dije: «Vuelve allí, Marré; vuelve allí por lo que más quieras, vuelve de una vez.»” (115).

⁵⁰ As the daughter of a Nationalist insurgent in Republican territory, Marré Gamallo experienced the horrors of war first hand. As previously mentioned, she spent much of the Civil War as a hostage in Región, being moved from one clandestine safe house to the next. She was also raped on multiple occasions. This profound trauma was bookended by two other losses. We already know that at the war’s end Luis I. Timoner abandons her without notice. The war’s start, however, was characterized by a parallel rejection. During her conversation with *el doctor Sebastián* she recalls watching her emotionally-unavailable father pack his suitcase: “...en el fondo ha plegado el uniforme recién desempolvado y en el último instante advierte que para cerrar la maleta es preciso renunciar a la fotografía: la mía, vestida de colegiala...” (173). Markedly, it is this memory that surfaces in the moments immediately after realizing her lover has fled.

Suspended above a metaphorical abyss, hers is a world distinguished by emptiness. Deprived in her adolescence of paternal affection, bodily autonomy, romantic love, and security in all of its forms, she comes to the pages of *Volverás a Región* as nothing more than a shell. No longer capable of rebellion, it is instead a resignation to this vacancy that propels her. As she explains to the doctor:

Ni es amor, ni es esperanza, ni es—siquiera—desencanto. Pero si aplicas con atención el oído observarás que en el fondo de tu alma se escucha un leve e inquietante zumbido— hecho de la misma naturaleza que el silencio—; y es que está pidiendo una justificación, se ha conformado con lo que ahora es y sólo exige que le expliques ahora por qué es eso así (115).

Having long ago acquiesced to its lonely and unfulfilled fate, her very being—like *el doctor Sebastián* and the rest of *Región*'s residents—is reduced to a “leve e inquietante zumbido” akin to silence. It is intangible, voiceless, and incapable of asserting itself. What thus fills the void is language; adjectives in particular achieving the dimensionality denied her. They are what one sees. In the absence of plot and in the presence of wraithlike characters whose rambling ruminations are at best unclear and at worst utterly impenetrable, adjectives act as anchors in a sea of anti-rational bewilderment. If *Volverás a Región* is indeed a dive into the *zonas oscuras* of its characters (and author), the countless adjectives that punctuate its pages give the reader something to grasp. To truly *entender Volverás a Región* may not be possible. Nevertheless, these descriptors facilitate a deeper kind of comprehension, one driven by Benet and Sontag's notion of style. At least individually, the novel's adjectives are decipherable. Observed in isolation, they are oases of intelligibility that consequently stand out visually, rising up as miniature verbal projections amid the dense linguistic thickets of *Región*. As such, they offer the reader a distinctly visceral connection to whatever sensation they transmit. One may be unable to retrace Gamallo's assault or recreate Marré's affair, but terms like “insaciable” (19), “desolados” (20), and “lujuriantes” (43) still *convey*. Communicating not through story, but through feeling, they immerse the reader in texture, in mood, and in emotion—in other words, in style. Like the young Marré's rite of passage into the “regiones limítrofes” (167) of a desolate hallway in a remote mountain brothel, the reader too is transported—via adjectives—to that uniquely literary “zona fronteriza entre las luces y la sombra” (Benet 50) where the nameless and ethereal mysteries of the human condition are revealed.

Another distinguishing characteristic of the adjectives in *Volverás a Región*, one that contributes to their materiality and also distinguishes Benet's style, is their atypical positioning. As evidenced in some of the examples above, the novel's adjectives are regularly placed *before* the noun, contrary to Spanish language grammatical convention, which in most cases calls for them to follow the word they modify. Marré describes herself as only able to “hacer brotar una flor malsana entre apasionados y fétidos cultivos” (151). Her adolescence was an “inmundo y grotesco proceso” (154), generating an “aborto, tenebroso e idiotizado éxtasis” (163) before settling into an “alambicada y frágil desolación” (163). The effect of such an inversion is to accentuate the modifier rather than the modified. The adjective is what one first encounters, and especially when part of a list, its foregrounding ultimately serves to divert attention *away* from the person, place, or thing being described. It is not the process of developing into a woman that stands out, but its startling characterization as foul and grotesque. It is the darkness that rises above the ecstasy of young love. Because of their uncommon placement, terms like “fétidos”,

“idiotizado”, and “frágil” are uniquely noticeable as *words*, not just descriptions. The material with which the artist fashions an exceptional sensorial experience, adjectives do not simply depict. More importantly, they *are*.

By altering its rhythm, these substantial adjectives also lend the narration a uniquely poetic air. Like the painstakingly rich prose of the historical avant-garde, this *new nueva novela* exudes a sense of literary precision, with each word carefully selected to set it apart from the language of the everyday. Benet’s reliance on other rhetorical devices supports this. As Herzberger points out, in the novel’s first (and most “direct”) chapter, personification coexists with the exactitude of scientific discourse in a manner that “[transcends] the literal preciseness of the words...” (47). The summits of Región form a range “[que] se presenta como un testigo enigmático, poco conocido e inquietante de tanto desorden...” (39). Two pages (but not even one paragraph) later, they are “alineadas como las unidades de una flota en orden de batalla” (41). Moreover, the peaks do not simply resemble intimidating sentries, they breathe, move, and interact like them, “[levantándose] como un postrer suspiro calcáreo de los Montes Aquilanos, un gesto de despedida hacia sus amigos continentales, antes de perderse y ocultarse entre las digitaciones portuguesas” (36) and emitting an “amenazador gemido” (20) to ward off trespassers. The site at which they meet is also that of “el nacimiento—y el divorcio—de sus dos ríos principales” (39), which are then described as “[gemelos]” with a clear “diferencia de carácter y costumbres” (40). These examples of nature personified are overtly *literary* moments that undoubtedly undermine any claims to straightforward objectivity. Scattered amid geographic specificities, they also help create the opaque, but beautiful atmosphere of uncertainty that makes navigating *Volverás a Región* such a challenge. Contradiction again reigns, on this occasion within the diverse strata of the novel’s very language, which serves simultaneously as technical guide and lyrical reflection on a land as incongruous as its inhabitants. Although a remote and moribund wilderness, it is also “alive”, and “an active character... [that] asserts its will and penetrates the lives of the people who live within it” (Herzberger 47).

That many of these instances of personification are also similes further enriches the novel’s already intricate style and so creates another point of contact with its avant-garde predecessors. Permeating not only the third-person accounts of a mysteriously animate landscape, but also the winding recollections of *el doctor Sebastián* and his visitor, similes are another central stylistic element that contributes to the ambiguity of the narrative and the materiality of its words. Some of them simply serve a descriptive function. Despite answering the door to the unannounced (and undesired) guest, the doctor evades eye contact, “con gesto indiferente y un poco despectivo, como el de ese portero de un club que pretende sustraerse a la presencia de un borracho inoportuno” (103). She nonetheless presses on, waving a handkerchief while speaking in “...un gesto de forcejeo, como quien saca un dinero para forzar una transacción a la que el vendedor se resiste...” (104) before handing the doctor an aged notecard (or is it a photograph?) that he “...[agita] en el aire, como un abanico...” (105). But as the evening—and the memories—progress, the similes too become increasingly complex, both linguistically and thematically. After finally inviting Marré into the crumbling abode—at that precise moment when the sun’s light “pierde su estructura diurna para descomponerse en mil fragmentos de un tiempo caótico y gaseoso” (114)—the elderly medic’s fears are confirmed and he is overwhelmed by the weight of a lifetime spent trying to forget:

Y es un instante en el que —en presencia de un catalizador de la memoria, una habitación que se habitó años atrás, una tarjeta con una palabra ilegible—se produce una fisura en la corteza aparente del tiempo a través de la cual se ve que la memoria no guarda lo que pasó, que la voluntad desconoce lo que vendrá, que sólo el deseo sabe hermanarlas pero que—como una aparición conjurada por la luz—se desvanece en cuanto el alma se restaura el orden odioso del tiempo (114).

Memory is an illusion, as is the notion that we have any control over what life will inevitably bring. Even desire and its accompanying optimism—like a mirage—will disappear just as quickly as the changing light. Better to let sleeping dogs lie, to never ponder what could have been (or even what is), and to quietly resign oneself to waiting for death alone in an ancient armchair in a darkened room in a decomposing home situated in an equally desolate landscape. Similarly stunted by fate's bad hand, Marré also understands the limitations of a memory that is “casi siempre la venganza de lo que no fue —aquello que fue se graba en el cuerpo en una sustancia a donde no llegan nuestras luces” (115).⁵¹ Nevertheless, she sees in the past not an opportunity for redemption (because in Región, there is no such thing), but an avenue for acknowledgement, and perhaps acceptance. Memories might be falsehoods, but it is still

...el pasado el que reflexiona e ilumina, como esa lente de flintglass que sólo con una determinada orientación polariza la luz, para extraer de un presente desmemoriado y estupefacto toda una serie de propósitos rutinarios que en realidad carecen de figura temporal. Porque si el futuro es un engaño de la vista, el hoy es un sobrante de la voluntad, un saldo (175).

In this enigmatic territory, the past is not actually past. As Jesús Pérez Magallón expounds, “...en ningún momento se permite al lector permanecer en la idea de que lo que acaece simplemente acaeció. En ningún momento lo que parece ubicado en el pasado se presenta, describe o menciona como algo ya muerto” (289). It is the “lente de flintglass” through which today and tomorrow are refracted, and as a result, it endures as more than just distorted *recuerdos*. Like the primordial forest's ancient custodian, Región's past is alive and impactful. It continues to determine the destiny of all who suffered the traumas of the Civil War, destroying any possibility of a present or future beyond an eternal “ayer cicatrizado en cuya propia insensibilidad se mide la magnitud de la herida” (93). In this way, the past has erased time itself, paralyzing Región's residents. They are trapped in a painful history that they cannot process (or, for some, even acknowledge). They spend their lives trapped by, but still unable to access their *zonas oscuras*.

This entanglement is in fact reflected in the very style of the novel, as its perplexing, but poetic density is not just the consequence of long sentences, abstruse vocabulary, and rhetorical flourish. Repetition also plays a central role, creating a distinct narrative cadence that not only highlights the novel's words as *words*, but also fosters the pervading, yet hazy, sense of fatalism. Firstly, there are the recurring images that have replaced traditional plot development. Instead of being carried from start to finish (and from past to present), the reader is offered flashes of those

⁵¹ Note here the points of contact between Marré's vision of memory and Benet's understanding of literature as a reflection of the anti-rational subconscious. Like her creator, Marré views the shadows of the body as inherently more truthful and authentic. It is in fact in the darkness where life's most significant events leave their mark, not as fully formed recollections, but instead as intangible and indescribable sensations.

events—a gold coin, a mangled hand, an unmade bed—that have frozen Región, compelled Marré’s return, and reduced the doctor to the confines of his home. But beyond these cyclical visions, anaphora is a stylistic constant, as words repeat themselves on a range of scales, starting *within* a given sentence. When *el coronel Gamallo* launches his bold assault,

[ya] ni siquiera se trataba de venganza, hasta el rencor se había esfumado para dar paso a la curiosidad *que* había renacido en su ánimo *y que*...estaba dispuesto a satisfacer a cualquier precio *y que*, cuando era joven, *ni su* orgullo se atrevió a anticipar para reponer los agravios, *ni su* honor para saldar las deudas del juego *ni su* amor propio para cobrarse venganza de aquel donjuán de provincias que trameó la apuesta y le quitó la mujer (66, emphasis mine).

After months of fighting, his deceived Republican foes finally reach the plain that is “su objetivo, su trampa y su tumba” (88). Three decades later, “...al recostar de nuevo su cabeza en un respaldo comido por las ratas, al acariciar el brazo de terciopelo raído...” (13), *el doctor Sebastián* anxiously perceives the rumblings bringing the victorious soldier’s daughter to his doorstep. She has finally found the courage to come back after years of imagining a homecoming via train, “[sólo] para detener el llanto y la pataleta y a sabiendas de que todos sus sofismas tendrán un mentís en cuanto se abra la taquilla, en cuanto le entreguen el billete de Macerta, en cuanto se suba al ordinario de Región para dirigirse a aquella casa que no ha podido apartar de su mente desde que acabó la guerra” (116).

Expressions and phrases likewise repeat within longer passages, as when the doctor’s long-orphaned patient also takes notice of the aged vehicle: “Toda la tarde permaneció cerrado en la carretera, bajo la sombra de una encina. Toda la tarde lo estuvo observando desde lejos, de detrás de una cerca de piedras, los ojos clavados en sus dos grandes faros...” (91). Or when Marré finally enters the house and observes “...una pálida y temblorosa bombilla” that flickers “con renovada intensidad como si tratara de superar su propio estupor con un exceso de celo” next to a door that “golpeaba también en su marco, como si se tratara de un gesto de protesta a la intromisión de la luz eléctrica en la noble morada de las sombras” (117-118). Lastly, there are words that recur throughout the entirety of the novel, most notably variants of the pronoun “aquel”⁵². The first page mentions “aquellas desconocidas montañas” (7). During the war, there is “aquel mes de septiembre” (73), “aquel hotel de mala reputación” (84), and “aquella operación de alivio” (87). And during the long night of the novel’s present, Marré remembers the conflict as “aquella barrera infranqueable” (152) after which she begins to “mimar aquella soledad” (163) first experienced in “aquella habitación” (171). The examples, found on almost any page of *Volverás a Región*, are endless.

The effect of these various forms of repetition is to enhance the sense of inevitability that impregnates the resigned reflections of its protagonists. While the reader will not understand exactly what *el doctor Sebastián* says in his oblique references to a meeting not kept or a frantic search on horseback, he or she will nonetheless *feel* them. His sorrow at losing his first and only

⁵² An adjective (or pronoun) notable for its own inherent ambiguity. Despite (or perhaps—paradoxically—, owing to) its demonstrative function, *aquel* and its variants embody a distinct intangibility. Lacking the specificity of its counterparts *ese* and *este*, it implies greater distance and so less clarity vis-à-vis the word that is described (or replaced). In this way, it is a strange signpost with which to mark a path through the novel. Simultaneously present and absent, the countless versions of *aquel* that fill the pages of *Volverás* are the quintessential Benetian anti-guide. In their repetition, they stand out, demanding one’s attention, but ultimately do nothing to aid one’s understanding.

love, subsequent acquiescence to a life of solitude, and utter unwillingness to look back—these sentiments permeate every word or phrase that is repeated, often without grammatical necessity, allowing them to be experienced viscerally rather than intellectually. Their recurrence creates a strong narrative pulse, one that bypasses reason—or in this case, its absence—in order to convey on a deeper, more intuitive level. Just as each day spent drunkenly dozing in a rotting armchair is identical to the next, so too I experience the sameness of words whose regular reappearance creates a palpably tragic beat. Each page is also just like the next, and through the strength of that rhythm, I feel what the doctor feels, even if the precise details of his history escape me. To read *Volverás a Región* is in this way akin to listening to a song whose lyrics one cannot quite discern, but whose emotional content nonetheless shines through. In this richly nebulous (and plot-less) terrain of the unexplored subconscious, words are not a story-transmitting medium. They are an artistic material whose very presence communicates a profoundly passive despair.

Whereas the novel's adjectives emerge as objects because they project themselves visually, its recurring words stand out sonorously, creating a kind of auditory materiality. Yet in similarly separating themselves from the signified, the impact is identical. In both instances, one's attention is drawn not to the novel's information (to use Benet's terminology), but to its style, which acquires a value—and an ability to convey—in its own right. And in both instances, one is invited to *feel* instead of think. In *Región*, one is immersed in the sensorial shadows of a highly suggestive and objectified language designed to induce rather than recount, thus allowing for new modes of comprehension that surpass the, for Benet, limited sphere of the rational. Horizons broaden and minds expand, as "...ese mundo claroscuro, ...esas fugaces impresiones de lo incierto, ...ese telón de fondo que trasciende al saber..." (Benet 51) come into view.

IV. A Way Out, Forward, and Beyond: Meaning in *Volverás a Región*

What then to *do* with the unquestioning sadness and emptiness one will inevitably *comprender* in *Volverás a Región*? Is it simply a matter, as Susan Sontag would argue, of permitting the novel, and the sensations it generates, to *be*? Does accepting it as an (inherently worthy) artistic object mean looking no further than its perplexing and sorrow-inducing style? Is this even possible, given the Spanish Civil War's place at the heart of the narrative? Would Benet's contemporaries, many of them—like him—survivors of the conflict and its enduring aftermath, be able to accomplish such a feat? Should the goal of the reader, from any age, really be to look beyond such a pivotal historical moment? Disregarding these belligerent underpinnings is at best impractical. That the storyline (however opaque) centers on *the* defining event of modern Spanish history cannot be ignored. But even if one could, to do so would be a fundamental disservice to truly comprehending *Volverás*.

It is consequently here, at the intersection of form and content, where the paths of the *nueva novela* and its avant-garde ancestors diverge. For although we once more find ourselves in the presence of a narrative designed to be *seen*, one in which the transitive function of words is again overshadowed by their experimental shape, something has changed—not just the gravity of *what* is addressed, but also the *why*. Francisco Ayala's word-objects celebrating modern urbanity are uniquely rich in sensation in order to thwart significance. The complex physicality of Benet's style, as it circuitously traces war's path across space and time, is instead an exercise in its cultivation. Although they also defy conventional interpretation, the textual *things* that compose *Volverás a Región* are intended as gateway, their contours and rhythms aiming to access the deeper layers of (a war-wounded) consciousness (and beyond). Rather than erased,

meaning is thus multiplied as it expands to include the irrational, the ineffable, and—strangely—the unknowable. Whereas the cohort of Ayala and Pedro Salinas challenge conventional notions of literary value through the annihilation of meaning and purpose, Benet does so through its radical reconfiguration. Meaning is not gone, but it is not logical, or even explainable. What was once whatever one extracted from narrative action and character development is now the intangibles of an encounter with the incomprehensible. Meaning is what happens when we push *past* those stories and confront the abyss that is the impossibility of intellectual understanding. The residents (and readers) of *Región* live with the debilitating consequences of the Spanish Civil War, but they do not always acknowledge the source⁵³. Consequently, a new kind of meaning is necessary, inexplicable words offering a path through inexplicable horror.

En Ciernes, Benet's aptly titled 1976 theoretical reflection that makes the case for such *meaningful* incoherence, overflows with terms that evoke this inscrutability: *misterio, enigma, incertidumbre, sombra*. Here, literature is built on "toda clase de ambigüedades" (44) and always involves "una cierta ocultación" (44). It is a realm ruled by *contradicción* and *paradoja*, a fundamentally metaphysical pursuit whose tactics and goals directly oppose science, which Benet signals as the prevailing approach to knowledge since the Enlightenment. Literature is in fact "una anticencia" (59) and its creator is,

la contrafigura del hombre de ciencia. En efecto, nada se opone tanto al intento de comprender y formular las leyes que rigen el universo, o a una parte de él, como el propósito de llevar al ánimo al hombre, haciendo uso del discurso racional, la idea de su fundamental ininteligibilidad..." (44-5)

Benet traces this split back to the seventeenth century, when the development of algebra—the "lenguaje de matemáticas" (46)—severs the ties binding science to its (shared) verbal roots by opting for numbers and formulas. Language no longer need serve as a transmitter of knowledge. Unmoored from these earthly concerns, it "...progresivamente va eliminando de su código la necesidad de ser inequívoca, veraz y certera" (48). As an instrument of exploration rather than communication, it emerges "...como objeto propio del pensamiento, como su mejor manifestación, como sistema de representación de un espíritu que, por lo mismo, en buena parte solamente a través del lenguaje—hablado o escrito—puede ser investigado" (48). Having cast off "[el] demonio de la exactitud" (48), language relishes all that remains arcane despite scientific discovery.⁵⁴ What was once used to determine, reveal, and fix—in other words, to set limits—transcends them by embracing the countless shadows at their edge. Words, now the domain of the literary, are the paradoxical avenue for channeling and expressing the inexpressible.

Benet hails this newly liberated literature as "frontera" (48), "mundo claroscuro" (51), "apertura" (52), and "paréntesis" (52). It is "el espacio abierto entre una afirmación y su

⁵³ A social reality that is in fact highlighted by a political one: after the death of Franco in 1975, the leaders of parties from across the spectrum came together to construct the *Pacto de Olvido*, an agreement designed to center on the future of the nation. Such forward-looking focus, however, legally protected killers. It also created a culture of silence. It was better to simply say nothing than risk digging up "old" wounds.

⁵⁴ Despite labeling literature alternately *anticencia* and an *antisaber*, Benet clarifies that he is not fundamentally anti-science. As he explains, the attuned author, "[no hace] sordo a sus postulados; sencillamente lo único que trata de recordar es que el ámbito iluminado por la ciencia está rodeado de un espacio en tinieblas tan extenso que ha de parecer ridícula la pretensión de limitar la existencia al hábitat del conocimiento" (51).

correspondiente negación” (52), “la zona fronteriza entre las luces y la sombra” (51). And as a resident (or perhaps, leader) of this “imperio del oxímoron” (53), *el hombre de letras* embraces the immensity of the indefinite. Indeed, where science ends is where “...su ámbito de trabajo, su fuente de estímulos e inspiración” (51) begin. No longer striving to resolve through natural representation “los numerosos enigmas de la naturaleza”, he instead:

tiene el deseo de presentarlos, de preservarlos, de conservarlos en su insondable oscuridad, de demostrar la insuficiencia gnoseológica y la insolubilidad de aquéllos; e incluso llevando a su extremo esa en parte doctrinaria posición, de fomentar la invención de aquella clase de misterio que por su naturaleza se encuentra y se encontrará siempre más allá del poder del conocimiento (49).

Literature has a new purpose—“[el] arrastrar a la imaginación hacia esa zona de sombra” (51)—as well as a new conception of meaning. Meaning is no longer an idea. It is not founded on reason. It cannot be extracted by analysis, comparison, or contextualization because it is not the product of cognition. It does not even necessarily come from the mind. Having transcended knowledge, meaning is a fundamentally otherworldly endeavor, one that is *felt* rather than understood. It is not something to be identified, but experienced psychically and physically. Meaning is suggestion and sensation, an embrace of the immaterial. In this way, it is also an exercise in immersion—a plunging of oneself into all that is dark and unfamiliar in order to more fully see, feel, and—if only for a moment—understand.

Thanks to its convolution, *Volverás* accomplishes this *arrastrar* to the outposts of consciousness through incomprehension. More than a faithful portrait of wartime life that engages through the spectacle of human suffering, its tangled and tactile structure intentionally confounds. The lengthy punctuation-less passages, replete with obscure expressions, winding ruminations, and unexplained occurrences, resist explanation. And even if they did not, the bulk of one’s energy is already dedicated to trying to grasp *what* (if anything) is happening. *Volverás* is hard to read and even harder to think about. There is no organic narrative structure with a defining climatic moment to highlight, no lifelike psychological drama to unpack. Even the narrative’s symbols, which arguably allow for more conventional interpretation, complicate this undertaking by concealing themselves amidst its verbal thickets. Encircled by words whose opacity transforms them into objects, they too resist logical connection. Like *Región* itself, the novel’s language is an impassible *hinterland* that disorients in order to undo preconceived notion or habit. And it is precisely this disorientation that serves as ferry, carrying one past reason and into the uniquely charged *misterio* that for Benet *is* the heart of import. Rather than read *about* the deadly landscape, one lives it. The maddening density of its forests, the painstaking decomposition of its structures, the paralyzing passivity of its residents—all are *felt* through the very act of reading. The erudite vocabulary feels unclear. The movable timeline feels unstable. The entire experience feels uncomfortable. There are no obvious answers or unequivocal declarations. There is no passage to which one can point and say “message”. There is only a linguistic fog—thick and tactile and intangible all at once—whose refusal to signify counter-intuitively presents significance anew. It reemerges as confusion, the narrative a series of (very literary) bewilderments serving as platform from which to perceive, in all *their* haze, the richness of the shadows that surround us.

What is more, it is not just a matter of a baffling *estilo*; the novel’s *información* is also notably ambivalent. When tackling an event as big and grave as the Spanish Civil War, it is

natural to anticipate a stance. To which side does its author belong? Who is represented with sympathy? Or disdain? What kind of picture does it paint of the current state of affairs? *Volverás a Región* flouts such questions, again sustaining an air of pregnant uncertainty. Even those bits and pieces that can be “understood” often contradict one another so as to deny any straightforward categorization of “good” and “bad” or “right” and “wrong.” Take, for example, the nuance with which Gamallo’s assault on Región is treated. The narrator makes explicit that it is not an attack born of the sincerity of his beliefs, political calculation or even institutional allegiance. It is instead revenge that rouses the coronel to action, a personal compulsion to cow the backwater that first stunted and then humiliated him. But even this desire for “revancha”—which Gamallo keeps hidden from peers whose lack of “un móvil personal que les hubiera empujado a la guerra” (68) he distrusts—is portrayed with surprising *comprensión*. In its description as “...un correlato de la gloria del apellido, un dogma para revestir de recelo el objeto de su afán, una forma hereditaria de defensa ante las imposturas del alma” (71), there is a softness that concedes its traumatic roots.

The retaliation—its magnitude and relentlessness—is horrific in its absurdity, but its leader is not a madman or a monster. Like the doctor and his helpless charge, *el coronel Gamallo* is utterly ensnared. Like Marré, his battle is a spiritual one. In Región, the Civil War comes late in the form of a vengeful native son. And the intensely personal nature of such a vast conflict only heightens the ambiguity that (paradoxically, of course) is the foundation of the novel’s structure and meaning. The stylistic *and* psychic density of *Volverás a Región* obscures war’s moral and political implications, in this way disrupting readerly expectations. Our search for broad ethical pronouncements or ideological identifications will bear no fruit, for they have no place in this “...pueblo que durante treinta años no había deseado otra cosa que carecer de deseos y dejar que se consumaran los pocos que conservaba, que como mejor solución a las incertidumbres del futuro y a la sentencia de un destino inequívoco, había elegido el menosprecio del presente y el olvido del pasado...” (34). They are simply too clear, too active, too decisive. Literature, Benet says, is *supposed* to disorient. This surprisingly sympathetic representation of war as private vendetta does just that.

And the informational inscrutability is not limited to Gamallo. It extends to even to the novel’s most explicitly political figures—there are no heroes; rare is the deeply held conviction. The *Mando* who approves *el Plan Gamallo* does so only haphazardly and to improve its standing post-victory. For these “batallas de usura” intended to “prolongar hasta sus últimas consecuencias una guerra concluida con un plantel de vencedores demasiado numeroso e inquietante” (65), they provide only “los pertrechos más inútiles” (66). Yet they exchange their Moroccan fighters for Spaniards who will (needlessly) end up as nothing more than names “en unas cuantas cruces y lápidas de mármol, los ornamentos con que el nuevo Estado se decidió a pagar la destrucción que había acarreado a aquella comarca refractaria a su credo” (66). On the other side, *aquella comarca refractaria* is hardly a righteous or motivated foe. The novel’s most famous line declares Región “republicana por olvido u omisión, revolucionaria de oído y belicosa no por ánimo de revancha hacia un orden secular opresivo sino por coraje y candor, nacidos de una condición natural aciaga y aburrida” (76). It supports the liberal cause with only “débiles recursos y agonizantes energías” (28). Its young leaders—“los últimos vástagos de las familias liberales” (35)—cultivate political power with a mysteriously ancient car and “un pájaro amaestrado que el capitán Asián había comprado en Las Ramblas a muy buen precio”, but without “un programa político atractivo para el pueblo” (79).

Moreover, their ideological guide is “un hombre alto, entrado en años y canas, y con el aspecto—quizá exagerado por el hecho de salir todas las tardes a pasear, acompañado de su mujer, con un abrigo raído, una boina negra y la cara casi oculta por unas gafas oscuras—de estar muy acabado de salud” (29). He traveled to *América*—moved by an “afán docente”⁵⁵—and returned “pobre pero inflamado de cierto ardor jacobino” (29). Before settling in Región to heal “una antigua lesión pulmonar”, “[se] ganaba la vida como profesor, como intelectual; daba clases en el instituto; recibía muchos impresos, escribía cartas...” (29). At first glance, the concise lucidity of this characterization makes him the most vivid of *Volverás*. We come to know his body, mind, and history. Ailments are detailed and convictions explained. But the image that is conjured is neither complex nor favorable. He is a caricature, a stereotypically devout revolutionary whose ubiquity only presents a different kind of imprecision. His appearance is defined, but formulaic. The phrase “al parecer” (29) qualifies all academic endeavors. Even

[su] saber, con no ser muy profundo, abarcaba casi todo el campo de cultura: sabía qué condiciones se deben dar en una sociedad para que la revolución sea posible, conocía el arte de vanguardia lo bastante como para llamar retrógrado al que no lo era y tenía en su haber unos rudimentos de matemáticas suficientes para dar clases de bachillerato (29-30).

He is therefore uninspiring *and* insubstantial, a lack in fact highlighted by his namelessness. The narrator cannot keep anything but his (nonexistent) title—“no tenía don” (29)—straight, first identifying him as “...Rumbal o Rombal o algo así; Aurelio Rumbal...” (29). In the pages that follow, the *maestro* is called, seemingly randomly, “Rembal”, “Rubal”, “Robal”, and “Rumbás” (32-35). The nonchalance of the confusion signals mockery, but the stupor in which his “tres o cuatro alumnos envejecidos, entristecidos y empujados a la bebida” (30) rest during lessons suggests another, more charitable, origin. Like Gamallo, the portrayal of Rumbal—or Rombal—is markedly ambiguous. He is generic, shallow, and ineffective—as thinker, instructor, *and* organizer—, but he is not a wholly unlikeable or depraved figure. Again, there is a softness to the derision with which he is painted, a subtle sympathy precluding any easy dismissal as adversary.

It is thus not a case of *Volverás* being *for* or *against* a particular side—the apathy of Región does not allow for such definitiveness. The characters are too hazy; the air too thick; the terrain too unforgiving. There is no true moral high ground. There is, however, still a place for *morality* more broadly. For both Benet and Susan Sontag, art is important not because it instructs, but because it enriches. There is no “moral of the story”, no subtle clues to aid in identifying the “good guys” or the “right” way to think about the war. Benet describes an enrichment born of psychic expansion, the novel’s stylistic complexities a portal into the mysteries of the universe. Ambiguity embraced, experience becomes more diverse, flexible, and open. Sontag, on the other hand, sees enrichment as the result of heightened perception, art allowing us to “recover our senses” (14) and thus engage more deeply with the world. She also characterizes the ameliorating impact of art as an inherently moral matter. But rather than

⁵⁵ Note Benet’s use of the term “docent”, which earlier appeared in *La inspiración y el estilo* while tracing the evidence-focused Enlightenment’s (for him, negative) impact on literature. It is, after all, the rise of a literary “actitud docente” that triggers the novel’s downfall. “A partir de ese momento el carácter moral de la obra de arte literaria, el ingrediente informativo, va a tomar su revancha sobre la componente recreativa que ha dominado tantos siglos de oscurantismo” (108-9).

adhering to a “particular morality” (25), she defines the concept abstractly, as “a code of acts, and of judgments and sentiments...which prescribe a standard for behaving or trying to behave toward other human beings *generally*...as if we were inspired by love” (24). Morality is “a *form* of acting and not a particular repertoire of choices” (24). It is varied *and* variable –“a mode of acting and being in the world” (25). As a result, “...no generic antagonism exists between the form of consciousness aimed at action, which is morality, and the nourishment of consciousness, which is aesthetic experience” (25). To the contrary, to interact with art is to develop morality. Because the two endeavors share a common end—to improve life—the aesthetic experience functions as a sort of moral training ground, with enhanced artistic “sensibility” naturally paving the way for its moral counterpart:

For it is sensibility that nourishes our capacity for moral choice, and prompts our readiness to act, assuming that we do choose, which is a prerequisite for calling an act moral, and are not just blindly and unreflectively obeying. Art performs this “moral” task because the qualities which are intrinsic to the aesthetic experience (disinterestedness, contemplativeness, attentiveness, the awakening of the feelings) and to the aesthetic object (grace, intelligence, expressiveness, energy, sensuousness) are also fundamental constituents of a moral response to life (25).

A novel is a uniquely charged art object whose power to enliven extends beyond the reader by cultivating the very qualities that give life (and not just art) meaning. When awareness is heightened aesthetically, one sees—and feels—*everything* more acutely. It is no longer just the highly stylized words that are uncommonly vibrant. As sensation expands, the world does too. Like the labyrinthine land it describes, the disorientingly beautiful narration of *Volverás* does not make sense and so it compels surrender. And in the absence of any totalizing vision of the forest, one can do nothing but observe—and absorb—the trees, meetings with their intricacies nurturing the ability to engage more fully with one’s own worldly surroundings. *Volverás a Región* is not moral because it takes a stand. It is moral because its beauty fosters attention and awe, and so begets more beauty, an act of undeniable courage considering the circumstances. *Volverás*, after all, is published in 1967, just a few years after Marré returns to Región. This means that those who first read her story were her (and her author’s) contemporaries. They too suffered the horrors of the Civil War. They too lived with its aftermath. In this way, her experience is *their* experience. Her failed (but nonetheless brave) reckoning with tragedy is also theirs.

Three years of destruction followed by three decades of dictatorship leave little room for hope of redemption or justice. But justice, according to Sontag’s view of art and morality, is again not the point. Here, as a springboard into *livingness*, the aesthetic is a powerful force for good. It is an escape from the dullness and—particularly in Franco’s Spain—the difficulties of the world, but it is not frivolous. To the contrary, its role is central in the creation of a vibrant and fulfilling life despite the most challenging conditions. It is an avenue for transcendence into unknown states of being and so offers a way out, forward, and beyond—a way back to *livingness* that eschews “accuracy” and “ethics” in favor of feeling. In the process of (re)learning how to better feel, see, and hear, the reader also (re)discovers how to *live*. This is how a war-torn world is rebuilt, how it becomes a more beautiful, conscious, and moral place. This is the purpose of art, its true meaning. The experience of reading tangled *Volverás a Región* will not clarify historical fact, determine culpability, or resolve political strife, but it nonetheless heals through

sensorial engagement with an artistic *material*. By refusing conventional referentiality, its highly stylized words generate wonder and reimagine narrative meaning, in this way serving as both balm and spark for a society deadened by violence and deprivation.

V. Conclusion

The term *livingness*, perhaps surprisingly, does not belong to Sontag. It instead comes from Susanne K. Langer, a philosopher whose 1953 *Feeling and Form* also explores the essence of art. Like Sontag (and Benet), Langer rejects the notion of content as something that exists outside of form and places feeling—not message—at the heart of meaning. The aesthetic is again an exceptional category with a unique expressive capacity. A work of art “negotiates insight, not reference” (22) and is “not logically discriminated, but is felt as a quality...” (32). Rather than “a copy of feeling”, it is its “symbolic representation” (373). It is “a symbol, a highly articulated sensuous object, which by virtue of its dynamic structure can express the forms of vital experience which language is peculiarly unfit to convey. Feeling, life, motion and emotion constitute its import” (32). Notably, this “livingness” (373) is not limited to the experiences of its creator because “[it] bespeaks his imagination of feeling rather than his own emotional state...” (28). Art is therefore objective and, consequently, expansive, offering “one nameless passage of ‘felt life,’ knowable through its incarnation in the art symbol even if the beholder has never felt it in his own flesh” (374).

Langer identifies this expansiveness as the source of art’s power—more than just “a revelation of our inner life...it [also] shapes our imagination of external reality according to the rhythmic forms of life and sentience, and so impregnates the world with aesthetic value” (399). Art attunes in order to enrich, giving shape to our shapeless interiors so that the world itself is brighter. And while the “education of emotion” it provides through “tacit, personal, illuminating contact with symbols of feeling” (401) unfolds first within a single consciousness, its ever-expansive impact is ultimately communal:

Art is a public possession, because the formulation of ‘felt life’ is the heart of any culture, and molds the objective world for the people. It is their school of feeling, and their defense against outer and inner chaos. It is only when nature is organized in imagination along lines congruent with the forms of feeling that we can understand it, i.e. find it rational...Then intellect and emotion are unopposed, life is symbolized by its setting, the world seems important and beautiful and is intuitively “grasped” (409).

Benet views literature as an emancipatory plunge into the dark spaces *beyond* the rational. Sontag sees it as supplement rather than escape, improving life by deepening perception. Langer describes it as a protective force that holds both individual and community together by harmonizing their many (incongruent) layers. For all, art is a kind of magic. For all, the source of that magic—art’s significance—is feeling. Early on in *Feeling and Form* Langer defines a work of art as an “articulate but non-discursive form having import without conventional reference” (32). That import—the “verbally ineffable” (39) energetic pulse of *livingness*—is not deduced, but perceived. It is not a conclusion, but a moment of brilliance. It is an aesthetic experience that, unlike content, exists beyond story. And for all, it is an ingredient essential to the flourishing of humanity.

“Art does not affect the viability of life so much as its quality; that, however, it affects profoundly” (Langer 402). So what matters is not that *Volverás a Región* is sad or fatalistic. Nor does its hesitant take on the Spanish Civil War. What matters is that it is read, the bewildering but beautiful process a poignant counterpoint to the epic tragedy it portrays. The novel is, after all, a “prime symbol” and a “total form” (Langer 369). It reveals itself whole; only whole is it comprehended. So when it ends, as the title long ago said it would, with “el eco de un disparo lejano” (315) following Marré into the wilderness, what prevails is still awe. After hours of talking, a dozing *doctor Sebastián* awakens alone to the sound of “ladridos desolados” and the smell of “salitre y fetidez orgánica” (312). The hum of an aging motor soon comes into focus and he looks down to find *the* photograph—“[no] era una tarjeta” (312)—, which he finally observes with care. Its edges are “arrugados y amarillentos” and the face that peers back does so with “una mirada oblicua pero no particularmente penetrante, dignificada y entontecida por un punto de anacronismo. En el revés tenía una inscripción a lápiz medio borrada, un nombre del que sólo la primera sílaba era reconocible y una fecha que no había sido tachada” (312). Although one can imagine just whom the discarded picture depicts, his identity is never confirmed. The death—and life—of this republican combatant remain ambiguous to the end, the mystery encompassing his very existence. Aside from an (almost) anonymous image left to rot in the locked office of a closed up house whose countless bolts and bars fight in vain against inevitable decomposition, nothing concrete endures –not the man, nor the woman who loved him, not even a name or a date.

As he seals up the clinic behind his final guest’s departure, the doctor continues his dialogue, now with an unfixed addressee. Apparently alternating between Marré and the invisible but ever-present Numa, he says:

Olvidó usted el salvoconducto. No le iba a servir de nada pero de cualquier forma se le ha olvidado. Se le ha olvidado también que las cosas son como son y que nadie es capaz de volverlas atrás. Si hemos aceptado tu ley es porque el que venga a cambiarla impondrá una más dura. Deja las cosas como están y no la permitas llegar. Aquellos que no se conforman con su desgracia, en esta tierra nuestra, acarrearán la catástrofe. Deja las cosas como están y cumple con tus compromisos de la misma forma que nosotros acatamos tu mandato (312).

Moments later he too meets his (also forecast) demise at the hands of his child-like charge.⁵⁶ Incensed at the sight of his “mother’s” second flight by car, he violently (and poetically) attacks his caretaker, striking him until “sus ojos rodaron por las órbitas para quedar mirando al suelo como dos bolas prisioneras que al desprenderse del mecanismo caen al fondo de las esferas” (314-15). The night is suddenly filled with “los pasos apresurados, los gritos de dolor, los cristales rotos, los muebles que chocaban contra las paredes; los muros y hierros batidos, un sollozo sostenido que al límite de las lágrimas se resolvía en el choque de un cuerpo contra las puertas cerradas” (315). Dawn breaks and a gunshot sounds: the novel concludes as “el silencio habitual del lugar” (315) returns.

Erasure, violence, futility, trauma –how can such a dark final chapter impart anything but utter despair? Examining these moments, and *Volverás a Región* more broadly, simply as story would mean surrender. It would mean the absence of desire, energy, courage, and strength.

⁵⁶ Earlier in the novel, *el doctor Sebastián* references the prophetic powers of his telegraphist father’s magical *rueda*, which foretells his own violent end (125).

Here, there is no will to live, nothing possible outside of disintegration. Yet when one reaches its close, the experience is decidedly not of despair. *How* it ends has been foretold and intuited; we already knew it would be poorly. What one is left with is therefore the *emoción* of its words. Not sorrow, anxiety, joy, or ease—those shifting and particularized emotions of an individual—, but a state of enthrallment that surrounds and captivates. Being inside *Volverás a Región* feels big, beautiful, and stirring. It also feels unreal, its puzzlingly stylized descriptions generating that distinct aesthetic *otherness* highlighted by Benet, Sontag, and Langer as that which gives art its potency. It is an intentionally confusing symbol that steps outside of life in order to better capture its radiance, simultaneously serving “as the overcoming or supplementing of reality and as the making explicit of forms of encountering reality” (Sontag 31). This dual role—the ultimate source of artistic *otherness*—is what makes it transformational. Thanks to works like *Volverás*, one sees farther *and* more clearly. Limits are lifted and the world makes sense even when the text does not.

There is no questioning the destruction wrought by the Spanish Civil War. That its people suffered decades of oppression, isolation, and poverty is not up for debate. History, however, is not art, not even when that art depicts the monstrosities of its moment. Whatever its topic, art is founded on *livingness*. Life is its import and its purpose. *Volverás a Región* is tragic, but it is not hopeless—its very existence shows us that. As an art object explicitly rendered to transcend consciousness and carry us “...en la dirección opuesta del saber” (*En Ciernes* 50), it is most importantly a path to alternate spheres of reality, an expansion that reveals other—perhaps richer—ways of being and perceiving. In this endlessly disorienting space, meaning is not a position and knowledge is not the goal. The mantle of docent is cast off and understanding is sacrificed at the altar of *comprehension*; the novel reemerges as an “aparato atesorador y posibilitador de una determinadas funciones del espíritu” (*En Ciernes* 47).

Chapter 3:
Encyclopedias, Mazes, and Mirrors:
The Raucous Physicality of Julián Ríos's *Larva*

Región, the sole setting for *Volverás a Región*, is small, rural, and remote. Roads are overgrown and buildings are boarded up, evidence of an open hostility to outsiders. Choked by not only the density of its thickets, but also the weight of war and its aftermath, Región is dying, its descent into nothingness inevitable despite the torturously slow pace of the decay. In Región, time does not bring progress, only increasingly refracted recollections of a past defined by violence, scarcity, and resignation. Región is also, as its notably generic name suggests, a metaphor for zones far beyond its unwelcoming woodlands. In fact, for many Región *is* Spain⁵⁷ because, despite the meticulous geographical specificity and scant population, Región is representative of a more generalized condition. The dreadful spaces of the novel, whether mountaintop, brothel, sanatorium, or bell tower, and the mysteriously intricate language that describes them, indeed capture *something*. They are isolated and inhospitable, silent and submissive, long-suffering and long forgotten. And in this way, they reflect the world in which their creator matured and from which Spain was only just emerging in the 1960s when *Volverás* was written. In Región, the avant-garde impulse is born of a desire to comprehend and so transcend. Radical formal experimentation is a way *through*, not beyond. Rather than mere escape, it offers an alternate path to meaning based on the *zonas oscuras* of sensation, feeling, and the unconscious. It is perhaps not surprising that in a place whose recent history has been defined by such physical suffering—fighting, hunger, even exile—it is in the intangible and inexplicable experience of *style* where author and reader alike can revive themselves.

Yet by 1967 when *Volverás a Región* is finally published, Spain is on a new trajectory, thanks to the opening of markets and borders alike. By the late-1950s, Franco's autarkic fiscal policies had proven unsustainable, creating an opportunity for a new breed of conservative bureaucrat to modernize the Spanish economy. The Stabilization Plan of 1959 and subsequent Development Plans of the 1960s resulted in a decade of such intense growth that the regime marketed it as the "Spanish Miracle". Tourism and trade intensified; industry expanded; the population of urban centers swelled, as the motto, "Spain is different", originally designed to encourage visitors by reimagining the country's apparent *lack* of modernity, ironically takes on a new meaning. Spain is not just different from its northern neighbors—it too has changed. The Spain of the 1960s is fundamentally *different* from her predecessors. Assimilation into the international economy brings prosperity. It also brings increased contact with the outside world and, consequently, increased integration in the arts. By the time the 1970s arrive, Spain is not only suffering the effects of a decidedly global economic downturn, it is also firmly enmeshed in postmodernism, an undeniably international cultural phenomenon.

⁵⁷ Ricardo Gullón's oft-cited essay, "Un viaje laberíntico que bien pudiera llamarse España", underscores the prevalence of this viewpoint. After making the connection explicit in its title, he goes on to argue that the symbolic relationship between Región and Spain goes beyond geographical similarity, identifying instead a uniquely Spanish feeling that results from contact with the exceedingly complex prose: "Si Región es España, si ese laberinto de sendas perdidas puede llamarse España, no es sólo porque la geografía novelesca coincide vagamente con la de este país, sino porque la invención de Benet, fantástica como es, crea en su discurso una imagen y una experiencia en donde cualquier español puede reconocer las suyas" (5).

And these ties will only grow stronger with the death of the dictator on November 20, 1975. Although this date is no longer regarded as an absolute and precise turning point in which Spain, in an instant, rejects insular authoritarianism in favor of cosmopolitan capitalism (scholars now signal 1959 as the start of a much more gradual process), the process of democratization in the years that follow nonetheless parallels a period of artistic effervescence that shares much with its counterparts across the Western world. It also achieves worldwide recognition in its own right, the carefree and celebratory atmosphere of the famed *Movida madrileña* a true emblem of postmodernity. The goal is to become a modern nation, and one strategy for achieving this goal is to focus on the future, rejecting, in particular, an immediate history defined by heaviness. Indeed, such forward-looking lightness is not simply a matter of popular opinion. It is also sanctioned politically during the legal transition to democracy, opposing sides coming together to prevent potential conflict between (now former) foes. In October 1977, the Spanish Parliament passed the (for some, infamous) *Ley de Amnistía*. The law freed political prisoners and allowed exiles to return, but it also protected those who engaged in criminal activity during the war and the dictatorship. There would thus be no formal accountability, no reckoning for those who ravaged *Región*. That same month, the *Pactos de la Moncloa* were also signed, another effort to smooth the transition that modernized the Spanish economy along with political and social rights⁵⁸. Such changes inevitably—and intentionally—fostered the major cultural shift that came to be known (and sold) as the *Movida*.

In the decades that followed, this (many now argue, simplistic) image of a suddenly democratic Madrid radiating a newly libertine energy in the form of pop music, promiscuity, and recreational drug use, would be called into question.⁵⁹ Even so, the *fiesta*-happy branding undoubtedly parallels a surge in a *new* kind of literary production. Like the (advertised) Madrid of the *Movida*, it too was buoyant and frivolous, intentionally and flamboyantly so. Gone were grand claims of profundity, consequence, and originality. Erased was any residual sense of self-importance, replaced by an embrace of the best seller and an acceptance of the novel's newfound position as just another commodity within a highly profitable cultural industry. Authors became celebrities, generating works that fall under the umbrella of postmodernism in part because they return to storytelling. Novels are again plot-driven, making them more accessible to the masses (and more likely to succeed in the marketplace). Subject matter previously identified with “low” cultural models, and hence deemed inappropriate for the high arts, makes its debut in the form of the *pastiche*, with novelists like Eduardo Mendoza and Manuel Vázquez Montalbán employing the popular genre of the detective novel⁶⁰. Others, like Antonio Muñoz Molina, integrate cinematic narrative techniques into *film noir*-inspired works, or, like Almudena Grandes, engage with eroticism. What is more, subjectivity, fragmentation, playful irony, and self-referentiality reign as writers incorporate intertextual references into prose that also serves as a reflection on the act of writing itself. The plurality of perspectives, languages, and lifestyles that defines

⁵⁸ Some of the issues addressed by the *Pactos de la Moncloa* include freedom of expression and freedom of the press as well as the right to unionize. Reforms were also made to the penal code, specifically targeting the rights of women. Adultery and sex out of wedlock were no longer illegal. Neither was birth control.

⁵⁹ The more recent scholarship (from authors like Víctor Lenore and Guillem Martínez) on the period, which problematizes the official narrative of the *Transición* and the *Movida*, will be discussed in greater detail in the final section of this chapter.

⁶⁰ Eduardo Mendoza's *La verdad sobre el caso Savolta* is in fact widely regarded as the first postmodern Spanish novel. Published in 1975, it is an enthralling work of detective fiction whose light tone and fragmented storyline ultimately thwart the truth the title promises.

contemporary society is admitted and absorbed; ambiguity and subjectivity are used to highlight the impossibility of achieving a singular, unified, and absolute truth.

Returning to the matter of setting, it is therefore fitting that those of the Spanish postmodern novel—in the starkest of contrasts to gravely desolate Región—are generally Madrid or another modern Western metropolis. In the quintessentially postmodern meta-fiction of Juan José Millás, the capital is itself a protagonist. As the title (in part) suggests, Muñoz Molina's 1987 classic *Invierno en Lisboa* follows its anti-hero, Santiago Biralbo, as he moves seamlessly between Lisbon, San Sebastián, and Madrid in a dramatic conspiracy involving love triangles, jazz and a stolen Cézanne. Truly international, and truly postmodern, it was (appropriately) adapted for film in 1991.

Some of the period's novels even take place totally beyond national borders, in still more cosmopolitan waters. One example of such extreme internationalism is *Larva. Babel de una noche de San Juan*, the inaugural novel of Julián Ríos and another postmodern literary landmark. Officially published in 1983, yet not released until the following year, *Larva* recounts the events of single night of debauchery during the *fiesta de San Juan*, a June 24 Catholic holiday closely linked to the summer solstice. Transpiring in an abandoned London mansion, it follows its protagonist, Milalias, through a crowded and wild masquerade ball as he, camouflaged as Don Juan, searches amid the merry chaos for his lover Babelle in her disguise as Sleeping Beauty. Once again, the environment could not be more *unlike* Región: first London, a global center of finance and culture with millions of residents who have come from all over, and then the estate itself, an erotic and ecstatic space undulating feverishly with thousands of partygoers as they dance, drink, and dally the night away. It is teeming, while Región is empty; connected, while Región is secluded; light, while Región is heavy; flippant, while Región is somber.

In the sixteen years that separate the creation of these dramatically distinct locations, the world, and Spain in particular, have changed radically. One would expect nothing less of the literature that describes them, the acute formal experimentation of the *nueva novela*—itself a reaction to the politically-engaged social realism of the 1950s—having succumb to a new vision of narrative as depthless and commodified mirror designed to reproduce (rather than reorganize) the heterogeneity of an increasingly splintered contemporary cultural landscape. Fragmentation remains, but it no longer manifests itself as impenetrable style and incomprehensible plot. It instead takes the form of a plurality of perspectives and genres, all of which are admitted as valid and subsumed into the gripping twists and turns of a customarily coherent storyline. The avant-garde impulse to *create* is dead—or is it?

How then to explain *Larva*, which despite its jocund atmosphere and uncomplicated premise, radiates truly stupefying stylistic complexity at every turn? There is no doubt that *Larva* explores traditionally postmodern concerns with traditionally postmodern techniques. Diverse voices share, and often dispute, the stage. Parodic wordplay, humorous neologisms, intertextual references, and untranslated foreign expressions abound. It literally describes a party. Nevertheless, the overall impression of the novel is decidedly *un*-postmodern, as plot, protagonist, and pun are lost in a shockingly convoluted narrative structure whose labyrinthine prose is so dense and confusing that it has been compared to James Joyce's modernist masterpiece, *Finnegan's Wake*. In *Larva*, Julián Ríos thus takes the hallmarks of postmodernism—especially the playful *pastiche*—to such an unparalleled extreme that they arguably cease to be postmodern. Postmodernism, after all, is less concerned with originality, a key characteristic of *Larva's* mind-boggling intricacy that in many ways shares more with its avant-garde predecessors than its chart-topping peers. Like *Volverás a Región* before it, *Larva*

intentionally teeters on the edge of unintelligibility, its thoroughly unexpected arrangement and disassembled language denying the reader a clear view through the windowpane to the (action-filled) garden below.

The novel having been stripped of its storytelling function and its words deprived their referential role, what one sees is its *language*. Language is once again an end in itself, a highly malleable physical substance worthy of appreciation in its own right. Like the *estranged* similes of Ayala's *novela poética* and the baffling specificity of Benet's *nueva novela*, language in *Larva* is object. And like these earlier moments of formal revolution, to read *Larva* is to persist in a state of surprise and confusion that demands a reconsideration of narrative significance. Only in this case, one cannot shake the feeling that the joke is on us. Nothing makes sense and no one seems to care. While Ayala's unexpectedly beautiful comparisons inspire awe and Benet's adjective-laden mysteries open the unconscious, the cheerfully incoherent babble of Julián Ríos simply bewilders. What then to make of its meaning? Is this just another example of postmodern translucence, with not only content but also the words themselves reduced to sheer image? Is it just the period's characteristic lack of seriousness taken to its (il)logical limit? Has language in *Larva* been so mutilated and objectified that even those paths to alternate planes of significance based on feeling, sensation, and experience are closed? Have we finally arrived at true meaninglessness?

Pessimistic visions of the postmodern world abound. For Jean Baudrillard, the real is no longer possible. Now in the realm of the *hyperreal*, of models of the real that paradoxically maintain no connection with reality, we are left with nothing but simulation, with a "map that precedes the territory...that engenders the territory..." (1). Similarly, Guy Debord laments the rise of the *spectacle* and the "obvious degradation" of life from "being into *having*" into "*appearing*" (17). And François Lyotard identifies the erosion of knowledge, narrative and otherwise, as a defining trait of the epoch. Purged of its use value, knowledge is appreciated only for its "performativity" (50). The image is king and stories have been flattened, drained of the ability to do anything but, in the words of Fredrick Jameson, "ceaselessly [reshuffle] the fragments of preexistent texts..." (96). For Jameson, it is this reimagination of writing as "combinatorial practice" (132) rather than cultivation and expression of a distinct worldview that reifies the sign and divorces language from meaning. From this perspective, *Larva* says nothing not because it rips apart words and dismantles conventional narrative structure, but because it *cannot*—the artistic material from which it is made (or perhaps, pieced together) no longer capable of unifying signifier and signified so as to facilitate a broader and more coherent understanding of art, society, and the human condition.

Yet it is impossible not to see *Larva's* difference. It seems careless to disregard how it looks, sounds, and feels unlike any other novels of the *Transición*⁶¹; facile to dismiss its outrageously radical form as just another postmodern hologram; erroneous to discount its strangely incomprehensible language as joking gibberish. Put simply, *Larva* cannot be reduced to an extreme case of postmodernity taken to the extreme. And, as we shall see, such

⁶¹ Indeed, *Larva* might have more in common—(not coincidentally) like the earlier experimental works of this dissertation—with the poetry of the period. For example, the radical work of poet Haro Ibars, whose verses display a decidedly *Beat* sensibility thanks to his encounters with the likes of Francis Bacon and William S. Burroughs during his childhood in Tangier. While such poetic roots distance *Larva* from its more conventionally narrative-driven postmodern peers, they in fact strengthen its ties to its avant-garde ancestors as another example of a distinctly *poetic* conception of language generating verbal plasticity and (consequently) reimagining meaning in the novel.

classificatory debates miss the point, because to focus on *Larva's* (lack of) resemblance to its more narrative-driven postmodern peers in fact obscures other—deeper—continuities with predecessors from previous decades. Once again, language is the heart of the novel. Once again, words reject an obvious link to a signified, demanding instead to be seen in their own right. Once again, such acknowledgement generates plasticity. Like the metal welded into a three-dimensional figure or the acrylic smeared across a canvas, language in *Larva* is object. And once again, that object communicates, just not in the way that we expect. Individual phrases, paragraphs, and even pages may resist meaning in the conventional cognitive sense, their wild unfamiliarity inhibiting a clear connection between word and world, but they nonetheless *evoke*. Theirs is once again a realm paradoxically ruled by the ineffable. Here, words are objects and comprehension is an encounter with sensation and feeling.

I. A Book to Behold: The (Very) Physical Form of *Larva*

Larva's raucous embrace of its own objecthood is apparent from the start, curiously even before reading the official first line. The book's length (almost 600 pages) and subsequent size means that, when in the hands of a reader, it certainly *feels* like a novel. The unremarkable familiarity of its cover, title page, and table of contents also plainly announces one's entry into literary territory. But any resemblance to what even the most seasoned reader might anticipate ends there, when *Larva's* opening line offers us not story, but footnote—an unexpected numerical one that precedes an equally disconcerting query, “The trifolium of our Roman à Klee?...” (12), before launching into an extended and, again, enigmatic response. This moment of disorientation soon enough gives way to understanding, if not of the words themselves, than at least of where one should be *looking*. It is on the page to the right where the work actually begins, with Babelle wandering and muttering, “PLUCK THE CLOVER...PLUCK THE CLOVER...” (13)⁶², as Milalias observes from a distance. In this way, we are introduced to the protagonist's veiled pursuit of this,

...harped black-haired Sleeping Beauty in her vaporous black nightie as she pushed her way through the thicket of serpentwining masks in the Hall of Mirrors, PLUCK THE CLOVER..., smilingly sleepwalking with arms extended toward the three glass doors open to the bosky night: in the background, among the shadows in the rear garden of the villa, a bonfire gleamed.

Pluck the clover... (13)

An account of the lengthy quest thus appears on each right hand page, forming the heart of the narrative and recounting the sights and sounds Milalias as Don Juan encounters on his trek through a dark mansion teeming with cloaked revelers engaged in a variety of illicit activities. Yet despite containing its core, the action of these central pages is far from straightforward. Although they *usually* represent the evening from Milalias's perspective, sudden shifts between first and third-person are frequent. So are the unannounced interventions of outside voices. Literary references abound. Standard punctuation is often omitted in favor of ellipses that sit alongside parenthesis layered upon brackets. There are untranslated outbursts in foreign tongues,

⁶² Quotes from *Larva* are taken from a 1990 Dalkey Archive Press edition translated Richard Alan Francis, with help from Suzanne Jill Levine and Julián Ríos himself.

surprising neologisms, and playful manipulations of well-known adages, all of which result in a bewildering narration that mischievously denies any clear-cut comprehension of plot. A later, but parallel moment in Milalias's chase underscores *Larva's* radical nature:

Glaze! Glas! Glace! That clochard will toll for thee...

Hey wait! Don Juan rushing after Sleeping Beauty, Every don has his dame... who was resolutely sleepwalking (: toward the door?) through the crush of snaking masks, murmuring her double half words. Wait! This one won't eat in or out. Live and let dine.

Manducemos et bibamos..., dissonated the monk in blackface with a chef's hat, fiddling with his onion rosary. Let's eat and drink as much as we can, tomorrow's just another day. Another day, another diet! Eat, for tomorrow you'll be eaten. A good bite and a good scream. Aai! One of God's servants, Fraai Gil, gaar-gaarantees it. And I was an alterboy before I was a busboy. Si, Sick..., and he winked at the Bellman. First monk and then chef (159).

We know our pretend Don Juan is following a dazed Sleeping Beauty through an utterly wild scene, but any sort of clarity ends there. And not just because of the confusing language. Its effects are intensified by a comparably complex narrative structure, the second level of which was already encountered in the form of a footnote. After only three words ("PLUCK THE CLOVER"), the reader is directed left by a diminutive digit. There, one finds:

1. The trifolium of our Roman à Klee?:

Three-partying through our folie à deux: do I, don't I, he loves me he leaves me not, leaf by leafing through the nocturnotes of our bacchantes, back hunting buck-beans in the back country. ((Seek, Dartful Lodger, your tarts in Hyde Park. . .)) Living in clover. . . [Sauberes Klee! Awesumptous trio. This summer sum of some of the . . . There's no threesome folia a dos? he would calculatedly ask himself one night, that highest bidder of a thousand aliases paperilously perusing papers with his babelic beauty ((: Sing, sing, christening after christening)) in the Tower of Paper. Babelle, Milalias and. . . Herr Narrator. Qui? she inquired. Who? A sort of ventriloquacious nut who misproduces our voices, he explained. A cunning conning cofounder and confounder. The Echommentator who dubdoubles us and tries to root in black-and-white everything we live and write en route. . . Twice as crazy for being split, Narr and Tor, so I Germangled him into Herr Narrator. Ah bon. You'll get to know him. . .In his deliriums he thinks he's the author of our feuilleton, our surreal serial. . .: Au! Tor! let the doubler be doubled. . .Anyway, here they have me, the aforementioned nut, trapped between brackets, making me Herr Narrator.] And now, King of Clovers! Roi de tréfle! Kleekönig! in ah-one ah-two ah-three to trick of treat you with PILLOW NOTES 1, p. 453.

On the next line, it happens again, and again two lines later and two lines after that. *Larva's* opening seven-line paragraph includes four footnotes; its first (right-hand) page has six altogether. For every page of primary narration, there is another dedicated exclusively to footnotes containing commentary—the first annotation (sort of) reveals—from Herr Narrator, a

figure who exists as both external narrator and as a character within the text who maintains a personal relationship with Milalias and Babelle.⁶³ His remarks are frequent; there are regularly eight or more on a single page. They also have a range of objectives. While some are limited to verbal prank, others provide details not offered by Milalias or even dispute his version of events. Often, they incorporate broader, philosophical reflections on the act of writing itself. Whatever their function, Herr Narrator's observations relish in the same linguistic mischief that characterizes the prose of Milalias, as the above footnote undoubtedly demonstrates. It is all but impossible to keep oneself afloat in this sea of strange punctuation, alliteration, and made-up words that simultaneously introduces and obscures the novel's main characters (Herr Narrator, Milalias, and Babelle) and central themes (the nature of authorship and language).

It is also here where *Larva's* already tentacular structure grows more tangled, with select interjections leading the reader to an addendum titled "Pillow Notes" at work's end. Regularly, after finishing a thought, Herr Narrator instructs his audience to "See PILLOW NOTES 4" (14) (or 5, 6, etc. There are 71 in all.), followed by a page number. Although phrased differently, the opening footnote contains such a direction: "And now, King of Clovers! Roi de tréfle! Kleekönig! in ah-one ah-two ah-three to trick of treat you with PILLOW NOTES 1, p. 453" (12). In all, on *Larva's* first two (left-hand) pages, there are thirteen footnotes that also lead to five "Pillow Notes", which share the (filtered) perspective of Babelle. As their title page—to which, notably, no footnote guides us—explains, the "Pillow Notes" are "(Rough-drafted by Babelle and translated [with Herr Narrator's interpolations] by Milalias)" (451). Despite the near constant interruptions of Herr Narrator, Babelle's "Pillow Notes" are by far the most direct and story-driven component of *Larva*, typically providing much needed background information without which the parallel narratives of Milalias and Herr Narrator would be entirely unintelligible. The inaugural "Pillow Note" lasts four pages. It begins with a description of her approach in a taxi whose "headlights flashed upon three hearts on the massive black iron-knobbed door. And lit up the graffiti on a brick wall supporting wrought iron. BABEL TOWER...VILLA MARA..." (453), before summarizing the setting of the novel and, very subtly, the catalyst for its plot:

A T-shaped two-story mansion, surrounded by a garden overgrown with all manner of exotic trees like an abandoned conservatory. So many ghostly statues—nymphs, satyrs, gnomes, busts and torsos—scattered among the trees and underbrush. At the rear of the house, beneath the portico, a shallow round pond. And on the esplanade below, a semicircular greenhouse with a flat glass roof

No, I couldn't get lost after your instructions. From the iron palisade entrance to the garden, I could already see the leprous-white façade of the Villa, the columns of the portico all patchy with peeling, flaking paint (453).

Slowly, the reader identifies details that enable the construction of a basic framework: We are in London. It is the night of San Juan and Babelle has been invited by Milalias to a party in a grand, if decaying, manor hosted by "Mr. "Napo" Leone" (455), a soft-core pornographer and possible distributor of hard-core drugs. "Everyone who's anyone will be there" (455). The punk band "SHAM ROCK!" performs as Babelle too searches for Milalias, "[her] little prince of

⁶³ The reader eventually learns that Herr Narrator, also known as Mr. Reis, and occasionally Mr. Rayos, is a personal friend of Milalias and Babelle who is assisting them in writing a novel, which the reader experiences first-hand in the work's right-hand pages. Milalias too is a penname for Emil Alia.

darkness” (454). Neither knows what character the other will assume. Will they manage to find one another amidst the “swirling mob” (455)? Will they recognize their lover in a surprise disguise? The parallel paths they take in this game of reunion are *Larva*’s premise. And although Babelle’s voice is occasionally familiar, repeating phrases already used in the Milalias-centered account⁶⁴, it distinguishes itself from what has come before through ease. In short, *Larva*’s third level of narrative is much simpler to understand. It (mostly) limits itself to just one language. It uses sentences with (mostly) standard punctuation. Basic facts, like *who* is speaking, are (mostly) clear. And—a few examples of minor wordplay notwithstanding—its vocabulary is straightforward and, even more importantly, (mostly) intact. Herr Narrator again intrudes without restraint—there are twenty-two interjections over the course of the first note, this time set apart with bracket rather than footnote. But their power to obfuscate is diminished by the clarity of both their demarcation *and* the language that surrounds them. After layers of utter incomprehension, Babelle’s “Pillow Notes” are thus a firmer footing on which one can land and gather him or herself before launching back into the madness.

Babelle’s commentary always concludes with a page and footnote number guiding the reader to the original annotation. Pillow Note 1 ends with “(13.1)” (456). From there, we must find our own way back to the source of *that* footnote, eyes scanning the strange text until they land on the digit in question. In the case of the opening interpolation, we have only traveled *three* words. Three words—“PLUCK THE CLOVER”—lead to half a page of bewilderment (that no doubt requires rereading) followed by four more of explanation (peppered with plenty of Herr Narrator’s confusion, of course). And when one finally returns to the point of departure, a new kind of disorientation reigns: Where was I? What was happening? What does it mean? And so begins another round of reacquainting oneself with words that at every turn resist understanding. This pattern continues for hundreds of pages, but it is not the end of *Larva*’s structural complexity. There are in fact two more narrative levels that, unlike the intertwining tales of Milalias, Herr Narrator, and Babelle, stand alone at their close. When Babelle’s “Pillow Notes” end, “Babelle’s Photo Album” begins, a foldout map of London preceding an assortment of photographs of streets, shops, pubs, and landmarks mentioned in the preceding texts because of their connections to the characters. These images, never referenced explicitly in any of the written portions of the novel, persist in a state of semi-isolation, at once a part of what has come before and also an independent entity.

The final section of *Larva* is the “Index of Names” whose title page sits alongside an image of a sign for a pub named “World’s End” (580). The function of an index, particularly in a work as long and dense as *Larva*, might seem obvious. It is there to help us orient ourselves. In this case, however, the “Index of Names” simply adds to the uncertainty because it is incomplete, listing *most* of the work’s characters alongside *some* of the pages on which they are located. It is a lack that Julián Ríos in fact relishes. In a conversation with Marie-Lise Gazarian Gautier published in *Interviews with Spanish Authors*, he acknowledges that the index “gives the readers some clues, although not all the names are mentioned, just some that are disguised in various phrases and phases, masked in that masque of masks which is *Larva*” (244). Engaging orally in the very wordplay that defines his writing, Ríos transforms roadmap into riddle. The “Index of Names”—a component that should reveal but instead obscures—is not a guide *to*

⁶⁴ On such example is when she contrasts the “mask of night, the nightdisguise of bosky darkness...” with the brightness of her “[body] unveiled, almost, in [her] vaporous wispy caftan, so vamp fatale...” (456). As we have seen, Milalias earlier made reference to her “vaporous black nightie” (13). Such overlaps not only suggest edits by Herr Narrator and Milalias, they also underscore the predominance of the themes of authorship and translation.

Larva, but rather a part of it. It does not exist outside the novel. In playing by the same rules, it becomes part of the game, yet another layer of impishly impenetrable fiction that ensures *Larva* remains a mystery, even to those intrepid enough to reach “World’s End”.

In the same interview, Ríos compares this complex configuration to the four-leaf clover, a motif that recurs throughout the novel as word *and* sketch. Because it echoes visually the interplay of its discrete narrative levels both on the page and during the reading process, Ríos sees the clover’s symmetrical structure is an apt symbol for *Larva*. Just as a single leaf on a clover reflects each of the other three from a certain perspective, so Milalias’s account of the *fiesta de San Juan* mirrors Herr Narrator’s commentary, Babelle’s “Pillow Notes”, and even the incomplete “Index of Names”.⁶⁵ Like the four leaves of an individual clover, each written portion of the text is both distinct from and akin to its counterparts. They are different, yet the same; four separate, yet parallel pieces of a puzzle that combine to create a whole at once fragmented and unified. While discussing this unconventional structure, Ríos does not limit himself to flora. Fittingly, in an effort to clarify the metaphor, the effusive author instead adds yet another thread to this already dense web when he explains that, “the pages on the left are the mirrors in which “language reflects itself,” as Mallarmé said; they are the second leaf...” (244). Piling metaphor upon metaphor upon intertextual reference, his account thus truly embodies *Larva*’s spirit of convolution, its layers playfully thwarting any sense of certitude. Like the wandering Milalias, the reader of *Larva* can never say “I’m here” or “I’ve arrived”. There is no finish line across which one will find genuine comprehension, no angle that offers true clarity. In its complexity, *Larva*’s ground is always shaky, but—when following the lead of Ríos and his protagonists—the only response to such unease is to fearlessly delve deeper into the gnarled literary maze.

Yet as one travels farther into the undergrowth, a paradox emerges, for the same characteristics that keep the reader confused *within* the novel’s sinuous structure also ensure they remain firmly—and consciously—on its outside. *Larva*’s experimental form befuddles to such an extent that I will never truly lose myself in its drama. I am too busy flipping between sections, forgetting my place, and trying to make sense of the multiple voices and mysterious punctuation. In this way, *Larva*’s perplexingly carved-up plot is forever forcing its readers back to its exterior, reminding them that all this is indeed happening in a *book*. *Larva* is a “page-turner” in the most literal sense, compelling the almost constant motion of one’s hands. It is a decidedly physical reading experience, made only more so by the novel’s heft. *Larva* is big and long. To read it is to feel the soft edges of its countless pages as they glide past your fingers and note them growing heavy in your palm as the minutes pass. It is, in other words, to perceive *Larva* as book before story, an outward shift that undoubtedly has precedent in the artist’s book, another (self-consciously) material art form that, as Johanna Drucker points out in *The Century of Artists’ Books*, flourished across the twentieth century. The artist’s book is an art object built from a book, but it is not designed to be read in the conventional sense. It “is a book created as an original work of art, rather than a reproduction of preexisting work” (2). So the artist’s book experiments with form in ways that underscore its physicality. Its binding may be unfamiliar, its pages blank or bursting. They may have many words or none at all, include photographs, original sketches, or maps. They may be cut or arranged three-dimensionally, printed as photocopies or on fine letterpress. The artist’s book, as a genre, is thus varied in its inventiveness, its unexpected shape(s) inextricably tied to the “thematic or aesthetic issues” (2) it

⁶⁵ Notably (and strangely), Ríos’s depiction does not include “Babelle’s Photo Album”, but does include the index.

addresses. For Ulises Carrión in “The New Art of Making Books”, such confluence between form and (form-focused) content is what distinguishes the artist’s book. Early on he declares: “A book can also exist as an autonomous and self-sufficient form, including perhaps a text that emphasizes that form, a text that is an organic part of that form; here begins the new art of making books” (n.p.). Advocating—in verse—for a new kind of book whose (self-reflexive) pages are *poetic*, he (like Shklovsky) distinguishes between the invisibly accepted conventions of prose and those of poetry. The difference lies not in length, but introspection: “A book of poems contains as many words as, or more than, a novel, but it uses ultimately the real, physical space whereon these words appear, in a more intentional, more evident, deeper way” (n.p.).

For Drucker, such self-consciousness is also a hallmark of the category. “Disturbing conventions of reading by calling attention to... [book] structures is often a feature of artists’ books through an emphasis on the features of the page and pointing to the book as a whole” (161). To again use Shklovsky’s familiar language, these *poetic* disturbances *defamiliarize*, thus altering our (numbingly habituated) awareness and allowing us to experience them as the *things* they actually are. *Larva* is not an artist’s book. However mutilated, it has a story and an identity as novel. But it is as close to an artist’s book as a novel can be, its many structural disturbances offering a fundamentally material encounter that accentuates its objecthood. Like its relative the artist’s book, *Larva* is designed to be felt, not consumed. Instead of a portal to intrigue and emotion, it is an object itself deserving of notice. It is the glass pane rather than the garden, a textual sculpture whose corporeal contours are celebrated for precisely what they are – manuscript, page, paper.

This vision of novel as simply art (book) undoubtedly recalls Susan Sontag’s case *Against Interpretation*. It also shares much with another renowned reflection on the origin of artistic significance that appeared just one year later in 1967 –Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood”. Unlike Sontag—but appropriately for *Larva*—“Art and Objecthood” is dedicated exclusively to the contemporary visual arts, which Fried characterizes as discarding their representational function and embracing their position as autonomous object. He deems this new art *literalist*, explaining that it “stakes everything on shape as a given property of objects, if not, indeed, as a kind of object in its own right. It aspires, not to defeat or suspend its own objecthood, but on the contrary to discover and project objecthood as such” (120). For *literalists* like Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Tony Smith, objecthood is most clearly projected when a work of art appears *whole*, its individual elements (and the ways in which they relate) eclipsed by an overarching unity of *shape*. It is through shape that they “assert the values of wholeness, singleness, and indivisibility –of a work’s being as nearly as possible, “one thing,” a single ‘Specific Object.’” (119).⁶⁶ It is shape that one should see and the impression should be total – not of bolts, beams, or paint strokes, but of an entirety that precedes its parts from conception to reception. Indeed, “[the] shape is the object: at any rate, what secures the wholeness of the object is the singleness of the shape” (119). Notably, wholeness is a key trait of the artist’s book, which is *literalist* in its way. Carrión explains that “In the old art the writer writes texts. / In the new art the writer makes books”. Drucker describes formal interrogation at the level of the page *and* the book. When such self-reflexivity remains focused externally, on the book as a whole, it can even become a “book sculpture” (Drucker 13). A “book sculpture” is impenetrable, fashioned for only the totality of its outside to be observed.

⁶⁶ Fried’s focus on sculptural *wholeness* shares much with Sontag’s case *Against Interpretation*. She too argues for art to be seen—and valued—in its entirety, rather than dispersed into analyzable pieces.

At first glance, *Larva* hardly seems to convey such singleness. Parts abound. Everywhere the reader turns, there is a new section, another footnote, or a distinct voice, all of which stand out because they are unexpected and unusual. *Larva* is full of words (and occasionally, images) apparently clamoring for attention. “Look at me”, “Pentecosthesaurus day” (154) seems to say. “I’m different”, declares “Daradiridatumtariddle” (175). Can such structural intricacy really coalesce into any sort of whole? Is there a totalizing vista of *Larva*’s forest, given the extreme nature of its trees? Strangely, and perhaps counterintuitively, unity of form *is* possible, if only because all those pieces that are so difficult to comprehend are also built to be handled. *Larva* may be composed of an endless stream of surprise, startling pivots, phrases, and periods drawing one into a state of bewilderment, but they can—like the original artist’s book or the enormous minimalist sculpture—also quite literally be touched. It is this touch to which the reader can cling when the boat rocks too forcefully. Like the ever-enigmatic *Volverás a Región* a decade before, exploration of *Larva*’s literary depths, impossible as they are to understand intellectually, must be accompanied by a regular retreat to the surface.

Fortunately, when an outburst by Herr Narrator is too confusing or an observation by Milalias too blurred, one need not wait long before being instructed to go elsewhere. And this pause in reading is key to experiencing *Larva* as a whole because it provides not only an opportunity to compose oneself, but also an all-important shift in perspective. In these moments, the maddening details disappear, taking with them the accompanying frustration, and the book itself (re)emerges. The view is panoramic and—consequently—unifying, allowing the reader to take in *Larva* as a totality. From up here, the novel exists as concept, feeling, and energy rather than ambiguous action, convoluted form, or contrary character. All those elements remain, but for a time they are hidden, their edges obscured to such an extent that the outline of a broader—and more cohesive—shape arises. And that shape is not just *Larva* the book, a thing in one’s hands. It is also *Larva* the (almost) artist’s book, the art object, a thing crafted to be held, observed, and absorbed instead of simply read. From the outside, there is no story and no segmentation. From above, *Larva* looks unbroken, even smooth. So the novel becomes a thing at which the reader must marvel. It is, after all, like nothing they’ve ever experienced.

In his analysis of *literalism*, Fried—again, appropriately in the case of *Larva*—underscores size as a trait central to the creation of such palpable objecthood. When a work of art is big, it imposes its will, compelling a certain kind of interaction that itself highlights art as thing. “The larger the object the more we are forced to keep our distance from it...” (126), a reality which only reinforces its substantial nature. “The largeness of the piece, in conjunction with its nonrelational, unitary character, distances the beholder—not just physically but psychically. It is, one might say, precisely this distancing that makes the beholder a subject and the piece in question... an object” (126). And while it may not fill a room, *Larva* is nevertheless large, its already-mentioned weight and girth without a doubt working in much the same way as that of its sculptural counterparts. In both instances, the monumentality of the work catches one off guard, thus generating the separation into subject and object noted by Fried. As the act of observing transforms viewer (or reader) into subject, the observed work is acknowledged as an independent entity and likewise transformed into object. Its representational role cast off, it is reborn as a (large) thing intrinsically worthy of regard.

This startling scale also shifts the quality of the regard, again accentuating the work of art as a “Specific Thing”. Fried argues that the size of *literalist* pieces induces greater “physical participation” (128) from the spectator. Rather than the one-way examination of subject watching object, it is an encounter between two bodies in space. As such, there is no vacuum.

The work of art ceases to be self-contained: “[The] experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation—one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder...*” (125). Bulk generates distance, and that distance, by molding the way in which viewer and art interact, paradoxically draws them together. The idea is not to overpower, but rather to “...*confront* the beholder—[the things that are literalist works of art] must, one might almost say, be placed not just in his space but in his way” (127). Indeed, the work’s very objecthood *depends* on this confrontation, as it is in some measure the result of the circumstances in which it is seen. The sculpture (or novel) is an integral object not only because it is big and seemingly indivisible, but also because it *confronts* an individual in a particular place at a specific moment. Borrowing a phrase from Robert Morris, Fried describes just how much “the entire situation” (127) matters:

It is, I think, worth remarking that ‘the entire situation’ means exactly that: all of it—including, it seems, the beholder’s body. There is nothing within his field of vision—nothing that he takes note of any way—that, as it were, declares its irrelevance to the situation, and therefore to the experience in question. On the contrary, for something to be perceived at all is for it to be perceived as part of that situation. Everything counts—not as part of the object, but as part of the situation in which its objecthood is established and on which that objecthood at least partly depends (127).

My experience of a work of art, with all its nuance and idiosyncrasy, generates the very objecthood that I observe. The space where it sits; the spot where I stand; the length of my stay; the time of day; my very being—all of it “establishes” art as thing.

Fried labels the power of *literalist* art a “stage presence” (130), its (object-generating) confrontational impulses resulting in “...the special complicity that that work extorts from the beholder. Something is said to have presence when it demands that the beholder take it into account, that he take it *seriously*—and when the fulfillment of that demand consists simply in being *aware* of it and, so to speak, in acting accordingly” (127-8). In other words, *literalist* art is not shy about wanting to be noticed, a trait indisputably shared by *Larva*. It is also one Fried eventually dismisses as excessively *theatrical*. The logic goes: as it strains for attention, any hope of transcendence evaporates. It is made for an audience, not for eternity, and so it is cheapened, any potential profundity reduced to the state of being “merely interesting” (142). How long must I look to see the totality? *Literalism*, an art of “duration” (140), says forever. Given not only *Larva*’s formal opulence, but also the exaggerated tone Ríos himself takes with Gazarian Gautier, it seems unlikely he would rebuff *theatrical* as descriptor, whether literary or personal. To the contrary, the theatricality of *Larva* (and its author) is innate and patent, something to be celebrated. *Larva* too confronts the reader, its shockingly fractured structure relishing confusion and commanding prolonged perception. What matters is not that *Larva* is understood literally, but that it is seen. Rather than a vessel for plot, it too is an object for study, one that—like its *literalist* counterparts in the visual arts—invokes the “complicity” of the beholder.

Time and again, Ríos explicitly embraces the seminal role of readers whose creative powers, he argues, surpass even those of the author. “A book starts to exist truly only after it is reread”, he says, before musing: “...doesn’t the person who reads a book twice also write it? I think he does, undoubtedly” (241). Indeed, writers actually yearn to be readers because writing is “an unrepeatable, limited action” and “a finite act” (241). Reading, on the other hand, is “infinite and unending” and “a truly liberating act” (241). This contrast makes the “curious”

reader an “active participant” (242) Ríos appropriately christens *elector*, a play-on-words expressly designed to capture their capacity to “redirect” (242):

...the “lector” is the elector or selector, as I said in *Larva* and in interviews a few years ago. I think “lector” elects with his eyes and with his hearing: he can elect multiple moments and directions, and he has all the electoral rights in the world. The writer doesn’t have the vote, although he has a voice. That’s why I think that when all is said and done, a book is no more than the sum total of its readers (242).⁶⁷

A novel is written to be read. From Ríos’s perspective, this purpose gives readers artistic agency. A novel exists to engage *them*. It *is* because the “patient” (241) attention of its readers lingers long enough to create an “entire situation” from which objecthood also emerges. In short, readers hold sway. And as with a theatrical production, the influence is collective. It is not one reader who will determine *Larva*’s fate, but many; the repeated act of reading (or observation) ultimately transforming the novel into a “Specific Thing”. The individual experience is solitary—a lone figure adrift in a sea of literary disorder—but the vastness of that sea means the experience is also shared. I am not alone in my discomfort at starting on the right. The precise conditions in which I encounter *Larva* might be unique, but my bewilderment at the layered footnotes is not. We all flip hesitantly from one section to another and reread lines full of undecipherable neologisms. We all wonder. We are all always on the outside, noticing in a way that transforms crazy story into art object.

During his tribute to the *elector*, Ríos states: “My ideal reader is the sum total of all past, present, and future readers, myself included” (242). The evolution to object—and to art—thus depends on the *patience* and *curiosity* of the group. The group has the power to see and to puzzle. The observations and deliberations of the group instill in the novel its value. In this way, the relationship is symbiotic—the readers’ awareness creating art that is in turn uniquely positioned to enrich an existence Sontag characterizes as otherwise unbearably dreary. Here is something to look at—a thing, a work of art—that will invigorate because it enraptures, and the *beholder* will be better for it. Fried would undoubtedly dismiss these (loud) transformational claims as *theatrical*. Relishing attention does not guarantee depth. It may even indicate its inverse (being reduced to *mere interest*). But for this very reason the critic also places much weight on the present, and on the capacity of (good) art to convey, in an instant, *all* of itself. There should be no need to linger, “...because *at every moment the world itself is wholly manifest*” (145). The essence of the best art is immediately perceptible, so clear it embodies “the condition...of existing in, indeed of secreting or constituting, a continuous and perpetual present”. Indeed, Fried sees “presentness and instantaneousness” (145) as the gift of great art. It offers itself up whole again and again, as if in a state of “perpetual creation”.

With *theatrical*, Fried invokes exaggeration and melodrama. He derides the need to be noticed and posits protracted observation as a reflection of a fundamental weakness—an inability

⁶⁷ Such a description of the uniquely active role of the reader brings to mind the (later) concept of the *hypertext*, a term that alternately describes “a form of electronic text, a radically new information technology, and a mode of publication” (Landow 3). In a *hypertext*, blocks of text are connected to other blocks of text (as well as “visual information, sound, animation, and other forms of data” (Landow 3)). The reader does not follow an established sequence, but instead makes their way through by selecting links (or not). In such a system, the reader naturally has more control over the path they trace. Like the reader of *Larva* (who may or may not follow all the footnotes), the *hypertext* reader *elects* the next step. In this way, Julián Ríos’s (fragmented) artistic ideals are harbingers of what’s possible in the age of the Internet (and the conclusion of this dissertation).

to effectively convey. The crux should be at every instant, and from every angle, self-evident. Yet *theatrical* also conjures theater, an art form of that sought-after present, one whose very nature confines the spectator to the moment they are witnessing because, without an edge or an opening chapter to revisit, that is all there is. And while Ríos would likely welcome any account of his novel as melodramatic and over-the-top (it is), *Larva's* strange structure also restricts its readers to a series of nows, all equally mysterious, equally pointed, and—in this way—equally revelatory. One can only behold the present in *Larva*; it is the only moment that makes sense. The past is a jumble of page flips through utter disarray. The future? One cannot even begin to imagine. But this footnote here captivates. I see it—whether because or in spite of the confusion—in a light that illuminates the work as a *whole*. It stands alone, but is all-encompassing. So is the next island of wit on which I will land a few lines (and page turns) later. In the absence of the expected progression from front to back and beginning to end, I cling to a series of “continual and perpetual [presents]”. Story retreats and *Larva* emerges, a baffling but beautiful “Specific Thing”.

II. Screams, Stutters, and Stammers: (Objectified) Language in *Larva*

Ríos envisions an infinity born of his readers, the diverse courses they chart through the work generating constant evolution, a permanent state of unfolding in which Fried paradoxically locates art's immutable essence. A few decades after Fried and a few years after *Larva*, Italo Calvino outlines a similarly expansive phenomenon, naming it multiplicity. For Calvino, however, the source of the expansion is the text itself. In a 1985-86 lecture series on literature in the new millennium⁶⁸, the author and critic identifies multiplicity as one of six key traits that will ensure continued relevance. Literature, he says, is powerful because of its propensity to radiate outward and so envelop everything in its path. Each paragraph contains innumerable connections. Each word is a link in an unending chain of associations. Praising the complexity of Marcel Proust and Carlo Emilio Gadda, the “Italian equivalent to James Joyce” (106), Calvino characterizes the novel “as encyclopedia, as a method of knowledge, and above all as a network of connections between the events, the people, and the things of the world” (105). In the refusal of artists like Proust, Gadda, and Ríos to simplify,

...the least thing is seen as the center of a network of relationships that the writer cannot restrain himself from following, multiplying the details so that his descriptions and digressions become infinite. Whatever the starting point, the matter in hand spreads out and out, encompassing even vaster horizons, and if it were permitted to go on further and further in every direction, it would end by embracing the entire universe (107).

Notably, Calvino does not limit his sweeping vision to structure and content. To remain relevant, the ever-expanding novel should embody the encyclopedia at *all* levels, starting with the material of its construction—language. The words themselves must protract, simultaneously absorbing and reflecting their surroundings, in order to achieve eternity. They too are an accumulation, their present state the product of a complicated past lurking just beneath the surface, their current connotation the mere residue of the diverse histories, tongues, and meanings that have already passed through them. The detailed Gadda is Calvino's model for

⁶⁸ These lectures given by Italo Calvino were published posthumously in 1988 under the title *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*.

such scope. By “exploiting the semantic potential of words, of all the varieties of verbal and syntactical forms with their connotations and tones, together with the often comic effects created by their juxtaposition”, Gadda shows literature to be “the convergence of infinite relationships, past and future, real or possible...” (107). Linguistic intricacies expose their counterparts in the wider world and so (strangely) help us understand. In accepting the text as it is, as layered and complex as the person and place that produce it, that which confuses also clarifies.

What would Calvino say about *Larva*, a novel whose extreme fragmentation clearly reaches beyond form into language? Ríos too openly toys with literature’s building blocks, using rhyme, alliteration, and allusion with a frequency and intensity that at once evokes infinity *and* defies comprehension. The narrative teems with humorous wordplay and erotic insinuation. There are intertextual references, both banal and erudite, at every turn. The language of *Larva* is mind-bogglingly dense and so disfigured that it is often unrecognizable, its convolutions creating countless tangents that exemplify Calvino’s call for a “...web radiating out from every object...” (107). They (along with our background, education, or even mood) carry us in any number of directions. But they often do not make sense. And as line after line is deprived of its role as referent, *Larva*’s words, like the book that contains them, are reborn as things –knotty things, things in whose minutiae Calvino sees the universe, tactile and observable things.

Larva’s second chapter, “The Book of Numbers”, highlights this object-inducing complexity as it accompanies Milalias on his search for Sleeping Beauty. While wandering the Hall of Murals, he notices “...the extravagant poses of figures painted on the walls, figures twisted and contorted into numerical shapes” (83). He also observes other revelers—a Hun with an Andalusian beauty, a toga-wearing Roman official, a flashy alchemist, a young alpinist bedecked in hiking boots and flowers, even Madame Butterfly herself—, the narration flowing so seamlessly between their perspectives and his that its source is generally unclear. It could be Milalias himself, another costumed partygoer, or even a third-person narrator. Whoever it is, we are left alone to (attempt to) decipher. Then there are the words themselves. There are moments, like this playfully frustrated declaration from our Don Juan, whose mutilated language is just barely held together by a semblance of grammar:

Irrelevant! She’s no prime number! Don Juan struck his chest. The thousand flowers of the bumbling drone...(How exhausting. And there’s still mille to come, millipederast! Seize the daisy miller, flit on to the next flower, pollynator...) Ah my wily divine lady, and he sighed, have them bring me the bill. I’m read to pay, for a thousand loves. Waitress! The bill! Everything is totailed and re-tailed and consume-consume-consummated? He indicated, stretching his arms, the throng of masks: Everyone wants to double-check the check, without taking into account-how shall I put it-the X fucktor! Here everyone insists upon strict accounts and by the end they lose track...Looking for the menu? Toss the old debts and deal a new meal! And away he strutted with a cackle: Gag! Gag! Gag! Gag! Gagargaling number-gags...((Gagaffeur! Gagoliard!)) (91).

The punctuation is mostly familiar. There are simple sentences with identifiable subjects and predicates as well as properly spelled words. Yet even the grammatically correct phrases are difficult to understand. What does “She’s no prime number!” mean?⁶⁹ Where is the bill he

⁶⁹ As its title, “Book of Numbers” anticipates, much of the wordplay in *Larva*’s second chapter centers around number. Other jokes include: Milalias forming a zero with his fingers as he recites *Hamlet* (83); his declaration of “I’ve ONE!” (89); and his references to “Four. Play!” and a “Fournicator!!!” (91).

wants brought? The mystery only grows as Ríos digs into the structure of individual words, minor revisions generating multiplicity in the form of double entendres. For example, when “totaled” is changed to “totailed” and a hyphenated “retailed” becomes “re-tailed”, a sexual undertone emerges that is built upon tail’s colloquial significance as sexual intercourse. The subsequent juxtaposition of “consume” and “consummate” and the refashioning of “X factor” into “X fucktor” only make this erotic evocation more explicit. So perhaps Milalias is ready to settle up sexually with Sleeping Beauty, to clear the balance of any lingering hostility by reconnecting physically? We cannot be sure. And as Don Juan retreats repeating “Gag! Gag! Gag! Gag!” that uncertainty seems the point. We know very little about the main characters and their relationship. There is no story to follow, no emotional depths to plunge—only words to notice and puns to ponder.

Indeed, in the intoxicating atmosphere of the masquerade ball, coarseness reigns and the unending innuendos are often carried beyond recognition, as when Herr Narrator observes Milalias tracing an “M” with his finger and exclaims: “Trazo M?! I trace M? The first of your five capital Ms, tantraversifying tantraveler? Tantragicomic tantract-writer? M?! Lang Slang, long of tongue? One of the thousand ems or fems of your erotickling mammothesis? / Trazo M. You know that magistral line better backwards. Ein Mussikalischer Spassage...” (90). Again, the passage is awash in highly suggestive neologisms born of combination. The litany of terms transformed with *tantra*—“tantraversifying tantraveler” and “[tantragicomic] tantract-writer”—impishly invokes tantric sex while also underscoring *Larva*’s range of references and focus on writing. These many layers of meaning, however, paradoxically prevent actual understanding. I notice the allusions and sometimes start or chuckle, but exactly *what* Herr Narrator is trying to say remains out of reach. “Lang Slang, long of tongue”? Is he describing himself or his protagonist? Even the M outlined by Milalias is sexualized and confused, becoming “the thousand ems or fems of your erotickling mammothesis”. “[Erotickling]’ is legible as a mix of “erotic” and “tickling”, “mammothesis” is less so. By the time we arrive at footnote’s end with “Ein Mussikalischer Spassage...”, any hope of comprehension is lost. This final untranslated phrase certainly *looks* like German, but the non-German speaker cannot be sure. A consultation with translation software does little to clarify, indicating that “Ein” is one, “Mussikalischer” is (perhaps) a misspelling of the German term for “more musical”, and “Spassage” does not exist. It is a three-word spiral into impenetrability that alone encapsulates *Larva*.

In addition to German, the narration overflows with French and Italian, the presence of so many (untranslated) phrases contributing to linguistic objectification by fostering incomprehension. Sometimes it is just a word or two, like when Milalias directs himself to “Count! Raconteur, recount...” before noting the rare “sincere” guest: “Wunderkind? One wonders. . . ((Moderato contabile))” (83). In both cases, the phrases are familiar enough to facilitate at least a degree of insight, their presence contributing to *Larva*’s (quintessentially postmodern) lighthearted internationalism. On other occasions, significance is almost impossible to extract without knowledge of the language in question. As Milalias pauses to dance and observe a “Rubenesque blonde, in chains and nearly nude straddling a tom-tom”, consecutive interjections by Herr Narrator confound, with “2. Très sot!: Fais le saut dans sauterie. Fais le grande saut dans le Fête des sots!” followed by “3. Convincing without vanquishing?: Mieux vaut un convaincu qu’un vaincu...” and “4. Fou, géronte!: The shameful act of that screwball tramp...” (96). A subsequent reaction to a “bearded man in striped sailor’s shirt and sleeping cap” (95) brandishing a climbing rope and shouting “Rappel. Ah oui! Rappel. Ach ja!

((Rappelkopf!⁶))” (97) demonstrates the difficulty of deciphering these multilingual utterances, even when they include unaltered real words: “6. The Alp-King und der Manschenfeind?: Rappelkopf! Misanthroped-up tight!” (96). Playing with the sonorous overlap between rope and misanthrope in order to mock the agitated mariner, the last sentence is a reminder that in *Larva* nothing can be trusted. Manipulation must be expected. So when the reader comes across a footnote in German (or French or Italian) that they do not understand, they will wonder not just what it means, but also whether meaning is possible. Do these words really exist? Can I look them up in a dictionary? If they have been modified, how will I ever grasp the nature of that modification and its impact on meaning? It turns out that “Manschenfeind” is German for misanthrope. The earlier “Mieux vaut un convaincu qu’un vaincu” is also translatable⁷⁰. But knowing their literal meaning does little to staunch the overwhelming sense of bewilderment. I must be missing *something*—like the apparent (and untranslatable) game involving “convaincu” and “vaincu”—and I will never know *what*.

Like the constant movement between sections that forces its readers to the novel’s exterior, so the complexity of its words keeps them on the outside of its language. The language of *Larva* is a mystery for which there is no solution, a reality underscored by the preponderance of not only linguistic dismemberment, myriad references, and unexplained foreign phrases, but also actual unintelligible babble. A few pages later the “bearded sailor” reappears, this time ringing a bell while approaching a knife-wielding “Flying Dutchwoman” as Madame Butterfly looks on. Suddenly, one of them (along with, it seems, the third-person narrator) hollers:

Ah you! Too! Ai! Haa! Oohoo! Ay, my onnanista...Oh my ray...Fretfully yours already. You-you-united! Oo! with a tremulous voice, until moody death mu-mu-moves us...Mu! mu! Til the mool mold us. Ha! Ha! Hai! Oohoo! Oi! Oioi! Huuhu! Hu! Huu! Huun! Hun! Hui! exhaling and mouthing and slobbering facedown on the matador’s belly. Ha! Cowardly loafer!

Not knowing *who* is speaking is disconcerting, but that disconcertion is immediately overtaken by the utter opacity of *what* is said. It is nothing more than a string of virtually non-verbal outbursts. Speech is replaced with sound, or at least the image of it. And the weirdness of it all is heightened by the length and evolution of the cries. “Ah you!” eventually devolves into “Oohoo”. A series of intelligible laughs —“Ha! Ha!”—disintegrates into the wholly nonsensical “Hai! Oohoo! Oi! Oioi! Huuhu! Hu! Huu! Huun! Hun! Hui!” Again, the reader senses that they are not in on the joke, but this time it feels completely out of reach. This spew of letters and noise is so removed from not just any potential frame of reference—linguistic or otherwise—but also language itself, that it seems only natural to wonder: What’s the point? Does *Larva* really say anything? Or is it just a word game whose ultimate goal is comedic confusion? What follows one (short) paragraph later appears to answer the latter in the affirmative. When an unidentifiable partygoer emits, “Gag a gag, gaga á go-go...Go-go-go-goo-googo-gottago-go to my bed, tired wanterfer...” (115), we are confronted with genuine gibberish, communication reduced to the pre-verbal babblings of a baby. When first learning to speak, an infant’s chattering is detached from a concrete referent. It is an exercise in sound and movement,

⁷⁰ Google translates this sentence as “Better a convinced than a loser”.

preparation for later dialogue.⁷¹ Such is the experience of the (puzzled) reader of *Larva*. The signifier having been severed from a signified, they too are left with only reverberation and shape. There is no inside, nothing to apprehend intellectually. One must simply listen and look at this *thing* that brazenly flouts expectation by refusing to refer to anything beyond its borders. *Larva*'s language simply does not do what it is *supposed* to do. It does not tell. And so—like the earlier works of Ayala, Salinas, and Benet—it is *estranged* and the reader is alienated, forced to see word as object rather than route to somewhere else.

Perplexity thus compels a reconsideration of language's purpose *and* value. As Susan Sontag reminds us time and again, literature is worthy not because it describes, but because it *is*. It enriches because it exists, a reality accentuated by the removal of the referential function. In the Gazarian Gautier interview, Ríos himself highlights the often-overlooked innate materiality of words, noting: "People tend to think that words are abstract. Writers often envy painters for their ability to use plastic materials and dip their fingers into the paint. But for me, words are also tactile and plastic; they have an inherent sensuality. As a writer, I attempt to show the sensual, physical, material aspects of words" (255-56). Citing Octavio Paz's identification of author as "servant" (255), Ríos goes further still. Language is not "tactile and plastic" because it is just any object. To the contrary – a word is "sensual" because "[it] has a body and his bodyguard and servant the writer knows how to handle the word hand by hand" (256). Words do not simply construct people (at least under more conventional narrative circumstances)⁷². They *are* people. They too have bodies that are protected and cared for by the hands of their creator. They too are more than their (potential) capacity to transmit thought. Words—and literature—matter because their very being, its sounds and its shapes, make the world more beautiful and profound. Without saying anything, far from their communicative role, they speak through sensation, and in the process enliven, intensify, and expand the perspectives of those they touch.

Relying on Clive Bell's definition of "significant form"⁷³, Susanne K. Langer also embraces the notion of art as an object that elevates in her 1953 *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*. Challenging the "polarity of feeling and form" (17) she claims typifies the theory of her era,

⁷¹ Such babbling undoubtedly recalls Sound Poetry, thus offering another angle from which we can understand *Larva*'s strange language as distinctly poetic (and avant-garde). Although its origins are disputed (some see them as reaching as far back as the oral traditions of pre-literate societies), Sound Poetry is a Dadaist (and Futurist) practice that explores words as sound rather than meaning. And while it might seem counterintuitive to consider (invisible and intangible) sound as object, its existence independent of a signifier in fact generates materiality. In their essay "Harpichords metallic howl—", Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo make the case for the "corporality" (255) of Sound Poetry using the specific example "Klink-Hratvenga" by the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. The poem, they argue, is a sensorial exercise that is deeply connected to the poet's body and, as such, is fundamentally corporeal. This notion of a uniquely sonic materiality rooted in the experience of sound as the (meaningless) product of the human body offers another avenue for understanding *Larva*, a novel also filled with unintelligible echoes. In this way, how we as readers comprehend materiality (in *Larva* and beyond) also evolves, from the weight of the book itself, to the arrangement of icons on the page, and now, to the decidedly physical reverberations of its nonsensical chatter.

⁷² Before underscoring their materiality, Ríos observes: "[Characters] in a literary work are made of words, no more and no less. Words on the page..." (255).

⁷³ In his 1913 *Art*, Clive Bell observes that there is a "peculiar emotion provoked by works of art" (10). He labels this feeling "aesthetic emotion" and sets out to "discover some quality common and peculiar to all the objects that provoke it" (10). This is, he says, "the central problem of aesthetics". His answer is "Significant Form" (11), which he defines (rather vaguely) as "forms arranged and combined according to certain unknown and mysterious laws do move us in a particular way" (16). The "rightness and necessity" (21) of these "aesthetically moving forms" (16) is difficult to capture with words, but is nonetheless instantly recognizable.

Langer defines art as an objectification of the “world’s emotional content” (19). Indeed, for Langer feeling *depends on* form, which is the vessel that distills and imparts not a “feeling expressed representationally”, but rather “the objective feeling which inheres in the work itself” (20). In other words, it is not Milalías’s playful frustration or the hopelessness of Region’s *doctor Sebastián* conveyed by their novels’ forms. It is an altogether distinct feeling born of—and inseparable from—the words themselves, and it exists apart from any “inward states of an animate being” (20). Instead of a “signal”, which merely “serves to make us notice the object or situation it bespeaks” (26), art is a *material* symbol whose goal is the expression of human feeling *objectified*. And while this is true of all kinds of art⁷⁴, literature, like music, stands out as a uniquely “complex symbol” (30) because

[its] parts not only fuse together to yield a greater entity, but in so doing they maintain some degree of separate existence, and the sensuous character of each element is affected by its function in the complex whole. This means that the greater entity we call a composition is not merely produced by mixture, like a new color made by mixing paints, but is *articulated*, i.e. its internal structure is given to our perception (31).

A novel and a symphony are therefore both examples of “articulated form” (31). Although their many pieces remain visible individually, they undergo a sort of chemical reaction out of which art, a feeling-generating object, arises.

The parallels, however, do not end there—especially for experimental works like *Larva*. Langer goes on to argue that in the absence of “conventional reference” (31), music does not bear meaning in the traditional sense. There are no “fixed associations” (31) and hence nothing to interpret. Music instead “has *import*, and this import is the pattern of sentience—the pattern of life itself, as it is felt and directly known” (31). In this way, “music is “significant form,” and its significance is that of a symbol, a *highly articulated sensuous object*, which by virtue of its dynamic structure can express the forms of vital experience *which language is peculiarly unfit to convey*” (32, emphasis mine). Even intangible music is a *thing* whose physicality transcends intellect to make it feel alive. It is this indescribable sense of *livingness*, built of thousands of separate notes coming together to create something *new*⁷⁵, that counts. And that something is “not logically discriminated, but is felt as a quality...” (32). It cannot be understood, but no matter—you know it when you hear (or see) it because it is already inside all of us. Sentience, vitality, sensuousness—life’s ever-present pulse—is where music leads as an “articulate but non-discursive form” (Langer 32) whose very shape embodies existence so palpably that its listener cannot help but feel more deeply.

Could the same not be said for *Larva*, a novel whose mysteriously mutilated language also lacks “conventional reference” but nevertheless conveys? *Larva* likewise defies logic, its impenetrable intricacy bringing us closer to Benet’s longed-for *zonas oscuras* than to any

⁷⁴ After using music to introduce her theory of objectified feeling, Langer declares that “all the essential propositions in the theory of music may be extended to the other arts” (32). She goes on to dedicate chapters to music, narrative, poetry, painting, and dance.

⁷⁵ That something new is produced is central to Langer’s definition of art. It is, in fact, both the what and why of art: “An artifact as such is merely a combination of material parts, or a modification of a natural object to suit human purposes. A work of art, on the other hand, is more than an “arrangement” of given things—even qualitative things. Something emerges from the arrangement of tones or colors, which was not there before, and this, rather than the arranged material, is the symbol of sentience” (40).

rational study of psyche or society. It is undoubtedly a “complex symbol” with innumerable linguistic oddities that simultaneously stand out *and* coalesce. The strange expressions maintain a “separate existence” because they each startle. We have no choice but to linger when Milalías observes the “[accordiondulating]” (19) of Babelle or the “sultry contordulations by that...Hindu ballerina” as “she keeps on meaculpanegyrating” (23). When Herr Narrator exclaims “Fou-fou! Flee fly foe fun: I smell the pun of an Inkishman” before calling his protagonist a “[fuliginous] inkquizitor” (50), we must notice. Yet as the peculiarities pile up across the almost 600 pages, they also fuse. The result is a broader and more uniform bewilderment that goes beyond any one eccentricity, permeating the text—and the act of reading it—as a whole. An overwhelming and inexplicable sense of humorous disconcertion, this “feeling which inheres in the work itself” (Langer 20) compels the reader to surrender any expectation of meaning and simply experience the “inherent sensuality” (Ríos 256) of *Larva*. Here, each carefully crafted word is, in its own right, “a highly articulated sensuous object” (32). The novel is too. As a *significant form*, its unintelligible words paradoxically “[reflect] the verbally ineffable and therefore unknown forms of sentience” (Langer 39). Referentiality is obscured and a newly dimensional language comes to life, taking the reader along with it.

That literature offers unique access to the nether regions of human consciousness by more fully engaging the senses is an assertion on which Sontag, Benet, and Langer would presumably agree. Words designed to be felt heighten sensitivity more broadly, thus allowing entrance into realms unreachable by reason. In these shadowy spaces, referentiality is irrelevant. Story is superfluous. What is important is the language itself—because it *is*, because it embraces mystery, because its many parts harmonize to transcend. In all three accounts, the conventional reading process is disrupted so that literary language can be seen anew. Sontag, Benet, and Langer are not alone in this reconsideration. According to their contemporary, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze⁷⁶, this disruption is precisely what distinguishes extraordinary from ordinary literature. The textures, tones, and rhythms of *Larva*’s words do not stimulate and reveal in spite of the confusion they generate, but *because* of it. In his 1977 essay, “He Stuttered,” Deleuze extols radical linguistic transformations that go beyond a single instance of speech, instead shaping the text as *language*. He explains that although writers often limit themselves to simply *saying* or *doing*, there is in fact another option: “*when saying is doing*” (107). For Deleuze,

This is what happens when the stuttering no longer affects preexisting words, but itself introduces the words it affects; these words no longer exist independently of the stutter, which selects and links them together through itself. It is no longer the character who stutters in speech; it is the writer who becomes a *stutterer in language*. He makes the language as such stutter: an affective and intensive language, and no longer an affectation of the one who speaks (107).

When the stuttering occurs at the level of language, the language itself undergoes a fundamental revolution that produces a more profound reading experience. To achieve such heights, a creative “*form of expression*” (108)—words in their role as signifier—is not enough. It is not only a matter of varying one’s vocabulary, for “[being] well spoken has never been either

⁷⁶ Deleuze released his first work, *Empirisme et subjectivité*, in 1953, the same year Langer published *Feeling and Form* and published regularly until his death in 1995.

the distinctive feature or the concern of great writers” (111). The stuttering must go deeper, penetrating the “*form of content*—an atmospheric quality, a milieu that acts as the conductor of words—that brings together within itself the quiver, the murmur, the stutter, the tremolo, or the vibrato, and makes the indicated effect reverberate through the words” (108). Like Langer’s diffuse objective feeling⁷⁷, the *form of content* extends language’s impact beyond referentiality by connecting individual words to something bigger. The entire work is so suffused with sensation that, once again, words do not simply *tell*. They also *evoke* affectively, in this way transforming the reader’s relationship with a text that rebuffs thought and induces feeling.

What is more, Deleuze contends that the key to this “affective and intensive language” (107) is disequilibrium, which is necessary to separate language from speech. Speech—a single manifestation of language—is static. It “never assumes more than one variable position among others or moves in more than one direction” (108). It occupies a “homogenous system in equilibrium... defined by constant terms and relations” (108). Speech confines. Where it reigns, words can only bear one meaning and stuttering is restricted to “nonpertinent variations of the intonation type” (108). The author indicates who stutters, whispers, or cries, but the reader does not personally experience these shifts. Language, on the other hand, is expansive and evolving. Its inherent “powers of bifurcation and variation, of heterogenesis and modulation” (108) thrive in extreme conditions. Deleuze describes language as “subject to a double process, that of choices to be made and that of sequences to be established” (110). Again and again, its creator must pick one expression from many, connecting it to what came before. If language remains in equilibrium, this two-part procedure naturally implies exclusion and progression. We read one word that means one thing. We go one way. We draw one conclusion. Language is reduced to speech.

But far from equilibrium, *the disjunctions become included or inclusive, and the connections, reflexive*, following a rolling gait that concerns the process of language and no longer the flow of speech. Every word is divided, but into itself...; and every word is combined, but with itself... It is as if the entire language started to roll from right to left, and to pitch backwards and forward: *the two stutterings* (110).

Language is thus forced into a “zone of continuous variation” (108) in which the possibilities are not only endless; they are also actualized, all at once. This is what it means for language to “vibrate and stutter” (108). It contains multitudes. It pulsates with life. It does not necessarily make sense. Declaring that the highest praise of T.E. Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is the assertion that “This is not English,” Deleuze maintains that to surpass speech and the restraining role of signifier, language must make itself virtually unrecognizable.

This means that a great writer is always like a foreigner in the language in which he expresses himself, even if this is his native tongue. At the limit, he draws his strength

⁷⁷ The characterization of the *form of content* as “atmospheric” also recalls Pérez Firmat’s description of the narrative of the historical avant-garde as “pneumatic”, which, notably, he uses to undo the traditional distinction between form and content: “Instead of an artifact separable into form and content, the pneumatic effect figures a homogenous (if unstable, surreal, and amorphous) novelistic vapor” (52). Although (importantly) not tied to a historical period, the “weightless, agile, incorporeal” (Perez Firmat 49) *form of content* shares its powers of disassociation, liberating words from their signified in order to harness the ineffable.

from a mute and unknown minority that belongs only to him. He is a foreigner in his own language...he carves out a nonpreexistent foreign language *within* his own language. He makes the language itself scream, stutter, stammer, or murmur (110).

Only at its edge can language realize its full potential as artistic *material*. Teetering on (and at times tumbling over) the brink of incomprehensibility, its capacity to reveal curiously grows. What was once a straightforward exchange of A equals B is replaced with a constellation of associations. They are infinitely abundant, extending in all directions, even beyond the reaches of the mind. The effect is overwhelming, as when Milalias observes “the coal-black Lecherous Goat from Goya’s *Witches’ Sabbath*, holding a big black book over his shaggy groin” (31) and Herr Narrator (again) interjects:

7. Volume voluminous! Eléphantastique!: Notre bouquin émissaire...[The scapegoat and his defile cabinet. Summammary of his Magnum Opuss. The Black Book. The Book of Changes. The Wandering and the Book: Deambularvagabounding through London, reading on the run the book of their more or less imaginary lives. Or wandering blindly and randomly on his parodyssey, waylaid in search of adventures. His graphomanionanism made them err; airy erotic errata. Living the written and writing the relived was one of the paraphrasisyphean tasks of his Londonerous novel. They called it (w)rite to life, or writ(h)ing, without realizing they would ever overspend themselves in the undertaking.] Our old phony book...(30)

Like so much of *Larva*, this footnote is practically indecipherable. After opening with two words sharing a common root and some *apparently* French phrases that also resist restriction⁷⁸, a bracket signals our entry into even more alien territory as an unannounced and lightly modified translation—“The scapegoat” (see footnote 20)—gives way to greater linguistic disfigurement. The focus is on the book in the hands of the dark creature. When Herr Narrator calls it the “Summammary of his Magnum Opuss”, spelling alterations seem to reference its strategic placement and the ever-present sexual undercurrent reasserts itself. A few lines later, unnamed figures “err; airy erotic errata”, as sound and significance collide. There are other, more conspicuously changed phrases. “Deambularvagabounding”, “graphomanionanism”, and “paraphrasisyphean”—all products of humorous combination—rise up, simultaneously obscuring and compounding significance. They are long and complex, almost impossible to pronounce and decode. One could try of course, pausing to articulate each unfamiliar syllable and attempting to identify its source, repeating oneself in the hope that it will flow and meaning will emerge. And while glimpses certainly do—the term *larva* reveals itself before unfolding into an alternate version of *vagabond*—they refuse to come together into something logical and neat. Attacking them with the intellect is thus inevitably an exercise in frustration. They go in too many directions. They touch upon too much. One must instead step back to observe their edges, perceive their beat, and appreciate their delightfully opaque twists and turns. Truly, they are “highly articulated sensuous objects” (Langer 32) best discerned with the senses.

⁷⁸ Of the four French phrases, “Eléphantastique!: Notre bouquin émissaire...” (30), “Eléphantastique!” is not in the dictionary (although it seems to be a combination of *éléphant* and *fantastique*). The final three, “Notre bouquin émissaire...”, translate to “Our Scapegoat”. Not surprisingly, “bouquin” has multiple meanings. An informal expression for book, it is also an “old billy goat”. The tentacles have begun to extend.

By passage's end, I do not know exactly *what* Herr Narrator is saying, but I do know that it (again) pertains to authorship. The word *book* and synonyms like *volume* and *novel* repeat. He lists titles. There are allusions to writing, like when *grapho* meets (most of) *mania* and *paraphrase* precedes (a version of) *Sisyphus*. Variations of the term *write* also abound, some spelled correctly and some altered by a single letter, as in “(w)rite to life, or “writ(h)ing” (30)⁷⁹. Yet, despite the thematic consistency, there is no obvious thrust. Whose *blind wanderings* is he describing and why? Does the bracketed tangent still reference the goat's book? Or does the literary “parodyyssey” belong to Milalias? The mention of “his Londonerous novel” suggests the latter, but the vagueness and difficulty of the meta-commentary keeps any certainty—particularly regarding intention—at bay. What connection is there to the party? Does Herr Narrator mock or venerate? The utter lack of clarity proves the futility of such questions; not only do they remain unanswered, but they also miss the point.

Fortunately for the perplexed reader, conventional literary explanations are unnecessary for *Larva*'s equilibrium-challenging intricacies. After all, I cannot explain with words words that I cannot understand. Yes, the paragraph is “about” writing, sex, and raucous celebration (as is the rest of the novel), but these themes in fact need no interpretation—not just because it is impossible, but also because they can be *felt* through the pulsations and pirouettes of the language itself. Although unable to piece together a plot or identify an argument, energetically I comprehend. As the narration quakes, it communicates beyond referentiality, its strange sounds and distorted declarations transporting me to an unknown land where I too am a foreigner. I am on “*the outside* of language” (Deleuze 112), and in this alien territory my only recourse is sensation. I look at the never-ending neologisms. I listen to the unidentifiable dialects. And because I cannot penetrate the language of *Larva*, I *see* it rather than consume it—the roundedness of “rocococoktail” (64), the hardness of “Klaverdietsing! Klaverdaaien!” (98), the sinuousness of “serpentecosthesaurusizing” (28), and the brightness of “Glaze! Glas! Glace!” (159). Severed from a signified, they materialize before my very eyes; their quivering contours extending out in every (in)conceivable direction. They stutter. They startle. They convey feeling. They are art objects.

III. Postmodernism, *Larva*, and the Case of Spain

Upon arrival in 1984, *Larva* immediately assumed the postmodern throne. Just three months after its release, *La Luna de Madrid*—the literary magazine at the heart of the *Movida*⁸⁰—hosted a conference in which “[n]uevos narradores intentan definir la posmodernidad”⁸¹. Here, the wild novel “was declared the paradigm of postmodern Spanish literature” (Lozano Mijares

⁷⁹ Although these minor revisions are less visually striking than some of their more complex counterparts, they in fact enact in real time the expansive nature of language in both Calvino's multiplicity and Deleuze's stuttering. The word could be “write” or “rite”. The character could be “writing” or “writhing”. Or perhaps it is all happening all at once. In either case, the modifications spell out the stuttering and map out the multiplicity. It is not just happening in the mind of the reader, it is also happening on the page.

⁸⁰ In *La novela española posmoderna*, María del Pilar Lozano Mijares calls *La Luna* “[el] elemento de cohesión de la Movida desde su primer número, en 1983... En *La Luna* publicó Almodóvar el primer episodio de la historia de Patty Diphusa y colaboraron autores como Arangueren, Molina Foix, Lourdes Ortiz, Jesús del Pozo, Ramoncín, Kiki Veneno, Javier Sádaba, Fernando Savater o José María Caballero Bonald” (213). *La Luna* was published until 1988.

⁸¹ This phrase is actually the title of a review of the conference published by *El País* on March 15, 1984. The short article summarizes an (appropriately) “agitado diálogo donde casi nada quedó claro”, sharing varying opinions on both the term *postmodernity* and its relation to the present state of Spanish literature.

184), its fragmentation, eclecticism, and self-referentiality establishing its contemporary aesthetic credentials. A year later, the 1985 Encyclopedia Britannica would dub it “an instant postmodern classic, without a doubt the most disturbingly original prose of the Century”⁸². Why such a fast and furious identification of *Larva* with peninsular postmodernity? Perhaps because of its celebratory style and content, which connect the work to a now well-established global cultural phenomenon. They also plainly embody the newly cosmopolitan Madrid of the *Movida*, a uniquely Spanish cultural phenomenon born of the political, economic, and social implications of the *Transición*. It is a moment so closely linked with an international postmodernity that María del Pilar Lozano pinpoints the *Movida* as “la expresión de la episteme posmoderna en la España de la democracia, el signo que delata su conversión en una sociedad capitalista avanzada...” (214). *Larva*, it seems, is peak (Spanish) postmodernity.

In another article titled “Postmodernism and Spanish Literature”, Lozano Mijares outlines four defining “cognitive strategies” (186) of postmodernism and (consequently) the *Movida*. Not surprisingly, all describe *Larva*. The first, “the impossibility of realism” (186), manifests itself in the prevalence of fantasy and instability. In a world where unity, truth, and certainty are no longer possible, “the postmodern novel deals with ontological issues related to questions about what the world is, who we are, and what the relationship is between the real, the possible, the impossible, etc.” (186). *Larva*’s multiple narrators, many made-up words, and unreal setting undoubtedly fit the bill. The second strategy centers on “the deconstruction of the subject, of space, and time”. There is no overarching vision to guide meaning, no “coherent entity” in the form of “the author, the reader, the narrator, or the character” (187). *Larva* shares “this fragmented, schizophrenic subject” (187), as well as thematic highlights like “the lack of communication” and “the world’s loss of meaning” (187). The third, “[t]he immersion in metafiction” (187), is equally apt for a work so focused on the act of writing. *Larva* not only repeatedly and explicitly addresses the topic, it also employs “means such as recursivity, parody, appropriationism, and pastiche” (187) to underscore its own fictional (and therefore, material) identity. The impact, that “[t]he reader’s attention is thus drawn from the projected world towards the linguistic medium...[and the] construction of the world is reduced, in the end, to the result of a word game...” (187), capture not only *Larva*’s jokey linguistic maneuvers, but also the object-focused argument of this very paper.

The final guiding principle is “skepticism towards the great discourses about reason and the search...to find meaning” (187). In the case of *Larva*, the response is a (characteristically) “ludic, ironic tolerance” (187) of plurality and even chaos in a novel that paints life as party. Depths are flattened and we are left with only the present, one crazy costumed night in a shadowy London mansion. As Lozano Mijares underscores, this typically postmodern lightheartedness is in fact a response to a much more serious matter—the absence of meaning, both in literature and the world at large. The *grand narrative* is dead and the disjointed postmodern subject leans on laughter to cope. It is not only art that has lost its footing as a unifying and sense-making force. Even language itself has been emptied of its once unquestioned referential function. Notably, in the formative *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson identifies the separation of the signifier from the signified as one of the hallmarks of postmodernism. While tracing the history of the sign, Jameson highlights two important shifts. After an early “heyday” of “unproblematical relations

⁸² Quoted on page 282 of Ilán Stavans’s “Julián Ríos y la novela enciclopédica”.

with its referent” (95), the very capitalist powers of “disjunction” and “specialization” (96) that first created the sign turn on it and

the corrosive force of reification... enters the realm of language to disjoin the sign from the referent. Such a disjunction does not completely abolish the referent, or the objective world, or reality, which still continue to entertain a feeble existence on the horizon like a shrunken star or red dwarf. But its great distance from the sign now allows the latter to enter a moment of autonomy, of a relatively free-floating Utopian existence, as over against its former objects. This autonomy of culture, this semiautonomy of language is the moment of modernism, and of a realm of the aesthetic which redoubles the world without being altogether of it, thereby winning a certain negative or critical power, but also a certain otherworldly futility (Jameson 96).

Because it sits farther from a shriveled, yet still surviving referent, the modernist sign achieves greater representational freedom. It is no longer tied down by “reality”, but there is still *a* reality, however diminished, to critique. Thus liberated from literalism, Ayala’s adjectives and Salinas’s similes demand recognition in their own right, their beautiful plasticity expressing the forward-looking spirit of the historical avant-garde. Benet’s labyrinthine prose is similarly detached from *and* attached to the territory and time that it portrays. In *Volverás a Región*, words may rise up and take on a life of their own, but they nonetheless convey feelings that persist beyond the page. Indeed, their heaviness *is* Spain’s heaviness.

In the postmodern age, however, the disconnect between sign and referent is total. It is a new phase, one in which

reification penetrates the sign itself and disjoins the signifier from the signified. Now reference and reality disappear altogether, and even meaning—the signified—is problematized. We are left with that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism, which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage...” (96)

We are now in the realm of the pastiche, that quintessentially postmodern technique of brazenly mixing genres, voices, and sources that for Jameson signals the end of not only originality—itsself a defining feature of postmodernity—, but also of meaning altogether. The world has been reduced to image, literature to commodity. The plurality of private, and hence subjective, perspectives frustrates claims of coherence. Meaning, on any level, is impossible, so why even try? Better instead to (flippantly, of course) accentuate its departure and show words for what they are—empty and evacuated *things*.⁸³ This removal of significance via fragmentation and reproduction also clearly describes *Larva*, a novel deprived of meaning in the most literal way. The narration is so completely shattered that the shards are unidentifiable. There will be no reassembly, not even recognition. This is also because many of its words were never words to

⁸³ The destruction of the signified and subsequent hollowing out of the signifier creates a(nother) particularly postmodern paradox. As the signifier is flattened through isolation, a new identity indeed emerges, that of word as stand-alone artistic material. Its ability to transcend erased, it can now be seen more clearly for what it *is*—an object in a book. It no longer takes me anywhere and so I am forced to confront it. Word becomes *thing*.

begin with. We are in a land of linguistic make-believe. *Larva* is a truly meaningless *hyper-pastiche* whose cosmopolitanism and lightheartedness make it unambiguously postmodern.

Or do they? Can categorizing a novel this complicated really be so simple? How, then, does one explain just how *different* *Larva* looks from its postmodern peers? How unfamiliar it *feels* to read it? It may exhibit all of the “cognitive strategies of postmodernism” (186) listed by Lozano Mijares, but something is nevertheless amiss. And it is not just Julián Ríos’s stated focus on originality at the expense of commercial success⁸⁴. There are in fact two *key* characteristics that *Larva* lacks. The first, a “return to narrativity” (Lozano Mijares 190), parallels the postmodern propensity to incorporate popular culture and reaches across borders to broadly define postmodernism. “The plot...again became the main driving force of the story, in an attempt to reclaim the reader through intrigue and entertainment, through the mere pleasure of telling a story” (190). Like so much of the postmodern novel, unwittingly embedded in this light realist revival is a deep skepticism regarding truth. Indeed, what on the surface seems “a traditional kind of fiction” is actually an example of “ironic and intertextual parody...an apparent realism” (190) designed to undermine the notion of an overarching sense-building narrative. Lozano Mijares links this “false mimesis” (190) to another trait she labels specifically Spanish. At the heart of Spanish postmodern literature, she says, is a profound

disenchantment, a disappointment...[that] came as a response to the changes introduced in Spain by the postmodern episteme. In thematic terms, this disenchantment is conveyed by themes such as: the disappointment in the political reality of democracy in Spain; historical amnesia concerning the Civil War; unfulfilled lives; difficult or failed human relationships, disconnected, illogical human desires; nostalgia for a former security; anguish regarding the responsibility of democracy; self-pity, self-indulgence, and a lack of solidarity; escapism. In structural terms we encounter the following procedures: multiple levels of diegesis (“Russian doll” texts); parodic hybridization of canonic and marginal writing forms; plot structures involving mystery or intrigue; unfulfilled derealization of space; pastiche (189).

Although the above formal features agree, the themes mostly do not. There is no disillusioned acknowledgement of any “political reality”, no backward-looking melancholy, no democratic angst. The protagonists do not lament lives unlived nor do they express disappointment at their lot. Yes, the Spanish Civil War goes unmentioned. The novel’s unrestrained hedonism could also undoubtedly be labeled “self-indulgent”, alienated, or escapist.

Yet *Larva* does not *feel* disenchanted. Its darkness suggests excitement in the face of mystery, not fear. The atmosphere is too erotic; the words that portray it too playful. Pleasure is at home here, and it goes much deeper than the flesh. The ecstatic party guests certainly experience those more primal (and for some, arguably *escapist*) forms of pleasure like inebriation and sexual contact, but there are also the pleasures of community, ritual, and even

⁸⁴ In his conversation with Gazarian Gautier, Julián Ríos openly (and playfully) rejects another postmodern hallmark—the best seller—, instead highlighting novel as singular creation: “I have said many times that my work has no need for speed, particularly when I see so many authors lose their heads and tales in the pursuit of best-sellers, “pest-sellers,” and “bête-sellers.” Every original writer has a unique vision of the world and of life, so his rendition of reality is new and unfamiliar and sometimes hard for people to accept” (241).

art⁸⁵. Herr Narrator also clearly delights in his own naughtiness, linguistic or otherwise. In the case of the reader, there is the pleasure of the unexpected, of the humorous, and—occasionally—of understanding. And the wordplay in which Julián Ríos engages (both in *Larva* and his interview with Gazarian Gautier) suggests that he himself genuinely enjoys such verbal games. His explanation of *escrivivir* confirms (and intensifies) it: “I couldn’t even separate literature from life; for me, to write is life, it is *escrivivir*, which in Spanish combines “writing” and “living”... For me, to write is *escrivivir*, it is the art of living more intensely” (242-43). To write is to flourish and thus to know true pleasure. Such earnestness is undoubtedly at odds with that hallmark postmodern *desencanto*. So is the belief that words still have the power to effect change and even emancipate: “We write to seek greater freedom, in many ways. The great writers have been great liberators of energies, taboos, and all sorts of things. That’s why I like to speak of “liberature,” meaning a literature that strives for freedom” (257). In the most discouraged of postmodern outlooks, such freedom exists only as illusion. There is no more originality⁸⁶, no authenticity capable of capturing—let alone, criticizing—an equally absent “real” world. In this way, Julián Ríos is fundamentally *un*-postmodern, his words bearing the weight of their complex materiality and his novels the weight of their (anachronistically) high-minded purpose.

Authorial intention is not the only way in which *Larva* defies its classification as postmodern. Another emerges when one follows the lead of Spanish scholarship of the last decade and reconsiders the established acclamatory narrative of the *Movida*. *Espectros de la Movida: Por qué odiar los años 80* by Víctor Lenore is one such example whose unflinching title makes its position immediately apparent. Put simply, the *Movida* is not what we think it is – that idealized image of a youthful yet sophisticated Madrid awash in art and merriment is not only incomplete, it is also dishonest. As Lenore explains, the falsehood matters because the Spain of the 1980s forms the foundation of Spain today. Indeed, it is “...la década que más ha marcado nuestras vidas, deteriorando las condiciones sociales, laborales y económicas hasta hoy” (18). The result, both then *and* now, is a “modernidad ingenua, superficial y sumisa” (33) that precludes authentic and impactful social mobilization. Spain may have been modernized, but it has also been neutralized. And for this, Lenore places the blame firmly at the feet of the *Movida*; a moment of cultural flourishing whose cozy relationship with the new Spanish political and economic realities ultimately negates its critical capacity. Spanish postmodern art, in other words, does not do what art is *supposed* to do. It does not disparage or demand. Instead, it is a tool used by politicians and capitalists to assuage the public by creating only the *appearance* of change.

Citing the concept of repressive tolerance developed by philosopher Herbert Marcuse, Lenore highlights the leading *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* as particularly adept at this cultural exploitation. After taking power in 1982, the *PSOE* lavishly funded exhibitions, conferences, and concerts and cultivated relationships with “los jóvenes artistas punkipop que

⁸⁵ Art, in varied forms, abounds in both *Larva*’s setting and the narration that describes it. In the mansion itself, there are the murals Milalias observes along the way as well as the concert that has brought them together. Zooming out, the text of the novel overflows with literary references, high and low, made by three protagonist-narrators who are themselves fiction writers.

⁸⁶ Ríos’s also places great emphasis on originality, which is for him a key element in literature’s liberating energy. In the interview with Gazarian Gautier, he uses the adjectives “original” and “unique” on no less than ten occasions. In addition to the previously cited critique of unoriginal “pest-sellers” (241), he lavishes praise on Pound as the creator of “astonishingly original, modern works” (248).

brotaron como setas en el Madrid de los primeros ochenta” (37), hiring them to headline “fiestas patronales” that burnished its own credentials as “el partido que estaba con la noche, la cultura y el hedonismo” (38). But what at first glance seems a modern embrace of pluralism and progress, Lenore identifies as depthless distraction, offering the hungry masses “una especie de participación balsámica, sin consecuencias sustanciales, más allá de la relajación, divertimento y catarsis popular” (45). Rather than initiate a period genuine societal transformation, the *PSOE* “demostró una tremenda habilidad para dar respuestas estéticas a conflictos políticos. Las demandas sociales de abajo, reprimidas durante cuarenta años, fueron muchas veces respondidas con concesiones culturales, un eficaz *tocomocho*...” (17) that obscured a fundamental acceptance of the (often Francoist) status quo⁸⁷. For Lenore, the outwardly rebellious *Movida* is a frivolous farce “[que] supone el paso de una contracultura basada en la lectura, el debate y la resistencia a otra audiovisual, amnésica y cómoda con el poder” (114). He paints a bleak picture: the eighties in Spain were nothing more than hollow “[tiempos] de decoración” (130) whose lack of seriousness defanged art and damaged Spain.

Lenore is not alone in his vision of Spanish postmodern art as an eviscerated instrument of depoliticization. *CT o la Cultura de la Transición: Crítica a 35 años de cultura española* argues the same in a 2012 collection of essays that explores the (always adverse) impact of the *CT* on different aspects of Spanish society. Early in his introduction to the concept, Guillem Martínez references Mozart, “uno de los primeros hombres libres contemporáneos codificados” (14) in order to explicitly link cultural production with freedom:

Los barros—especificaba Mozart—que forman el pentagrama, esa pauta sobre la que formulaba su música / su libertad. La *CT* es la observación de los pentagramas de la cultura española, de sus límites. Unos pentagramas canijos, estrechos, en los que solo es posible escribir determinadas novelas, discursos, artículos, canciones, programas, películas, declaraciones, sin salirse de la página, o ser interpretado como un borrón. Son unos pentagramas, por otra parte, formulados para que la cultura española realizara pocas formulaciones (14).

For Mozart, music *is* freedom. So what happens when the framework of such freedom—its *pentagramas*—is designed to constrict instead of expand? When the bars enclose rather than elevate? In a way, art is reduced to *just* politics, its goal to pacify—no matter the cost. The *CT*, consequently (and paradoxically), “consiste en su desactivación, es decir, en crear estabilidad política y cohesión social. Trabaja, en fin, para el Estado” (15). And it does so by staying *within* the bars, however *canijos* and *estrechos*. In other words, “la cultura no se mete en política—salvo para darle la razón al Estado—y el Estado no se mete en cultura—salvo para subvencionarla, premiarla o darle honores—...” (16).

As Martínez explains, the relationship is “intrínsecamente violenta” (16) because it is vertical. “Con su dinero, sus premios y sus honores” (16), the State sits on top, determining what can be called *culture*. Below, cultural production quietly seeks approval through agreement. Above all, the art of the *CT* does not make demands of its superiors:

⁸⁷ To prove his point, Lenore highlights the retention of “dirigentes franquistas”(44) in the Spanish security forces as well as the power the “oligarquía franquista”(44) maintained over the *Ibex 35*. He explains it simply as a matter of money: “[L]a izquierda defiende estilos de vida plurales, pero no disputa las estructuras de poder económico” (18).

Un objeto cultural es reconocido como tal, y no como marginalidad, siempre y cuando no colisione con el Estado. Aquí es preciso señalar que la zona de no colisión es amplísima, mientras que la zona de colisión es reducida. Lamentablemente esa zona de colisión consiste en lo problemático, el punto en el que se ha producido la cultura europea de los últimos trescientos años. Por eso mismo, en la CT desaparecen todos los productos culturales problemáticos. El resultado es la producción de miles y miles de productos aproblemáticos –en todas sus modalidades: social, política, sí, pero también formal y estética; la belleza, si se fijan, es absolutamente, snif, problemática en muchos de sus tramos; concretamente en los más bellos, si me fuerzan” (16).

The art of the *CT* thus flourishes with regards to quantity. It is ubiquitous, creating a (superficially) celebratory atmosphere. Its quality, however, suffers under the weight of its “espíritu conciliador y ecuménico” (33). Defying historical precedent⁸⁸, anything deemed *problematic*, on account of uncomfortable critique or unfamiliar beauty, is sidelined. The plethora of creations *aprobemáticos* only strive to strengthen the image of art “como un lugar de encuentro y no de confrontación” (33). The *CT* is amenable and easy, and as such, it is uniquely Spanish⁸⁹. Its political objectives—“la adhesión, la estabilidad y la desproblematicación” (18)—do not only eradicate the critical capacity of the works of the *CT*. They also tie them to a particular political reality and (a)historical moment. They are “...conceptos políticos absolutamente locales e inexportables—, por encima de los criterios de mercado al uso... Su única función y su única vida es local” (18). In the wider (and already democratized) postmodern world, they simply do not apply.

How, then, to understand *Larva*, within this historical context? Is it a creation of the mollifying *CT*? By limiting one’s focus to its blatant hedonism, it would be easy to (mistakenly) say yes. It may not happen in Madrid, but *Larva* nevertheless depicts an unimaginably rowdy party. The atmosphere is erotic. The participants are intoxicated. They are also costumed. Here, fantasy reigns as punk music blares and masked bodies collide. What is more, the strangeness of the words that describe such a raucous scene only intensifies the overwhelming feeling of debauchery. They too are totally out of control. They too ignore broader social concerns. By this logic, *Larva* must epitomize the uncritical emptiness so disdained by Martínez and Lenore of Spanish cultural production in the 1980s. Yet there are other traits that (again) defy such simple categorization, placing the experimental novel firmly outside the bounds of the *CT*. Its words may be wild, but they are certainly not easy, in this way resisting the role of frivolous distraction. Their mystery suggests something *more*, even as (or perhaps, *because*) it withholds meaning. This difficulty undoubtedly earns *Larva* the label *problematic*. Formally, at

⁸⁸ This rejection of historical precedent regarding art’s role concurs with the unfolding of the Spanish *Transición*. Martínez points out that, “...en cuanto proceso histórico, la Transición se caracterizó por esa primacía de la política sobre la historia, por la decisión política de cancelar la historia en aras de ese proyecto de refundación de la convivencia que, desde mucho atrás, parecía imprescindible para cerrar las heridas de la Guerra Civil. La Cultura de la Transición, por su parte, sería la consecuencia natural del masivo alineamiento de la clase intelectual y cultural del país con ese proyecto” (28-9).

⁸⁹ In this sense, Martínez and the concept of *CT* diverge slightly with the analysis Mijares Lozano, who explicitly uses the adjective ‘postmodern’ and the noun ‘*Movida*’ to describe the same period. Lenore, for his part, uses only *Movida*. Martínez instead distinguishes between a more global postmodernity, itself subject to market pressures, and the *CT*, which is unique to Spain. The two, in fact, coexist: “No es lo mismo Cercas o Muñoz Molina—CT—que Ruiz Zafón o Pérez-Reverte—el mercado—...” (18)

least, the baffling novel does not conform to the postmodern *pentagramas* of the *CT*. With its obscure references, absent plot, and perplexing prose, *Larva* is not straightforwardly *beautiful*. It is demanding and, at times, off-putting. And so despite the previously mentioned praises, *Larva* received no official sanction, whether from Spanish state or marketplace. Despite some attention from the media⁹⁰, there were no widely reported literary prizes. It was not a bestseller. *Larva*, it would seem, does what Martínez calls impossible –it has its feet firmly planted in two worlds.

Thankfully, Susanne K. Langer offers a way through the conceptual binds presented by *Larva* and *CT* with her notion of *semblance*. After outlining why art is “a highly articulated sensuous object” (32), Langer introduces another key (yet, as we shall see, paradoxical) characteristic, its “*otherness* from reality” (45). *Semblance* is the term she uses to describe this *otherness* that is unique to every artistic creation, representational or not. Pottery, portraits, and poems have *semblance*. So do symphonies and short stories. They all, in other words, their inherently *material* nature aside, convey an “air of illusion, of being a sheer image” (45). A work of art becomes an *image*

...when it presents itself purely to our vision, i.e. as a sheer visual form instead of a locally and practically related object. If we receive it as a completely visual thing, we abstract its appearance from its material existence. What we see in this way becomes simply a thing of vision –a form, an image. It detaches itself from its actual setting and acquires a different context (46).

Art is image not because it is literally intangible (we have already seen Langer not only reference substantial art forms like ceramics, but also argue in favor of the objecthood of *all* art), but because it serves no other purpose than to be observed⁹¹. As such, it is inherently separate from its surroundings. By creating space for “quality without practical signification” (51), this disconnect is the source of art’s power. It does not have to *do* anything. There is nothing it must *say*. Art just *is*. And for Langer, like Sontag, that is the point. Art’s “importance lies in the fact that we do not use it to guide us to something...practical...” (48). Untethered from the “...realities of the natural world” (51), it offers the inevitably tethered viewer (or reader) a moment of respite in which they too can disengage from the mundanity of daily life in order to simply *be*.

Langer insists on a “broader meaning of “image” that accounts for the genuinely artistic character of non-visual arts” (48) like literature and music, but she nonetheless acknowledges the potential difficulties in universally applying expressions “almost inseparably wedded to the sense of sight” (48). *Semblance*, a term borrowed from Carl Jung, is her way around this “conceptual limitation” (48). Jung used the term in his exploration of the dream, an “exemplary case of illusion” unrelated to vision because “...in a dream, there are sounds, smells, feelings,

⁹⁰ In addition to the mention of *Larva* in the conference review by *El País*, the newspaper published an introduction to the work that in fact preceded its official release by seven years. On May 18, 1977, “Julián Ríos publicará por entregas su novela *Larva*” appeared in the culture section, explaining that introductory fragments of *Larva*, widely praised by intellectuals like Octavio Paz, have been printed in the Mexican literary magazine, *Plural*. What follows is a conversation between Ríos and the director of Spanish literary magazine *Espiral* in which the author says: “Bueno, *Larva* es en realidad varias novelas (digamos mi novela-ríos) o una novela que tiene varios libros, y aún no he acabado de reunir y ensamblar todas las piezas de esta construcción...Quizá me decida a empezar a publicar *por entregas*, porque cada libro de la novela (e incluso cada capítulo) permite, en un primer nivel, una lectura autónoma.”

⁹¹ And, given this analysis of the uniquely weighty *Larva*, I would also add *held*.

happenings, intentions, dangers—all sorts of invisible elements—as well as sights, and all are equally unreal by the measures of public fact. Dreams do not consist entirely of images, but everything in them is imaginary” (48-9). The same can be said of the novel, which also “assume[s] a purely imaginal status” (47) despite its “non-visual” (and dimensional) nature. Even *Larva*, an especially substantial work, is *semblance*, curiously not despite its materiality, but *because* of it. After all, it is *Larva*’s radically physical mutilation of language that disjoins its story and its words from the everyday. We see them as things and so they stand out as separate. The impact—and what makes *Larva* meaningful in the absence of literal meaning—is

...the fact that it liberates perception—and with it, the power of conception—from all practical purposes, and lets the mind dwell on the sheer appearance of things. The function of artistic illusion is not “make-believe,” as many philosophers and psychologists assume, but the very opposite, disengagement from belief—the contemplation of sensory qualities without their usual meanings of “Here’s that chair,” “That’s my telephone,” “These figures ought to add up to the bank’s statement,” etc. The knowledge that what is before us has no practical significance in the world is what enables us to give attention to its appearance as such (49).

Unlike most everything else in our world, art is unencumbered. It is enough. Just to experience it is enough. And so, for a moment, I too am enough. There is nothing to produce, no argument or interpretation, nothing even to understand. I simply—and freely—engage sensorially with a “virtual object” (49)⁹² designed to present “pure quality, or semblance” (50).

Langer’s 1953 notion of *semblance*—art as liberating unreality—precedes *Larva* (and the *Movida*) by almost three decades. Notably, however, what Langer proposes is not an analysis of a particular period or philosophy, but a universal theory of art. She therefore intended for *semblance* to apply to the art of the future. In this instance of Spanish postmodernism, at least, it does. Her characterization of an intangible art “that exists only for perception” (47) undoubtedly recalls earlier condemnations of uncritical depthlessness. In both cases, art is an illusion removed from the world in which it was created. For Lenore and Martínez, this detached emptiness is a source of despair, proving art’s evisceration and Spain’s degradation. After a long history of “combate” (Lenore 130), art has been reduced to decorative image. Tragically, its disconnection also means deactivation. Langer, on the other hand, sees (an ultimately redemptive) buoyancy. Lightness does not signal doom.⁹³ To the contrary, it is art’s strength, precisely *because* it enables separation. From this perspective, separation equals freedom, not just for the work in question, but also for the individual with whom it interacts. A problematic narrative unrestrained by “practical signification” (51) takes its reader along with it. As its words are set “free from their normal embodiment in real things so that they may be recognized in their own right...” (50), senses are heightened. Powers of observation grow. The reader is

⁹² In earlier chapters, Langer describes art as objectified emotional content, a carefully crafted (and non-discursive) *thing* to which feeling *inheres*. As previously noted, this decidedly solid vision seemingly contradicts *semblance* and the notion of art as imaginative illusion, yet Langer allows them to coexist (and even objectifies the illusion). There is, as she points out, a class of objects that “consists entirely in its semblance, that apart from its appearance it has no cohesion and unity—like a rainbow, or a shadow—we call it a merely virtual object, or an illusion” (49).

⁹³ Indeed, in addition to “multiplicity”, “lightness” is a trait Calvino also identifies as essential for art’s continued relevance in the 21st century.

temporarily disengaged from reality only to return to it with greater insight⁹⁴. In this way, a literary “virtual object” enriches, paradoxically producing profundity where before there was nothing more than the inattention of routine.

This is not to say that *every* vacant work of the *Movida* is in fact an education in awareness. That Spanish politicians exploited their positions of authority and their access to funding in order to coopt cultural production and create the impression of progress is undeniable. Their influence was real. So is the *CT*. Yet as *semblance* demonstrates, emptiness does not always equal insignificance. Illusions are not inherently trivial. Like *Larva*, a novel can traffic in humor and debauchery and still be serious. It can be superficial *and* deep, phantasmal *and* substantial. Sitting outside of the *CT*, *Larva*'s unreal words defy comprehension, literally resisting “practical signification” (51). References removed, they look, sound, and feel disconnected from anything *real*. “Strangeness, separateness, otherness—call it what you will—is [their] obvious lot” (Langer 50). This is *semblance*. It is detachment from our ordinary existence—why they are hollow. It is also—again, paradoxically—*why they are things*. The weight of signification lifted, their materiality emerges. Finally, they can be noticed for exactly what they are—words. And this insistence is their “direct aesthetic quality” (50). It is what makes them *art*.

IV. Conclusion

Despite the postmodern crown granted by its critics, *Larva* in many ways feels like a literary anachronism, more avant-garde in its style *and* aspirations. It may be a pastiche forged from countless cultural fragments, both high and low, but it is also (and indisputably) *original*. Its endless punning may be lighthearted, and at times even inane, but it is also incredibly (and intentionally) complicated. Indeed, it is cubism—not pop art—with which Julián Ríos finds artistic parallels when he asserts that, “wordplay allows us to see the complexity of reality. Sometimes wordplay is almost like a cubist painting where you can see several different angles or perspectives on the same plane. I really like to be able to show various facets of the same reality simultaneously” (Gazarian Gautier 250-51). The many voices that interject in *Larva* may reflect a newly pluralistic society. They may also reveal the intricacy inherent in a single scene, work, or life. But unlike other postmodern plot-centered narratives, the language of *Larva* is its focus, a particularity that returns us to the “deviant utterances” of Gerald Bruns. As we saw in the opening chapter on the beautifully plastic narrative of the Spanish historical avant-garde, an utterance is “deviant” when it does not do what it *should*—when it rejects its role as signifier. “Deviant” language is not a “a medium for discourse, but constitutes rather a point of departure for the creation of literary art. This means that the very motivation for the act of speech lies to some extent in language itself: language has its own value, quite apart from its function, which is to say its transitive purpose” (71). Words in *Larva* are undoubtedly “deviant”. They do not *tell*. They *are*. They are long. They are foreign. They are elaborate and surprising. They are unintelligible. They are frustrating and amusing. They are objects that demand to be noticed.

⁹⁴ This characterization of art as an experience uniquely capable of engaging, and hence enhancing, the senses shares much with another broad consideration of the nature of art, Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation*. Once again, interpretation is not the goal. A work of art is not a puzzle to be solved, but an object to be encountered. Notably, Sontag uses a term that itself strongly echoes the translucence of *semblance*—*transparence*. After explaining that “[transparence] means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are” (13), she calls it nothing less than the highest value of art.

This dimensional character may correlate them more closely with their experimental ancestors in the avant-garde, but also is part of a much longer lineage of objectified literature. Gerald Bruns traces “deviant utterances” back to antiquity. He also sees Góngora’s meticulously crafted stanzas as an undertaking in which “language tends rather to be a medium for the poet’s art than a medium for meaning” (24). Once more, the goal is “the expressiveness of his art”, not “the expression of truth” (24). Words are not simply a vessel, but are again a material to be shaped by the *ingenious* mind of their author. They are *things* “to be contemplated for the brilliance of [their] design” (26). Susan Sontag’s denunciation of the conventional form-content hierarchy is similarly unconnected to a specific movement. So is Susanne K. Langer’s portrayal of art as a “highly articulated sensuous object” (32). Both authors understand art as a material valuable in its own right. Both view artistic significance as the product of a uniquely intense sensorial encounter instead of intellectual analysis. Even Michael Fried’s critique of the Literalist sculpture of a very particular period acknowledges that “[i]t belongs rather to the history, almost the natural history –of sensibility; and it is not an isolated episode but the expression of a general and pervasive condition” (117). It is thus not a matter of *Larva* being postmodern *or* avant-garde. Contradictions coexist so that *Larva*—as novel *and* as art object—can simply *be*.

At once playful and grave, modern and antiquated, erudite and colloquial, its incongruously substantial nature is perhaps best summed up in a single word: *Larva*. Julián Ríos himself has called a novel’s title a “crucial element,” as well as “the seed” in which “the entire story is contained” (Gazarian Gautier 247). And *Larva* is no exception. As is fitting for this intricately *deviant* narrative, “larva” has two distinct meanings that both illuminate the novel’s uniquely ambiguous position. Most commonly, “larva” describes an insect at an early stage of development, during a period in which it has yet to assume the physical characteristics that distinguish it as the member of a specific species. A secondary definition is that of specter, ghost, or skeleton.⁹⁵ Thus, “larva” embodies a state of possibility *and* a state of decay. It is the mystery of an unknown future *and*, quite literally, the remnants of a past that still haunts the present. Like Langer’s *semblance*, “larva” is both solid and diaphanous. It too is paradox, one that captures the essence of *Larva* as a work whose startling dimensionality looks forward and back. But perhaps what best embodies *Larva*’s contradictory and multivalent nature is not the careful layers of its title, but instead its many unintended consequences. When asked if Cortázar’s *Axolotl* inspired his use of the term “larva”, Ríos responds emphatically “No, absolutely not” (Gazarian Gautier 247). Offering up Valle-Inclán’s *La lámpara maravillosa* and Descartes’s “larvatus prodeo” as equally erroneous fonts, he then casually observes: “It is curious that the title has so many possible sources” (Gazarian Gautier 247).

⁹⁵ Definitions for “larva” were taken from the online Merriam-Webster dictionary.

Conclusion:
The Same, but Different:
The *Proyecto Nocilla* and the *Novel as Art Object* Topos

In the preceding chapters, I have offered a vision of Spanish narrative objecthood that stretches across the twentieth century. Beginning with the historical avant-garde and ending with Postmodernism, I have examined instances of pointed formal experimentation that not only challenge conventional notions of the novel as genre, but also reimagine how—and why—meaning is created. In each case, stereotypically content-focused narrative is transformed by language that refuses to conceal itself in story; the result distinctly dimensional works that foreground the material from which they are constructed. In each example, the signifier is distanced from the signified to such a degree that the reading experience is radically reconfigured. To return to Shklovsky, the foundational avant-garde figure with whom we began, this all-important shift away from a habitual perspective requires the innovation of form. As language (at times, fiercely) asserts its (*estranged*) independence, the reader too must evolve. Here, routines do not bring understanding –if we are going to truly *comprender*, we cannot mindlessly consume referents in order to interpret. We must instead engage our powers of observation and notice the words themselves –as words, as icons and sounds, as carefully crafted *things*. In this way, it is a uniquely sensual literary encounter in which a person with a human body meets a textual body. Here, meaning is not an explanation but an extraordinary encounter with shape, volume, resonance, and rhythm.

Yet for all the (vanguard) intersections (like the lack of plot and the profusion of poetic device) that contribute to this shared objecthood, these experimental novels are undeniably *different* from one another. I may *see* with common clarity the (objectified) language of *Cazador en el alba*, *Vispera del gozo*, *Volverás a Región*, and *Larva*, but my experience with each text is not the same. Surprising and ornate descriptions make *Cazador en el alba* sparkle, while the hazy similes of (an always unfulfilled) *Vispera del gozo* feel reflective and melancholic. Thirty-five years, a civil war, and a dictatorship later, the painstaking—and pained—density of *Volverás a Región* ensnares, only to obscure and confound. Post-*Transición Larva* likewise perplexes, but always playfully, the lightheartedness of its profoundly mutilated language bubbling beyond its cover. They are all art objects, but their materiality is nevertheless singular, a reflection of the specific spaces and times from which they emerged.

And they are not alone. They are not the only Spanish examples of *defamiliarized* and form-focused novels generating new notions of narrative language and meaning. Indeed, the phenomenon continues—to the delight of Italo Calvino—into the twenty-first century. The *Proyecto Nocilla* by Agustín Fernández Mallo is a case in point. In 2006, the—then relatively unknown, and now star—author published *Nocilla Dream*. The startlingly fragmented work (which some hesitate to even label narrative) was an unanticipated critical and commercial success. The equally experimental *Nocilla Experience* (2008) and *Nocilla Lab* (2009) came soon after, the trilogy (and Fernández Mallo) at the helm of an important shift in contemporary Spanish literature whose status as an official *generación* critics were quick to note, name, debate, and eventually, discard. Alternately labeled the *Generación Nocilla*, *Mutantes*, *afterpop*, and *pangea*⁹⁶, the young(er) authors⁹⁷ were immediately celebrated for the *newness* of their creations.

⁹⁶ The phrase *Generación Nocilla* first appeared in two newspaper articles covering a literary conference dedicated to up-and-coming authors: Elena Hevia's "Los autores del siglo XXI" and Nuria Azancot's "La Generación Nocilla

In the case of *Nocilla Dream* and *Nocilla Experience*, such *newness* takes the shape of the rhizome—or, as Fernández Mallo would say, “una red ‘libre de escala’” (*Postpoesía* 155)—, their countless chapters expanding (seemingly infinitely) outward with a dizzying array of stories, people, places, themes, and outside sources. They are, it has been noted time and again by scholars like Saum-Pascual, Christine Henseler, Alice Pantel, and Jesse Barker, products of the age of the Internet, the consumer-driven media culture of the early 2000s transforming how information is received and understood. The literature born of this technology-triggered “cambio cognitivo” (*Mutatis* 28) Saum-Pascual labels *#postweb*. As she explains in her 2018 *#Postweb! Crear con la máquina y en la red*: “Escritura *#postweb* vendría a referirse a un tipo de literatura que, consciente de su lugar dentro de la red del conocimiento y de las prácticas de inscripción del mismo, se ha generado por y para los medios digitales y que ha asumido plenamente la web como algo que ha dejado de ser novedad y futuro para ser presente...” (10). Such is the (posthumanist) angle scholarship on the *Proyecto Nocilla* naturally takes, examining its new narrative form (and content) in relation to the “llamados “nuevos medios” digitales” (*#Postweb* 12) that have conditioned them (along with the minds of their creators) and defined the historical period in which they appeared.

My own concerns, however, like the novels themselves, are *different*. Thus, while I acknowledge (prevailing) contemporary considerations of how the digital revolution of recent decades has infiltrated narrative structure, reimagined authorship⁹⁸, and more, my goal is instead

y el afterpop piden paso”. Hevia’s article was published in Catalonia’s *El Periódico* on June 29, 2007. Azancot’s was printed in the Madrid-based *El Cultural* a few weeks later, on July 19, 2007. The symposium they were covering, *el Atlas Literario Español*, was funded by publishers Seix Barral and *la Fundación Lara* and took place from June 26 to 28, 2007 in Seville. That same year, two books were also published on the topic. First, *La luz nueva* by (group member) Vicente Luis Mora, a theoretical work that sorts the Spanish literary panorama of the early 2000s into three categories: *tardomodernidad*, *posmodernidad*, and—the most revolutionary—*pangea*. While the other narrative types relay to some extent on existing literary models, *la literatura pangeica* has totally ascended to the plane of the *new*. For Mora, “[pangea] representa el actual estado del mundo, indisociadas ya sus vertientes físicas o concretas y las digitales o abstractas, y el arte *pangeico* sería aquel que responde ya plenamente a este *nuevo*... estado de cosas...” (72). Next came an anthology edited by (sometimes member) Juan Francisco Ferré and Julio Ortega that included short stories and excerpts from the likes of Fernández Mallo, Jorge Carrión, Eloy Fernández Porta, and Javier Calvo. Titled *Mutantes: Narrativa española de última generación*, it made the case for a new group of Spanish authors—*Mutantes*—whose works are above all contemporary, connected by (and reflective of) the “saturación mediática y mediatización sistemática” (Ferré 17) that has defined the first two decades of the twenty first century. In 2010, Eloy Fernández Porta would release his own take on (and phrase for) this new literature—*afterpop*. But, as Alex Saum-Pascual emphasizes in *Mutatis Mutandi: literatura española del nuevo siglo XXI*, characteristics in common, whether lived or literary, do not (necessarily) a generation make. Indeed, despite the obvious points of contact and the many names and essays dedicated to this *latest* in Spanish literature, “los escritores mutantes han insistido repetidamente en mantener su individualidad e idiosincrasia” (379). Jorge Carrión, for example, is quoted as already rejecting the word “nocilla” in Azancot’s article. Javier Calvo too explicitly establishes his independence in “La historia de la nocilla”, a May 2009 article in *La Vanguardia*. Today, such terminological debates have largely ceased, the focus of critics, academics, and the authors themselves having shifted to the actual works as a reflection of (and a dialogue with) the information-abundant digitized society in which they were created.

⁹⁷ Fernández Mallo was born in 1967 and the majority of the (now disputed) *Generación Nocilla* was born in the 1970s. Although they are now in their late 40s and early 50s and (perhaps) should no longer be characterized as young, when they arrived on the Spanish literary scene fifteen years ago, much was made of their youth.

⁹⁸ Another key trait of *#postweb* literature is a new understanding of “la función de Autor” (Saum-Pascual 142), who is no longer a solitary creative force, but instead another node in an expansive creative network. Taking inspiration from Foucault’s description of the end of the *author-function*, Saum-Pascual see Fernández Mallo specifically (and *#postweb* literature more broadly) as participating in the “murmullo del anonimato” (144) because

to examine the *Nocilla* trilogy within the (much more specific) framework of the three earlier experimental moments discussed in this dissertation. I aim to understand it as another avant-garde example of narrative objecthood that both intersects with *and* diverges from its already-analyzed peers, a final (and future) point of contact (and contrast) for the manifold manifestations of Spanish literary dimensionality across the twentieth century.

In her introduction to *literatura #postweb*, Saum-Pascual advocates for “la *crítica efímera*” (12), a kind of study that embraces its own impermanence and even accepts eventual irrelevance. Such irreverent *intrascendencia* not only recalls the famed *deshumanización* of Ortega y Gasset; it also underscores the importance of (ever-changing) context, reminding us to just what extent “...la cuestión literaria... depende absolutamente del contexto y del momento en el que nace...” (12). It is context, after all, that explains how such similarly word-focused works can look, sound, and *feel* so different from one another. It is context—the technological, political, social, and cultural realities of a given era—in which such *defamiliarizing* (and eye-opening) techniques unfold. As we are about to see, the *Proyecto Nocilla* is (not surprisingly) fundamentally distinct from *Vispera del gozo* and *Volverás a Región*. Its materiality is—once more—singular. But despite their digital roots, the radical formal innovations of the *Nocilla* novels share much with their pre-digital counterparts, a reality highlighted by the many references to the historical avant-garde in their criticism (and marketing).⁹⁹ They may be uniquely *contemporary*, but they are not without—I would argue, an objectified—continuity. How does their daring transformation of narrative language and structure overlap with other instances of (extreme) experimentation? In what ways do they diverge? How is the objecthood of the *Proyecto Nocilla* like (or unlike) that of the vanguard *novela poética*, the *nueva novela*, and the postmodern pastiche? These are the questions with which I will conclude my exploration of a literary phenomenon that endures, paradoxically, as a series of singularities.

I. Uncovering Objecthood: An Archaeological Approach to (Avant-garde) Literature

The approach I will take to answer them is, despite my distinct focus, borrowed from *#Postweb*. It is also—appropriately—itself inherently substantial. After establishing her own critical transience, Saum-Pascual explains why it matters –(again, appropriately when remembering Shklovsky) because it offers an otherwise inaccessible shift in perspective:

Les propongo que pensemos este #ensayoefímero, y con él la práctica de la crítica literaria más amplia, de manera fugaz, inestable, discontinua y, por ende, de manera también técnicamente antinarrativa, en tanto que la historia es básicamente una narración que nos montamos para justificar el acaecimiento de eventos como consecuencias lógicas de otras cosas que ocurrieron antes y que, a su vez, provocarán nuevas reacciones y

“[todas]... las obras de Fernández Mallo presentan la colaboración de otros *autores* e incluyen materiales multimedia prestados...” (144)

⁹⁹ In “Breaking the Code: *Generación Nocilla*, New Technologies, and the Marketing of Literature”, Vicente Moreno explains how critics (following the lead of Fernández Mallo and the work itself) readily accepted (and propagated) a celebratory vision of *Nocilla Dream* as *new*. To demonstrate, Moreno outlines “a succession of positive reviews” (78) that praise the twenty-first century novel specifically for its rupture, a quintessentially vanguard characteristic. He even quotes a review from *El País* in which Lluís Satorras foreshadows this dissertation by declaring that “...para comprenderlo, hay que atender a algunos antecedentes del siglo pasado, las vanguardias de los años veinte o los ensayos novelísticos de los sesenta” (quoted on 78). Other examples—from Fernández Mallo himself—are forthcoming.

resultados en el futuro que se avecina. Se trata de pensar la cuestión literaria y sus objetos emergentes en la España del siglo XXI como si fueran elementos arqueológicos, no históricos, fuera de la reacción en cadena de la historia literaria (12-13).

Narrative, she reminds us, is not necessarily natural; it is instead something we create in books, movies, and even history. Narrative is a major avenue for making sense, but it is not the only option. Rather than fill in the blanks for the sake of seamlessness, we can also just see things—be they academics, novelists, movements, works of criticism or art, books—for what (and as) they are. They do not need to weave neatly into a story in order to be valuable. We can instead observe each of them not as a *part* of something bigger, but as an artistic *whole* that is itself inherently worthy of our attention. This is a practice that more honestly lets them be. It is also, as Saum-Pascual points out, a practice that paradoxically makes room for connections not tethered to the official tapestry. With the grand narrative gone, accounts, perspectives, and positions that were previously invisible appear, such plurality fostering new (and more) points of contact (and, at times, contrast).

When we perceive novels “...como si fueran elementos arqueológicos, no históricos”, we engage in literary archaeology. Literary (or media) archaeology is a broad contemporary approach to examining works as the concrete *singularities* of a particular moment, not culminations of (advancing) influence. It is a way of “[pensando] [el discurso histórico y la memoria] como una red de relaciones discontinuas y objetos aislados que puestos unos juntos a otros nos ayuden a descubrir, no solo algo de lo viejo en lo nuevo... sino algo nuevo en lo viejo” (Saum-Pascual 13). Fittingly, its lead practitioners (Siegfried Zielinski, Jussi Parikka, and Erkki Huhtamo) all have their own methods for achieving the shared goal of avoiding an (easy) explanatory narrative. For example, Zielinski’s idea of *deep time in the media* is “una crítica a la noción teleológica de la evolución de los medios donde se asumiría de manera natural una idea de progreso intrínseca a la narrativa propio de todo dispositivo tecnológico” (Saum-Pascual 14). In this way, an archaeological attitude does not strive to simply eliminate associations between strata, but rather to “uncover a non-linear layering of *variations*” (Parikka n.p.) that Jussi Parikka aptly likens to the rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari¹⁰⁰.

Huhtamo too looks for those links buried by an overpowering central narrative, using the term “topos” for such unexpected (and until now unseen) moments of continuity. He opens his discussion on the subject in “Dismantling the Fairy Engine” by describing an instance of *déjà vu*. After encountering an ad for the Winter Olympics (and a Samsung phone) in which miniature athletes leave the electronic device and compete on a desk in an empty office, he realizes that he has seen them before. Indeed, these “little people” (28) have also appeared in promotions for early videogames, a 1959 issue of the *New Yorker*, and even “in the context of phonograph and gramophone advertising” (28). As Huhtamo explains, they are “a topos—a stereotypical formula evoked over and over again in different guises and for varying purposes. Such topoi accompany and influence the development of media culture. Cultural desires are expressed by being embedded within topoi. Functioning as shells or vessels derived from the memory banks of tradition, topoi mold the meaning(s) of cultural objects” (28).

He goes on to name the father of the topos as Ernst Robert Curtius, a German scholar specializing in modern French literature whose critical masterpiece was nevertheless dedicated to the writings of the medieval Europe. Alarmed (and restricted) by the rise of fascism in the

¹⁰⁰ As we will see in the final section of this conclusion, the rhizome has been an important avenue for understanding the structure of the *Proyecto Nocilla*.

1930s, Curtius identified topoi with origins in the ancient world as a way of establishing (and preserving) “the continuity and universality of the Western tradition threatened by the new Dark Ages” (29). Classical topoi were rhetorical tools, familiar expressions that an orator could use (and alter) as they pleased and that eventually developed into “clichés, which [could] be used in any form of literature” (29). There are topoi of form *and* content (an ambiguity that became a point of critique, Huhtamo notes), long-lived literary patterns whose “temporal and spatial omnipresence” Curtius called—appropriately for our purposes—“a sculptural motif” (quoted on 31). Curtius also explicitly invoked archaeology, likening topos investigations “to aerial photography, which had helped archaeology to discover massive land structures invisible from the ground level...” (33). Topoi are thus decidedly physical—and (again) paradoxical—in nature, a material remnant of the literary past whose continued presence strangely undoes notions of linear time with regards to the “development” of literature. Rather than intangible ideas that have evolved through the ages leaving us with only the traces of what was, topoi are entities in equal parts variable *and* static. Notably, they undergo no “essential changes in their meanings – only changes in their style” (33). Topoi move between periods, authors, and genres, the particularities of a specific manifestation of *little people*, “the world as a book”, or “*theatrum mundi*” (Huhtamo 30) reflecting “historically specific circumstances” (Huhtamo 34). Nevertheless, their core remains unchanged, an enduring artistic whole whose core invariability (even in different circumstances) contradicts conventional notions of a single and progressive History. Topoi do not travel *through* time; they are sprinkled across time. Topoi are everywhere all at once, in such a way that time is re-conceptualized. As a given topos expands spatially and temporally, its dispersed (and distinct) iterations do not simply advance into the future. Alternately, these strangely shifting stabilities come together to “create a cyclical motion in a way many media archaeologists no doubt endorse. There is no separation; instead, there is constant interchange, a cruise in time. The past is brought to the present, and the present to the past; both inform and explain each other, raising questions and pointing to futures that may or may not be” (Huhtamo and Parikka, *Introduction* 15).

A sculptural motif; a stylistically distinct repetition; a (multidirectional) *cruise in time* – these descriptions undoubtedly also characterize the shared *and* singular literary objecthood of this dissertation. That objecthood, then, is a topos. And what I am doing here is—unexpectedly—an exercise in literary archaeology. I have unearthed an assortment of Spanish novels from a range of periods that do the *same* thing (they all flaunt their materiality) in a *different* way (but they do not *feel* alike). Thanks to literary archaeology, I do not have to understand them as sequence. *Volverás a Región* does not have to be explained as an avant-garde offshoot; *Larva* does not have to evolve into the *Proyecto Nocilla*. Like the language of these experimental works, which moves beyond referentiality (and plot) to display itself as autonomous *thing*, this archaeological approach removes criticism from the (artificial) flow of narrative. Once removed, it too (re)emerges objectified, its newfound dimensionality the result of improved visibility. Such critical quarries are not objects because they are big or rigid. To the contrary, they are objects because we can (finally) see them. They too are whole. They too are worthy of notice, not because of their placement in a logical progression of literature, but because they engage deliberately—and concretely—with their unique moment in a way that also creates more space for (equal) encounters across periods and genres. When I examine a literary artifact as an (distinctly material) end in itself (rather than a means to an end in the form of a story), everything becomes clearer –the work itself, its many “cultural continuities and ruptures” (Huhtamo 34), and my own (and others’) critical practices.

II. Fragmented Continuity, or Another Example of Unconventional Narrative Structure

And so I will pause to excavate one last literary artifact—the *Proyecto Nocilla*—in order to observe its particular points of contact and contrast with the (other, not earlier) works occupying the topos of *novel as art object*. Consequently—and in the spirit of literary archaeology—, there will be no neat narrative arc, no concise conclusion that summarizes a straightforward trajectory from Point A (*la vanguardia histórica*) to Point D (*los Mutantes*). There will be instead instances of continuity and rupture that, by moving in many directions, “nos ayuden a descubrir, no solo algo de lo viejo en lo nuevo...sino algo nuevo en lo viejo” (Saum-Pascual 13).

The first, and most obvious, example of intra-topos continuity is a shared unconventional narrative structure. Like the other experimental examples, *Nocilla Dream* opens unexpectedly, with a citation from a 1999 Scientific American article on Alan Turing clarifying that computers can do a lot, but not everything. The (now wildly outdated) piece explains that although they can quickly identify “la posición exacta dentro de 100 años de un satélite” or “[pronosticar] las subidas y bajadas de la bolsa por un período de un mes”, they struggle to recall our faces and read our scribble, something our own “red de neuronas” (15) accomplishes with ease. “De ahí el interés en crear computadoras inspiradas en el cerebro humano” (15), closes the quote (and chapter) mysteriously. In the second, “Falconetti, un exboxeador que venía de San Francisco” hikes along the US50, stopping for provisions in a five-aisle Carson City, Nevada “supermercado” (16) before ignoring the request of Samantha, a prostitute sitting on the porch of “el Honey Route, último burdel antes de dar comienzo al desierto...” (16-17). In the third, a young “Billy The Kid” awakes in a van traveling along the same highway to find, “quieto en el asfalto como un conejo sin camada, paralizado por una incertidumbre que es imán para la soledad...un zapato de tacón, marrón quizá por la tierra del desierto, o quizá porque de verdad fuese marrón. Ni 2, ni 4, ni 6, ni 8, ni ninguna otra cifra par” (19). The fourth is a four-line anonymous reflection on the contrasting conditions of an *álamo* and a marriage. The fifth returns to the Honey Route and Sherry, who unexpectedly finds a photo of her mother in a collection of “fotografías encontradas” (21) that a nomadic client stores in his suitcase. “[Su madre sonreía] agarrada a un hombre que, [Sherry] entendió, era el padre que nunca había llegado a conocer” (22). In the sixth, still on the US50, the wind blows and a tree shakes, as

los cientos de pares de zapatos que cuelgan del álamo se someten a un movimiento pendular, pero no todos con la misma frecuencia, dado que los cordones por los que están sujetos a las ramas son de una longitud muy diferente en cada uno de ellos. Visto a una cierta distancia es, en efecto, un baile caótico en el cual, pese a todo, se intuyen ciertas reglas (23).

By now the reader also intuits that—once more—this is no ordinary novel. After just nine pages (some of which contain only a small amount of writing), we are already at chapter six with no plot in sight. None of the characters have appeared more than once and the only thing that seems to join them is the forlorn road they occupy. There are stories—the *exboxeador* taking Columbus’s journey in reverse, the child who travels with his dad to rock-climbing competitions, the lonely sex worker abandoned by her collector-lover—but there is no *Story*. In

its place, there are pieces¹⁰¹. Pieces of places and people, pieces of text, and pieces of ideas that share the space of the book, but otherwise withhold obvious connection. This absence of traditional linear plot development is a central point of contact with the other form-focused topos members. In neither *Nocilla Dream* nor *Nocilla Experience* is there a plot that unfolds from beginning to end. There is no Story that stretches out sequentially, no problems that are overcome in a journey across hundreds of pages, no logical and emotionally satisfying conclusion. As we have already seen, there are instead fragments of all sorts. There are (sometimes recurring) vignettes describing the (often unconventional) lives of fictional characters. In addition to Falconetti, Billy The Kid, and Sherry, in *Nocilla Dream* we meet Jorge Rodolfo Fernández, a Borges-obsessed Argentine living in a Las Vegas *apartahotel* who constructs an inhospitable temple to the *maestro*; Kelly, a young California surfer whose friends travel to Spain in her honor after she dies of cancer; Hans, a Danish slaughterhouse worker who skillfully slices cows in Carson City and salmon in northern Denmark; and Chii-Teen, a Chinese physicist and director of “el museo de Ciencia Ficción de Pekín” (196) (among many others).

In both novels, there are also passages from an awe-inspiring array of outside sources. *Nocilla Experience* alone incorporates portions of interviews with popular musicians like Björk, Thom York, and Eddie Vedder; assorted quotes from the Basque magazine *ZEHAR*¹⁰²; an obituary from *El País*; a treatise on landscape design; part of the Wikipedia page on the (perhaps) supernatural *caras de Bélmez*; the (growing) script of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*; and slivers of *Rayuela*, a literary classic whose revolutionary character recalls Moreno’s take on *Nocilla* novelty. The sources of most, but not all, are labeled. *Rayuela*, for example, anonymously accompanies an enigmatic Julio in his travels to the rooftops of Barcelona and London. He is “...alto, muy alto, con barba, y con los ojos separados como los de un pez” (46). He wears “un espeso abrigo de *tweed*...” (46), first sharing his “2 grandes obras maestras, *Rayuela A* y *Rayuela*, o lo que es lo mismo, *Rayuela* y mi Teoría de las Bolas Abiertas” (47) with Marc, another cagey roof dweller devoted to

una teoría que hace años que tiene en marcha, enmarcada en algo más amplio que él denomina *socio-física teórica*... La pretensión de su teoría consiste en demostrar con términos matemáticos que la soledad es una propiedad, un estado, connatural a los seres humanos superiores, y para ello se fundamenta en una evidencia física bien conocida por los científicos: sólo existen en la naturaleza 2 clases de partículas, los fermiones [electrones y protones, por ejemplo] y los bosones [fotones, gluones, gravitones, etcétera]. Los fermiones se caracterizan por el hecho, ampliamente demostrado, de que no puede haber 2 o más en un mismo estado, que no pueden estar juntos. La virtud de los bosones es justamente la contraria... (32).

¹⁰¹ This is a description that could just as easily apply to literary archaeology, which replaces the telling of narrative of History (the plot) with the observation of cultural artifacts (the pieces).

¹⁰² On its website, *ZEHAR*’s description of itself as “a platform of thinking inside institutional constraints, dedicated to art and contemporary culture” (n.p.) evokes the innovative aspirations of the *Proyecto Nocilla*. The articles cited in *Nocilla Experience* likewise highlight the novels’ distinctly *material* nature. For example, the first is a review of a controversial German exhibition of cadavers that have undergone “un proceso de embalsamado llamado *plastinación*, que proporciona firmeza y plenitud a tejidos y órganos corporales para que puedan exhibirse de manera convincente” (43). Others include an account of a machine conceived by Alan Turing capable of imitating any other machine as well as an explanation—titled “Datos hecho carne”—of *transhumanism*, a branch of humanism committed to uniting the human and the computer in order to defy death.

Notable to this exploration of literary materiality is Marc's habit of literally hanging his theories out to dry, the "hojas escritas, a mano y por una sola cara, con fórmulas matemáticas" strung along countless clothing lines that, along with the (possibly illegal) shack he has constructed from "diferentes hojas de latas, bidones, trozos de cartones petroleados y fragmentos de uralitas" (12), fill his terrace. Here, "[cuando] sopla el viento [siempre sopla] y se mira de frente el conjunto de hojas, éstas se forman una especie de mar de tina teórico y convulso. Si se ven desde atrás, las caras en blanco de las DIN-A4 parecen la más exacta simbología de un desierto" (12). They are not just ideas; they are sheets of paper, an ocean, and a desert. In short, they are *things*, concepts materialized.

Their physical nature, however, also stems from their broader positioning within the novel itself, a positioning that both connects *Nocilla Dream* to and distinguishes it from the rest of the *novel as art object* topos. Notably, these equations are not alone. To the contrary, the wafting leaves sit alongside a dizzying number of texts, with regards to quantity *and* type. In addition to the wide-ranging cited passages and the fictional vignettes (repeating and not), there are philosophical reflections, like the nine lines of chapter 93 that reference *Heráclito* and Einstein in their contemplation light and dark and life and death. There are also links to websites and sections that share seemingly random information without the organizational axis of a protagonist. Chapter 7 of *Nocilla Dream*, for example, outlines one of the hotel industry's biggest challenges—"el hurto de pequeños objetos" (25). It lists what is stolen before sharing a solution:

La cadena de hoteles *Houses of America*, tras declarar la amnistía a todos quienes en sus 62 años de existencia se han ido con algún objeto en la maleta, ha decidido intentar recuperar sus pertenencias de forma pacífica, y para ello ha creado el primer Museo de Objetos Encontrados, con sede en Los Ángeles y en Chicago, aunque también se encuentra el catálogo en Internet (25-26).

The account appears made-up—there are no citations and Google searches of the hotel chain and the (remarkably object-focused) museum bear no fruit.

But fictional (or not), this strange description is nevertheless one part of an incredibly intricate composite. Indeed, the 113 chapters of *Nocilla Dream* and the 112 (plus 32-page epilogue) of *Nocilla Experience* are not just plot-less—they also display a level of formal complexity that rivals, recalls, and therefore informs other instances of Spanish narrative experimentation. After all, such radical fragmentation is a hallmark of not only the *Proyecto Nocilla*, but also the historical avant-garde *and* postmodernism. Like *Larva*, *Nocilla Dream* is a *pastiche*, blending countless fragments of high and low, original and borrowed, real and fake. It is, moreover, a (commonly postmodern) creative technique that is decidedly physical in character. The literary equivalent of the collage—itsself a quintessentially Cubist practice that literally combines materials to make art—the *pastiche* also joins things with other things—popular movie and magazine quotes bordering lives on lonesome desert highways and deep thoughts on the nature of our existence.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ The pastiche (or collage) is something that, despite its postmodern pedigree, Fernández Mallo identifies in *Postpoesía* (a theoretical text we will soon see in greater detail) as uniquely contemporary, an example of the *cruise in time* described by Huhtamo and Parikka. Fittingly, the *pastiche* also appears frequently on the *inside* of the *Proyecto Nocilla*. In chapter 85 of *Nocilla Experience*, Arkadi, an elderly Armenian farmhand "desayuna leche con azúcar y vodka en un cuenco" (129) and waits for the stirring of pigs. Next to him, "...junto a un Cristo y unas fotos

That the connections between all the parts of *Nocilla* are not clear only heightens this sense of dimensionality because there is no flow. Once again, plot is replaced by piece. There is no way *into* the novels, nowhere to get lost and forget that in reality I am holding a book (or perhaps tablet) in my hands. This sounds similar to something I said in the previous chapter's exploration of *Larva's* particular plasticity. Like *Nocilla Dream*, *Larva* is startlingly disjointed, to such an extent that, from the inside, it does not look or feel like a novel at all. But the reading experience, as one might anticipate given their distinct contexts, is *not* the same. In neither case am I absorbed in an unfolding human drama. However, for all their (page-turning) fragmentation, the many-layered footnotes of *Larva* still trace a path for me to follow. It may be torturously twisty and often obscured, but the path is nonetheless there. And it is important, because, in the midst of narrative chaos (and there is a lot), it is my beacon, leading me physically through the book and creating clearer connections between its unusual sections when I cannot rely on routine. *Larva's* plot may lie (almost totally) buried beneath its richly *defamiliarized* language, but some sense of progression *is* possible –not from trailing Milalias on his search for Babelle, but from following the footnotes themselves. I may not understand *what* I am reading, but these structural guideposts do offer an alternative kind of progress, allowing me to make my way through the book as object rather than story.

The numerous sections of *Nocilla Experience* offer no such segue. To the contrary, each chapter appears at first glance as an individual (and frequently, isolated) entity. In the absence of structural cues or context, each piece stands alone amid a curious patchwork of other (separate) pieces, in the process acquiring a tactility (again) born of being noticed. A chapter is not a segment of a wider textual sequence, surrounded by other segments of text that sit alongside it *in* the book and inform its significance. Here, when I look directly at the book, I see a (rather disconnected) *pastiche* of quotations, cultural references, ruminations, and solitary tales that look and feel different from one other, and that consequently, come together to create an altogether different kind materiality, one that in fact extends *far beyond* the physical boundaries of the book. Indeed, in my frustrated search for sense-making context, Alex Saum-Pascual would undoubtedly tell me that I have been looking in the wrong place. The *Proyecto Nocilla*, she says, is instead an example of *transmedia storytelling*, a concept developed by Henry Jenkins to capture “narrativa [cualquier tipo de historia, no tiene que ser escrita, películas y cómics también] cuando se mueve por diferentes entornos” (*#Postweb!* 138). It is a creative practice that is inherently expansive, incorporating “diferentes plataformas como videojuegos, películas de animación, novelas o cómic, que no se limitan a copiar o reproducir la narración original, sino que la expanden dentro de un mundo que incluye la narrativa original como parte, pero cuya lectura total requiere de su participación en este nuevo mundo...” (139). It is also innately of the twenty first century, as “[esta] expansión de la obra pondría en evidencia la distribución de nuestra experiencia contemporánea entre la realidad física y aquella que llevamos a cabo en la red, ampliando nuestra noción de producción *#postweb*” (133).

In the case of *Nocilla Dream*, I must therefore widen my own understanding of the novel as genre and *thing*, adapting it to now. In other words, I must look away from the page. The

de sus padres, tiene colgada en la pared la carátula del *Sargent Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*...En esos 15 minutos que tarda el sol en salir, Arkadi suele mirar detenidamente los rostros que se arraciman en la carátula del disco. Le había tachado la cara a Karl Marx, el único a quien conoce, pero después le pegó encima el rostro, sacado de una foto, de su difunta esposa” (129). In a remote Eastern desert, he observes perhaps *the* quintessential collage of Western Popular culture. He also participates in its physical transformation, an act that in itself underscores its inherent materiality.

literary category moves beyond “...aquella gran narrativa estructural anterior...” (140). I too must turn toward other (contemporary) media and artistic materials. When trying to *comprender* the seemingly random array of texts and topics,

...[I] cannot limit [myself] to symbols, ideograms or surrounding grammar, but need to look at the greater textuality that surrounds them, in their mediality, or as participating elements in media convergence. The immediate context of each verse—each sentence, scene, character—are *other media*: other rewritings, images, videos...that are not presented to us in the hermetic body of a book, but are bound up with our reality; billboards, commercial breaks, etc. that interrupt our daily reading with constant stimuli interrelating with a reading practice that previously existed in isolation” (Saum-Pascual, *Transmedia Poetics* 90-1).

Larva's densely footnoted fragmentation winds the reader slowly through a one-way textual labyrinth. The linguistic overgrowth makes movement difficult, but the direction in which to travel is clear (enough). The equally fractured *Nocilla Dream* feels instead like I am adrift among the countless astral (or media) bodies of an ever-expanding universe (or Internet). I am carried away; there is no center. In this way, materiality too is (uniquely) dispersed. There is—like in the rest of the *novel as art object* topos—a *defamiliarized* narrative structure that rebuffs the once habitual role of medium, but only here does it actually escape the book's covers.

III. The Unexpectedly Literary: Science as Substance in the *Proyecto Nocilla*

This newly dispersed literary materiality inevitably leads to other points of (contextually-specific) divergence. As the *Proyecto Nocilla* expands the contemporary notion of novel, material traditionally deemed outside the scope of “high” literature also makes its way in. This is a trait that we have seen very little of in the topos. *Larva* pushes the limits of what is “appropriate” with its frequent and flagrant sexual innuendo, but its focus (and feeling) is nonetheless *literary*¹⁰⁴. So are the meticulous descriptions of *Volverás a Región*, *Cazador en el alba*, and *Vispera del gozo*, which are alternately praised and disparaged as poetic. The *Nocilla* novels, on the other hand, incorporate science¹⁰⁵ at every level, even narrative. A case in point is Chii-Teen, a recurrent character in *Nocilla Dream*. We first meet him in chapter 56 after what seems to be (but is not cited) a factual summary of the discovery of the neutron first predicted by “el físico teórico Wolfgang Pauli” (107) in 1925 as he sought to locate energy created by a nuclear reaction. In order to find this “nueva partícula casi fantasma, llamada neutrino, sin masa y sin carga eléctrica” (107), physicists like Chii-Teen work underground, monitoring “un

¹⁰⁴ Remember the fundamentally meta nature of *Larva*. Not only are its protagonists authors, but we as readers also get to read *their* work, each level of footnotes corresponding to the same, but different stories of Milalias, Babelle, and Mr. Rayos. What is more, much of the novel's word play centers on the act of writing and the world of literature, with Mr. Rayos describing his edits in real time and frequently referencing specific authors, genres, and literary movements. Indeed, he enters the novel pondering: “The trifolium of our Roman à Klee?” (12).

¹⁰⁵ My intention is not to debate the literariness of science, but rather to note how science does (or does not) typically appear in novels and how, when used unexpectedly, it can contribute to objecthood. Science fiction is obviously an incredibly common popular genre, but hard science—for example, complex equations—is unusual. It is also abundant in the *Proyecto Nocilla*. The (often unseen) similarities between science and poetry are a topic that Agustín Fernández Mallo (as author and trained physicist) addresses directly (and extensively). His ideas on the subject will be addressed shortly in the main text.

grandísimo estanque de agua, como un edificio de 6 pisos, en el cual cualquier impureza que se colase, animal, vegetal o mineral, arruinaría el proyecto...que, efectivamente, detecta 1 ó 2 neutrinos por año” (107). In chapter 61, we watch him “salir del complejo donde se ubica el detector de neutrinos del cual está a cargo...” (117) and get stuck in a traffic jam on his way to a new exhibit of “[pistolas] desintegradoras, la ballesta de *Barbarella*, la Reina Alien de *Aliens*, el Millennium Falcon de *La Guerra de las Galaxias*, la USS Enterprise de *Star Trek*, la pistola de rayos de *Flash Gordon*, el primer ejemplar de *La Máquina del Tiempo* de Wells y también el primero de *Crónicas Marcianas* de Ray Bradbury...” (117). As he idles, he thinks about “la nave Mars Polar Lander...ahora salvaje” floating aimlessly through space because of an “error de cálculo de la NASA” (117). The last time he appears, he is at home reading old newspaper articles “[que] guardan relación con ciertos temas de física, y en concreto con algún aspecto, sea teórico o experimental, de la detección de neutrinos, o con la ciencia ficción...” (196).

And while Chi-teen’s scientific reality embraces the creative imaginings of Western popular culture—a fact that itself serves to highlight the radical miscellanies of the *Nocilla* novels—, other fragments limit themselves to more “serious” science, omitting science fiction *and* narrative development. Chapter 53, for example is just a list of 13 “Constantes físicas de interés”, which include: “Radio del Sol, $R_{\odot} = 6.96 \times 10^{10}$ cm”, “Constante de Gravitación. $G = 6.67 \times 10^{-8}$ dyn cm² g⁻²”, and “Masa del átomo de hidrógeno, $m_H = 1.67 \times 10^{-24}$ g” (102). There is no simplified explanation of their significance for laymen. Nor is there any clue as to their connection to a wider plot—we do not see Chii-Teen calculating them, for example. They simply *are*. They are also incredibly surprising. One simply does not expect to encounter the fundamentals of physics in a novel. As a physicist, Fernández Mallo certainly understands them, but the average (even highly educated) reader does not know what they mean. For most, they are opaque. And as Gerald Bruns reminds us (notably for this archaeological approach, while looking to Modernism), such startling impenetrability is at the root of objecthood. “Indeed, to the extent that words are said to conceal (and ultimately, to be separable from) their meanings, they may in turn be said to possess an independent existence” (23). Having rejected language’s “logical” role as signifier, the equations instead embrace a “poetic [conception] of language” (13) that values shape over significance.

Yet we cannot forget that they, and their context, are still *different*. *Cazador en el alba* uses strangely surreal imagery to sever signifier from signified.¹⁰⁶ *Larva* chops and combines words to make double entendres, jokes, or even gibberish. These equations, in contrast, are not (remotely) meaningless. To the contrary, they are examples of pure explanation, each signifier key to a bigger (and very specific) significance. But what happens when that significance is broadly inaccessible? What becomes of physics equations when they are put in a novel to be viewed by readers of *literature*? How does that (likely less informed) public understand the (for them) incomprehensible? In this way, they are truly twenty-first century examples of the “deviant [utterances]” (71) that characterize the *novel as art object* topos, words or phrases (or whole chapters) that no longer serve as a “medium for discourse, but [constitute] rather a point of departure for the creation of literary art. This means that the very motivation for the act of

¹⁰⁶ As we saw (awhile ago now) in the first chapter, the *novela lírica* opens with a (surreal) start, the objects of modern Madrid transforming before our very eyes: “Todos sabemos que es peligroso, en los días de nieve, acercarse demasiado al oso hambriento de la peletería. Todos hemos seguido alguna vez por la carretera el rastro de una serpiente, hasta encontrar un neumático de bicicleta muerto, estrangulado en el borde. Todos nos hemos conmovido un poco ante esos grandes osarios de bombillas eléctricas, ante esos montones de escombros, de latas vacías, de botellas rotas, donde hay también un ramo de flores mojado y un peine sin púas” (17).

speech lies to some extent in language itself: language has its own value, quite apart from its function, which is to say its transitive purpose” (71). That the deviant utterances in question are physics equations only heightens this plasticity. Physics, after all, is a science dedicated to the study of *matter* in time and space. Chapters incorporating equations are art objects because they are (for most) mysterious and unanticipated, their language was designed for a knowing few rather than widespread transparency. This objecthood is intensified by their content, however opaque, which reminds us that, from a (literal) scientific perspective, “...todo es masa, y todos somos y seremos masa, y quizá algún día haciendo colisionar 2 chorros de subatómicas partículas encuentren los físicos al fin el ansiado bosón de Higgs que dé cuenta de tanto pesa que nos constituye y rodea” (*Nocilla Experience*, 73).

Fernández Mallo too sees a direct link between deviant scientific utterances and the poetic, as demonstrated in his early manifesto, *Postpoesía: Hacia un nuevo paradigma*. Published after the conclusion of the *Nocilla* trilogy in 2010, the extensive text outlines and attempts to resolve what he sees as the sad state of contemporary Spanish poetry¹⁰⁷, which unlike its peers in other artistic fields, has failed to evolve with the world around it. It is, for Fernández Mallo, a dying (if not dead) genre, its resuscitation requiring renewed relevancy in contemporary society. Science, he says, is an important avenue for such reconnection, for despite a perceived divergence between fact (science) and fiction (literature), both are indeed in the business of *representation*: “Y es que la ciencia, como las artes, no es el mundo, sino una representación del mundo, y como tal representación es ficción... Creer que la ciencia describe la realidad resulta tan cándido como pensar que el mapa (una abstracción) de una región es la región” (19). Formerly “un objeto externo susceptible de ser desvelado”, the postmodern scientific *fenómeno* is now “un sujeto con entidad propia al cual sólo es posible aplicarle modelos de representación cambiantes y fluctuantes, *simulaciones* y, en definitiva, una suerte de modelos poéticos; ficciones en sí mismas” (21). For Fernández Mallo, equations are literally poetry, using the same means to achieve the same ends. As such, any self-imposed separation between the two worlds is not only false, it is also harmful to the (presently stalled) development of Spanish literature¹⁰⁸. What is more, in the physics equation Fernández Mallo also sees a model (along with other, more innovative, art forms) for “*poesía postpoética, o poesía expandida, por apropiarnos del término cine expandido utilizado por los teóricos para referirse al cine que usa y se inspira en las nuevas tecnologías*” (28).

Paradoxically advocating for “una especie de regreso a un período pre-ilustrado en el que poesía y ciencia aún no estaban netamente separadas” (30) in order to embody the now, Fernández Mallo strives to innovate. This is a goal that firmly connects him to the vanguard sensibility of the *novel as art object* topos. Like the historical avant-garde’s praise of rupture, Benet’s search for an inimitable style, and Ríos’s adoration of originality, Fernández Mallo harnesses language in his quest for newness –not just the defamiliarized *Nocilla* narration, but also the passionate pleas of *Postpoesía*. That he explicitly outlines his objectives in an extensive theoretical text only strengthens his (oft-observed and outright rejected¹⁰⁹) avant-garde

¹⁰⁷ It is a lamentation that echoes Benet’s own critiques of Spanish literature in *La inspiración y el estilo* roughly 40 years before.

¹⁰⁸ Although Fernández Mallo uses the term *postpoesía* and focuses his disillusionment on the state of Spanish poetry, he also acknowledges that the term and its techniques and aspirations can also be applied to contemporary narrative.

¹⁰⁹ That the *Proyecto Nocilla* was early on celebrated as avant-garde has already been noted. But despite the obvious overlap of both purpose or rhetoric, Fernández Mallo himself explicitly distances *postpoesía* from the

credentials. Indeed, the manifesto is a quintessentially avant-garde gesture, from Shklovsky's *defamiliarized* declarations to Marinetti's fiery defense of Futurism and Ball's celebration of Dadaist impermanence. Self-conscious intentionality is a hallmark of the pivotal modern literary period whose ideals in fact transcend time, infusing the entirety of *novel as art object* topos. Benet likewise published multiple works of theory that (endeavor to) illuminate his shadowy impenetrability. And Ríos was famously prolific *and* verbose in his accounts of his literary aspirations. In all instances, a primary text built out of deviant utterances is accompanied by an explanation, but Fernández Mallo's stands alone in its reliance on science.¹¹⁰

Aside from actual equations, there are countless chapters in *Nocilla Dream* (and *Nocilla Experience*) dedicated to the concepts and history of physics. In addition to Wolfgang Pauli, we hear about the strange origins of Los Alamos, New Mexico from Robert P. Feynman. He was a physicist and there were "...experimentos que realizar y tampoco faltaba trabajo teórico" (53). But before building the atomic bomb, they had to build buildings. After meeting a star scientist from the *Physical Review*, he gets to work on the unexpected: "...como los de física experimental no tenían nada que hacer hasta que estuvieran listos sus laboratorios y sus aparatos, se pusieron a construir ellos mismos los edificios" (54). Later, we read Jacob D. Bekenstein's take on a "teoría definitiva de la realidad" that relies on the "[desarrollos] recientes de la física teórica" and "[un] estudio de las extrañas propiedades de los agujeros negros" (74). Chapter 101 of *Nocilla Experience* describes how

[unos] tipos fueron a Woolsthorpe, condado de Lincolnshire, Inglaterra, donde se ubica la casa que fuera de Isaac Newton, y se colaron en su jardín. Allí localizaron el manzano [de la variedad Flower of Kent] del que cayó la manzana, el cual se encuentra vallado y señalado como el árbol más importante del mundo, y tomaron una pequeña muestra de él. Una vez en los laboratorios BioArt & Co., lo clonaron, y esa réplica exacta está ahora en el Museo de las Ciencias en la ciudad de La Coruña, Galicia, España. Cualquiera que lo observe no puede dejar de preguntarse por qué ése y no otro fue el árbol que hace cientos de años condujo a Newton a hacerse la pregunta '¿por qué esta manzana cae y la Luna no?' (152).

Such accounts are filled with important moments of discovery, big ideas, and numerous names, but not much (if any) immediate context. I know little (if anything) about those quoted and their thoughts. Who is this person? Where did this passage come from? In the case of chapters without citation that recount seemingly actual events or scientific realities, there is even less clarity. Is this fact or fiction? What is the source of this information? Is the data correct? Did

rebelliously destructive literary impulses of a century before, declaring from the outset that "...no se trata de un *remake* de las *vanguardias históricas*" (*Postpoesía* 12).

¹¹⁰ Another way in which Fernández Mallo's manifesto(s) are different is the number of platforms from which Fernández Mallo *himself* gets to discuss the audacious endeavor; twenty-first century transmedia networks affording unprecedented opportunities to broadcast explanations, inspirations, and objectives. Such profusion is confirmed by a quick search on Google. Interviews with Fernández Mallo, in print and video, abound. So do articles from a wide range of sources, some traditionally scholarly like *The Paris Review* and *Quimera*, some contemporary (and niche), like his personal blog, *El hombre que salió de la tarta*, and others more broadly circulated, like the culture pages of *El País* and *Vanguardia*. Yet regardless its origin and reach, each account is an opportunity for him to expound on his creative philosophy, which he does with gusto. Notably, the views expressed and the language used to express them likewise paint a portrait of literature as *thing*. He compares antiquated poetry to cholesterol. *Postpoesía*, on the other hand is a *germen proteico* and a *célula*. It is something that is constructed rather than told. It is an artifact.

“[los] sismógrafos del programa Apolo” really discover “que en la Luna hay actividad sísmica, terremotos, temblores que se producen entre 800 y 1.200 km de profundidad, a medio camino de la superficie y el centro de ese satélite” (152)? In this new “*universo a través de los medios, o #transmedia*” (#Postweb! 131), the natural reaction to such questions is to turn to Google in search of other relevant media. With one quick search, one can see a photo of Robert P. Feynman and know that he died on February 15, 1988 in Los Angeles, California. With another, we learn that Jacob D. Bekenstein is a theoretical astrophysicist who wrote the second law of thermodynamics. A few clicks later and we have found the website for not only La Coruña’s *Casa de Ciencias* (which invites you to sit “junto a un manzano clónico del de Newton, el que le inspiró para descubrir la ley de la gravedad”), but also BioArt Laboratories (and a 2008 New York Times article on the company’s attempt to clone a dog). In this way, the transmedia tentacles of the *Proyecto Nocilla* extend far beyond the already teeming pages of the book.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Fernández Mallo (as the twenty-first century creator immersed in *transmedia storytelling*) has designed it this way; the reader is supposed to put down *Nocilla Dream* and follow a tangent on his blog, another website, or even in a movie¹¹¹. He even has a name for all this material—his own term for *transmedia*—, identifying as an *Exonovel* everything one encounters on the novel’s *outside* during the reading process. He first outlines the concept in a 2012 essay, “Topological Time in *Proyecto Nocilla* [Nocilla Project] and *Postpoesía* [Post-poetry] (and a brief comment on the Exonovel)”, expanding his ideas in 2018’s *Teoría general de la basura*. In both, the author opens with a (decidedly scientific) definition of the term “exoskeleton”:

el esqueleto externo continuo que recubre toda la superficie de animales artrópodos (arácnidos, insectos, crustáceos, miriápodos y otros grupos relacionados), donde cumple una función protectora, o de respiración o mecánica, proporcionando el sostén necesario para la eficacia del aparato muscular. También se llama exoesqueleto al excremento, frecuentemente mineralizado, que excretan los corales (*Teoría* 164).

As the above description underscores, the exoskeleton is a uniquely corporeal structure –it is firm and three-dimensional; its often rough texture inspires touch; it literally supports a body in space. So does the *Exonovel*, “which sustains a novel, providing internal solidity and protection, without which the novel itself is not possible” (*Topological* 68). “The Internet”, Fernández Mallo adds, “is a rather interesting contemporary example of the Exonovel” because it allows access to “other important components of the novel that require a different medium and a different language” (*Topological* 68). The *Exonovel* thus sits around the novel, as both a part of it and separate from it. It physically supports the novel, its “solidity” providing the strength and stability necessary for the novel to grow. That such growth creates space for other *languages* once again recalls the distinction Gerald Bruns draws between “logical” and “poetic conceptions of language” (13). By expanding the novel almost endlessly past itself, an *Exonovel* takes the reader along with it, obliging one to observe *all* of the novels’ fragments from afar and thus challenging conventional notions of the language’s purpose. Moving from the page to the screen and back again (and again) is simply not an immersive experience. With *Larva*’s complex clover, I cannot forget that I am reading a *book*, a thing whose mass I feel in my palms. With

¹¹¹ Characteristic of contemporary *transmedia storytelling* methods, Fernández Mallo does not restrict his *Proyecto Nocilla* to the page (or the written word). Between 2006 and 2009 (so while writing the novels), he also recorded a movie version of the *Proyecto Nocilla* that (appropriately) is available for viewing on the Internet.

Nocilla Dream, I am also drawn outward, this time into a “...mundo modular, sujeto a ser desmantelado y reconstruido, sin una idea central sino múltiples independientes pero relacionadas, que se expresen a través de imágenes desconectadas que, a su vez, atraigan otras formas de creación” (#*Postweb!* 139). And when I am out there, moving between media without a firm narrative center, even the pieces of the *pastiche* that are *in* the book rise up as objects. Their strangeness and separateness come into view and I cannot help but wonder: What happens when language does not signify conventionally? When some of its words (and chapters) literally make sense, but withhold meaning by refusing the role one expects them to play in a wider plot? Are there other ways to read (and understand) a novel? Is it enough just to see?

Like the tangibly deviant utterances of Gerald Bruns, the intricate *Exonovel* of Fernández Mallo offers a new kind of language born of a new use for language. And yes, it is designed to be seen. It (once more) is material rather than medium, its spiny prickles occupying space forcefully enough to be noticed. What is more, it is not just erected at the whim of the curious (or not) reader. Fernández Mallo in fact forces the matter by including actual links to websites in the text itself, “dislocated footnote[s]” (68) that the reader can actually use and that become an authentic “component of the plot” (68) (or lack thereof). For example, in chapter 39 of *Nocilla Dream*, we watch Ted digitally salute “todos los internautas del mundo, pero en especial ... aquellos que, como él, viven o trabajan en alguna *micronación*” (79). What follows is a short history of the micronation, starting with “[la] micronación más famosa, o de alguna manera precursora a estas otras actuales que motean tanto la superficie como la atmósfera y las profundidades del globo terráqueo... Sealand; el Principado de Sealand (www.telebase.es/sealand)” (79). A few lines later,

[el] *site* Micronations on the Web (www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Senate/5385/index.html) dice que, aparte de las 185 “macronaciones” nucleadas en las Naciones Unidas y los 60 países que no están formalmente reconocidos como tales o no forman parte de la ONU, existen decenas de micronaciones no reconocidas. En la lista de Micronational Links (www.reuniao.org/chancellery/links.html) se pueden encontrar 95 micronaciones, cada una con su sistema legislativo y financiero, sus símbolos e himnos (79-80).

Ted lives in a distant desert bunker in Nevada in “Isotope Micronation” (80) and when we meet him, we also meet every other micronation in the world. The collage grows more complicated as physics, pop culture, and niche interests collide with the infinity of the Internet; the *Exoskeleton* and the novel—as a shared, but singular materiality—take shape.

IV. Poetic Plasticity: Incantatory Repetition in the *Proyecto Nocilla*

The science content of the *Proyecto Nocilla* generates a uniquely expansive objecthood specific to its contemporary *universo transmedia*. But as Fernández Mallo reminds us, those equations are also poetry, and from this poetic plane they—like their *novel as art object* counterparts—also develop dimensionality, sometimes *with* science. Chapter 85 of *Nocilla Dream*, for example, shares a physics haiku: “Wave is a tree, / light particles hanging / x infinity = matter” (160). Chapters 25 and 48 offer two virtually identical anonymous reflections describing how all objects “son grumos, catástrofes ocurridas en el espacio plano, neutro e isótropo que había en El Principio. Son las llamadas Catástrofes de 1ª Especie” (57). The

interaction between these objects “lo llamamos Catástrofe de 2ª Especie. El desierto, por plano e isotropo, es el lugar menos catastrófico. Salvo cuando la quietud se rompe porque un escarabajo arrastra una piedra, o en un pliegue nace una hierba, o un álamo encuentra agua y crece” (57). After the explanation of the catastrophic impact of things encountering one another in space, the example is surprisingly poetic. What qualifies as a catastrophe is not a crashing meteor, but a pebble-dragging beetle and crevice-occupying grass. These images of life flourishing in an inhospitable wilderness are quiet and beautiful, and they offer more than just hard scientific fact. They are simple, small, and insignificant, granting the reader a rare moment of contemplation. In this way, they bring to mind the striking similes of *Cazador en el alba*—they too are a place to pause and appreciate verbal splendor without the weight of interpretation.

Such moments abound in the *Proyecto Nocilla*, science-related and not. Before we know why her marriage is strained, we find a woman named Lee-Kung staying with relatives in the Chinese countryside. Despite the secluded setting, she connects with Billy, the father of Billy The Kid. He updates her on his rock climbing competitions “y le envía unas fotos. Más allá de la pantalla del PC, la visión de los arrozales en toda su extensión le encoge el corazón, que se transmuta en plomo. Pequeño pero denso” (59). She is isolated and her heart retracts, an instant of loneliness and longing portrayed with surprising beauty. A distant gaze and a heart transformed into lead. The final phrase—“Pequeño pero denso.”—is just three words and two adjectives. It is again uncomplicated yet starkly evocative. So are the visions and ruminations of Chii-Teen. When he gazes into “ese búnker de purísima agua le parece ver racimos de algas que después desaparecen. Pero hoy ya ha visto la cola de una sirena” (107). Later, he notices the image of a paint-splattered artist in front of a pristine white canvas and reflects:

Pero sólo la contemplación de esa fotografía, de ese hombre solo y automático como un neutrino en el espacio vacío rasgando una tela también sola y vacía, sólo la intuición tan claramente materializada de la colisión allí de dos fuerzas, una telúrica y la otra áurica que buscaban separarse en el estudio del pintor, sólo esa casualidad de esa tarde de domingo que vino acompañada de un doloroso y arrítmico bombeo en una válvula de su corazón, le llevó a la certeza de que 1) decir “ciencia ficción” es una redundancia porque toda ciencia es ficción, y 2) que el próximo domingo se dedicaría a una actividad menos peligrosa...(198-99).

A physics-inspired simile captures the transcendent emptiness of an artist at work. The repetition of “sólo” creates a rhythm that conjures Chii-Teen’s subsequent realizations¹¹². We cannot see what he sees that leads him to declare science is fiction¹¹³, but we experience it through the words themselves, their pulse communicating sensorially rather than through signification. We can feel Chii-Teen’s heart pounding before it is even said.

¹¹²Chi-Teen, like Fernández Mallo, is a physicist, the presence of so much science thus lending a distinctly autobiographical air to the entirety of the *Proyecto Nocilla*. For its part, *Nocilla Lab* includes two characters (and authors) named Agustín Fernández Mallo. It also ends by transforming into a comic whose main character is clearly drawn from the author. Such open, but uncited autobiographical nods also contribute to the materiality of the novels’ language. When we recognize pieces of Fernández Mallo, be they his interests, events from his life, or his likeness, we cannot pretend that what we are reading is pure fiction. Instead, we recognize the separate parts from which it has been built.

¹¹³ Returning to those objectifying autobiographical features, we are reminded that in *Postpoesía* Fernández Mallo himself (and not one of his characters) explains exactly why science, a “representación del mundo” (19), is fiction.

Indeed, repetition as a language-transforming (and object-creating) poetic device features prominently in the *Proyecto Nocilla*. That the repetition predominates in both original *and* quoted passages serves to highlight the trilogy's proximity to and distance from its topos kin, particularly *Volverás a Región*. Chapter 30 of *Nocilla Dream* is an excerpt from Thomas Bernhard's novel *Corrección*¹¹⁴ in which the narrator describes the discovery of the architectural plans for a shadowy structure called "el Cono" "en la buhardilla de los Holler" (65). There they were created and there they are studied after the death of their creator, Roithamer. Throughout the description of his review, "en la buhardilla de los Holler" repeats (along with "buhardilla" and "los Holler" in other contexts), the incantation producing a striking otherworldliness. Without (at least immediately) a broader frame of reference, we cannot grasp all of the details, but we can intuit the mystery surrounding the project. There is a sensory intensity created by the echo, which itself recalls the gunshots of *Región's* Numa and (again) transmits feeling instead of literal meaning. There is also a visual impact, as one inevitably *sees* the (relatively long) recurring phrase. To the eye (and ear), it stands out from the words around it, in this way, acquiring the plasticity of a thing to be discerned (not a word to be translated). Chapter 84, an original passage that depicts lights going out on an ever-widening scale uses the repetition of a single word to a similar end:

Una ciudad en la noche vista desde el cielo. Piensa. Una casa, una luz que se apaga. Al instante un número indeterminado de luces a su alrededor también se apagan, y en cascada el círculo oscuro va ampliando su radio hasta que toda la ciudad deja de verse. Piensa. Un país en la noche vista desde el cielo, una ciudad en un punto de luz que de repente se apaga. Inmediatamente después va apagándose en círculos las ciudades próximas hasta que la oscuridad del país alcanza sus fronteras. Piensa (158).

Reading, observing, or hearing "Piensa" at regular intervals impacts the tone of the chapter and how we comprehend it. It feels haunting—or haunted—like *Región*, as if there is (again) something beating under the surface that the words on the page do not say directly. In both cases, access is granted through chant-like repetition. In *Volverás*, it is "aquel" that returns, like a drumbeat, to steady (or lull?) the (disoriented) reader. In *Nocilla Dream*, "Piensa" echoes in a richly sensorial world where the language is musical and the lights are bright. Neither provides any context that allows for classical interpretation, whether because it is hidden behind exceedingly complicated words or because it is simply not *in* the book. And when language is unfamiliar, refusing to coalesce around a story, is when objecthood emerges. Its words are not building blocks in the development of plot or message. Consequently, we see and hear them as what they are—images, sounds, objects.

Incantatory repetition in the trilogy also happens *across* chapters, like how the phrase "de costumbres fijas" punctuates the strict routine of Hans. Despite an after-work invitation from an associate, "Hans, de costumbres fijas, continuó directo a su casa" (75). "De costumbres fijas, Hans se acostó a las 9.00" (76). And "Hans, de costumbres fijas, tras devorar la hamburguesa de vacuno que preparaba... sacaba siempre del mismo bolsillo del mandil el mismo libro y leía..." (82-83). As these short passages move between chapters, they create important visual and auditory links, acting as a sort of linguistic bridge that carries the reader through the startlingly

¹¹⁴ Notably, the Wikipedia page for Bernhard's 1975 *Corrección* underscores its experimental nature, linking it to the narrative of modernists Kafka and Beckett. Bernhard too is an innovator with ties to avant-garde ancestors (and perhaps the *novel as art object* topos).

disconnected waters of *Nocilla Dream*. Even though there is no overarching story to extract from its intricacies, I can create a new kind of *sense* centered on the experience of (re)encountering words on the page. *Larva* organizes its fractured form around the footnote. Here, repetition acts as that anchor, allowing me to orient myself. In a sea of remote references and complex theories, they feel (surprisingly) familiar, like something I can hold on to in order to stay afloat. And so language across the topos becomes a distinctly (and broadly) sensual encounter, *Larva* offering (primarily, but not exclusively) touch as *Volverás a Región* and the *Proyecto Nocilla* engage through sight and sound.

In *Nocilla Dream*, the scale of such repetition is also shifting. In addition to single words or phrases, there are (almost) whole chapters that reappear, fulfilling a similarly mysterious, yet grounding role. As described, the first two-thirds of chapters 25 and 48 are identical (except for a semicolon and a comma replacing two periods). And in *Nocilla Experience*, there is the always-lengthening written excerpt of *Apocalypse Now* and the return of a dead dictator, found “flotando en el lago, boca arriba, con el ojo derecho, el único que le quedaba, abierto y sin signos de aparente agresión humana” (10, 101). There is also a recurring remote Russian “palacio del parchís” (16) that sits unused and abandoned. After a detailed report of the origins of this eerily empty board game temple, chapter 6 closes:

Dentro sólo se oye el viento que fuera golpea. Los libros están en sus estantes, los ordenadores cargados de programas, los platos de las cocinas limpios y perfectamente superpuestos, la carne intacta en las salas frigoríficas, los tableros de colores en las vitrinas y las fichas y cubiletes incubando teóricas partidas. También hay una radio que un obrero se dejó encendida.

Subsequent chapters (23, 39, 82, and 111) start here, repeating word for word the same account before also sharing whatever news of the day blares through the vacant halls. Remarkably, this radio in the Caucuses broadcasts “Radio Nacional de España” (40). From it, we learn about a vandalized Roman wall in Lugo, robberies in Girona and Madrid, mourners for Pope John Paul II, Spanish highway development, and the death of a blended western and Iraqi family at the hands of American forces in Iraq. Internal context is (as always) noticeably absent, so the reader must find their footing on the hypnotically duplicate descriptions. It is a territory made recognizable *and* otherworldly through repetition, its words curiously suppressing one kind of (conventional) understanding while also sustaining another. They may not tell, but there is nevertheless respite in their reiteration. The more I hear them, the more they cease to signify, thus continuing their evolution into enigmatic art object(s).

Perhaps the most extreme case of repetition comes from *Nocilla Lab*, a more story-driven and less fragmented work whose transmediality instead takes the shape of a comic. The (again) autobiographical account of a couple’s trip to an “isla al sur de Cerdeña” (36) “para acometer el Proyecto, nuestro Proyecto, como nos gustaba llamarlo” (15) is not composed of countless micro-chapters. To the contrary, it has only three sections, the first of which (“Motor automático de búsqueda”) is around 70 pages long, but has no paragraphs and only a single period (at its conclusion)¹¹⁵. Having settled on “una pequeña isla al sur de otra isla llamada Cerdeña” (15) as

¹¹⁵ Although this section certainly *looks* more typical (even without paragraphs), when combined with the two that follow, it is difficult to classify *Nocilla Lab* as traditional. The second section, “Motor automático”, has 44 short chapters as well as photographs. The final section, “Motor (Fragmentos encontrados)”, switches to a typewriter-inspired Courier font in order to share fragments of text from within the story. They are again divided into short

the site for the secretive *Proyecto*, Agustín Fernández Mallo (the narrator and protagonist) recounts his first-person adventures with an unnamed mate. After opening with a stream of consciousness that includes a return to Chernobyl and a reflection on likeness and paradox, he introduces the setting, “el corazón del Mediterráneo, un pueblo marinero” (15) that inexplicably reminds him of “un pueblo de pescadores portugués, un pueblo cualquiera, pero portugués, atlántico, casas bajas, ligeramente ornamentadas con motivos barrocos y pintadas de azules y naranjas” (15). They enter a bar “a tomar algo, a ver pasar los barcos, a ver rodar los papeles entre los coches aparcados en el muelle, a nada...” (16). On its neon sign is a “galeón del siglo 19 tipo el de *Moby Dick*” (15) and it is filled with wood and the remains of old ships. As they sit in “aquel bar de una isla al sur de Cerdeña” (16), Fernández Mallo declares: “Acabo de tener la sensación de estar en las Azores” (16) despite never having been there. He then explains:

[En] aquel momento, justo en aquel momento en aquel bar de una pequeña isla al sur de Cerdeña al que habíamos entrado a tomar algo, a ver pasar los barcos, a seguir con la mirada el rodar de los papeles en el muelle, a nada, me vino a la cabeza un artículo de un escritor llamado Enrique Vila-Matas, un breve artículo que había leído hacía muchos años en un periódico, en el que este escritor hablaba de un bar de un puerto de las Azores, y lo asocié inmediatamente a ese en el que ahora ella y yo estábamos, un bar quizá también de madera, no sé, un bar en el que aquel escritor contaba que los marineros que cruzaban el Atlántico se dejaban mensajes en un tablón de corcho de la entrada o esculpidos con una navaja en la pared cuando el corcho estaba ya repleto, y cuyos destinatarios no eran los lugareños sino otros marineros que, sabían, pasarían por aquel bar de las Azores tarde o temprano...(17)

From this point on (and even though their journey takes them across the island), the bar and its reminiscences reappear frequently. Sometimes the memories from “aquel bar de aquella isla al sur de Cerdeña que se parecía a otro bar de las Azores...” (26) are identical; sometimes, there are minor variations in word choice or order. He recollects the discovery of a “campo de juegos” built by Mussolini and a conversation regarding proportions when, suddenly, they are discussing proportions “...en aquel bar de esa misma isla al sur de Cerdeña que se parecía mucho a otro de las Azores, al que habíamos entrado a comer algo, a ver rodar los papeles entre los coches en el muelle, a observar la llegada de los barcos, a nada...” (36). He recalls the minutes before learning of the death of her cat, “...y ella se rió en aquel bar de aquella isla al sur de Cerdeña que se parecía mucho a otro de las Azores porque aún faltaban 2 minutos para recibir la llamada de nuestro amigo comunicándonos la muerte de la gata, aún no sabíamos nada de esa muerte...” (36). “[Este] bar de esta isla al sur de Cerdeña que se parece mucho a otro de las Azores” (62) infuses the entirety of the first part of *Nocilla Lab*. It is everywhere, on almost every page, occasionally more than once.

There are likewise (many) other instances of repetition. Before getting to work on their unspecified project, they spend six days unwinding on the beach, six

sections, sometimes just a few lines, though this time without chapter numbers. And, as previously mentioned, they transform after around 20 pages into a graphic novel. The series of illustrations depicts a man who looks identical to Fernández Mallo (the author) as he escapes from the island to an oilrig where he has coffee with Enrique Vila-Matas (a decidedly more conventional Spanish author).

...días de burbuja playera que por una especie de ley antisimétrica parecían tanto más eternos cuanto más planeaba sobre nuestras toallas, sobre nuestros zumos de piña, sobre nuestros baños, sobre nuestros gin-tonic, sobre nuestro sexo, sobre todo, la sombra de aquello que verdaderamente nos había llevado hasta esa isla, nuestra misión, nuestro Proyecto, como nos gustaba llamarlo, y sobre el cual aún no habíamos cruzado una sola palabra desde nuestra llegada... (32)

Later, Fernández Mallo ruminates on ruins, speculating that

su potencia simbólica era tan intensa que tuvieron que ser abandonadas para que el mundo no se destruyera en ellas por exceso, por exceso de vida, para a partir de este momento ser sólo soñadas, para constituirse en lugares inhóspitos, para que no les ocurriera lo que les ocurriera a la materia y la antimateria, que se aniquilan por el extraño empeño en estar juntas, para que no les ocurriera lo que les ocurre a las parejas... (55).

Other observations are not themselves repetitive, but instead thematize repetition. The paradox that opens the novel is indeed that "...todo, visto con el suficiente detalle, es idéntico a su homólogo del lugar más alejado de la Tierra: vista bien de cerca, una hoja de una garriga de Cerdeña es igual a la de un pino de Alaska" (14). While driving, he (accordingly) notes that "aunque era la primera vez que pisaba esa tierra a mí me parecía que todo aquello ya lo había visto, y de alguna manera esa figurada repetición me daba confianza..." (34). The section even concludes with a return to Chernobyl and the "ley del símil, de las semejanzas", which states that "todo lo que alguna vez ha existido lo ha hecho para de algún u otro modo volver a existir, repetirse, nada se da en solitario, todo ocurre por lo menos dos veces..." (77).

To read "Motor automático de búsqueda" is therefore to reread, to an extreme unmatched in the other avant-garde artifacts. Words, phrases, places, and moments recur with such regularity that they inevitably become one's focus, obscuring the story (however convoluted) that surrounds them. In this way, the narration is song-like. Every note (or word) is not coherent; to try to understand by distinguishing each individually is to miss the point. We must instead submerge ourselves in its rhythm. We must rely on our senses and, as Susan Sontag advocates, engage the words sensorially.¹¹⁶ "Aquel bar en aquella isla al sur de Cerdeña" is therefore not just a place. It is also an invocation into an alternative state of mind. Like a sleep-stimulating lullaby, it gently carries us into a new type of reading experience in which words embrace their identity as words. With each passing repetition, the pretense of story recedes and language's

¹¹⁶ In "Mutantes ibéricos y sampling literario en la narrativa de Agustín Fernández Mallo", Alice Pantel also equates the *Nocilla* novels with music, first highlighting the many musical references. In addition to the eight interviews quoted from *El pop después del pop*, the Pet Shop Boys, Sufjan Stevens, and the Beatles make an appearance. Even *Nocilla*, from the trilogy's title, is borrowed from a Siniestro Total song, "Nocilla, ¡Qué merendilla!". But the most musical aspect of the novels is in fact the way in which they are composed, through sampling. Sampling is a technique pioneered by DJ Shadow (one of the artist's quoted in *Nocilla Experience*) "[que] consiste en tomar una muestra de un sonido grabado en cualquier soporte para integrarlo o combinarlo con otros y así crear una composición nueva" (Pantel 10). Pantel explains how Fernández Mallo does this with his citations of *Apocalypse Now*. As the quote from the movie repeats (and grows), so do its connections with other works of art, reaching back to its origin, "el relato factual de Stanley...[y] el cuento de ficción de Conrad" and forward to *Nocilla Experience*. For Pantel, the appropriation and repetition are key to the *mutant* musicality of *Nocilla*, its author a "...DJ narrativo...[que] se puede apropiarse de un texto, recortarlo, pegarlo, modificarlo, transponerlo, y reproducirlo en un sinfín de posibilidades creativas para ajustar la herencia colectiva de su propio objetivo artístico" (10).

material identity rises. We need not read for comprehension—we know already know what it says and that it does not advance the plot. Once more, but in a new way, we get to just look and listen.

V. The Distinctly Indistinct *Proyecto Nocilla*

To close, I will return to a characteristic of the *Proyecto Nocilla* that (apparently) distinguishes it as contemporary in the *novel as art object* topos—its expansiveness. Such movement *away* from the novel’s core and toward a much broader *transmedia* context was early on (and often) likened to the rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari¹¹⁷. Because the rhizome (as compared to the realist tree) is anti-hierarchical, it is decentralized and sprawling. “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*” (D and G 25). And as boundaries are blurred, the power of this middle is revealed. When (systemic) mimesis is rejected, two things previously kept apart by sequence, like a theory of physics and an Argentine author or an equation and a haiku, can now meet in “a reciprocal belonging, through which they become something else” (de Beistegui 22). New connections—that goal of literary archaeology—are made. The (old) structure of the “...tree imposes the verb “to be,” but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, “and...and... and...”” (D and G 25). In this ever-shifting ambit ruled by conjunction, the nature of literary objecthood likewise transforms. The playing field leveled, once inconceivable connections (across genres, disciplines, perceived status, and media) now proliferate. Science *and* story *and* cinema convene, this union generating changes in each that underscore their value beyond referentiality. Unanticipated associations make me take notice; I am unsure of exactly *what* I am seeing when I observe in a novel an excerpt from the McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Physics. All I know is that it is unfamiliar and impossible to pin down. Its edges are amorphous, prone to unpredictable “lines of flight” (D and G 10). In this way, the *Proyecto Nocilla* is an example of the—always inherently indeterminate—rhizome.

For Fernández Mallo, this indeterminacy is what connects the trilogy to the twenty first century. In fact, he in fact strives for uncertainty,

porque la condición necesaria, aunque no suficiente, para que un género artístico o una disciplina científica sean fecundos es, precisamente, que los límites, los lindes, de esa disciplina o género estén desdibujados, estén en continua vía de definición. Sólo en esas fronteras híbridas se da el ADN necesario para que surja vida artística o intelectual (“La otra historia de la ‘nocilla’”).

In the *universo transmedia*, rhizomatic spaces of imprecision are spaces of creation. They are where the truly *new* is born, horizontality begetting openness, which in turn fosters unforeseen connections (and on and on). Here, any word or image can become a link, or a *line of flight*, to another, any article on a given topic can trigger a question and a Google search, any (anonymous) poster can share (uncited) impressions in which fact and fiction merge.

Indefinability therefore typifies the present-minded *Proyecto Nocilla* at every level, not just its extreme formal fragmentation. An earlier section outlined different kinds of chapters in

¹¹⁷ Juan Bonilla references the rhizome in his prologue to the first (2006) edition of *Nocilla Dream* and Agustín Fernández Mallo uses the term to explain the contemporaneity of *postpoesía*. Scholars like Alice Pantel, Roxana Illasca, and Alex Saum-Pascual have also looked at the *Proyecto Nocilla* through the lens of the rhizome.

the novels, but in addition to those dedicated exclusively to physics, history, or philosophy, there are many that defy categorization, like previously-noted chapter 56 of *Nocilla Dream*, which opens with a (factual?) account of the development of the discovery of the neutron and ends with Chi-teen spotting a mermaid. Chapter 89 is similarly ambiguous, comparing the radii of the Earth and a beach ball thrown by Falconetti into the San Francisco Bay before reflecting on the connection between our actions and our limitations. There are also several (nebulous) narratives protagonized by (curiously unclear) historical figures. Some are obviously fiction, like the recurring narrative of Ernesto “Che” Guevara that includes an (in reality autobiographical) accident in Vietnam between pedestrian and motorbike. Others are more vague, like the strange tale of American surrealist painter Margaret Marley Modlin, who flees to Madrid from California after her actor husband is blacklisted, only to spend the rest of her life as a brush-wielding recluse. Chapter 97 relates the second departure (of only three) from her apartment, when, in a taxi en route an exhibition of her work, she hears “Siniestro Total cantando *Ayatolah no me toques la pirola!*” (180) and is inspired to design the album cover. Although the group accepts her sketch, the project goes unfinished “debido a la mala salud de Margaret...y la portada definitiva consistió en los integrantes del grupo caracterizados de los Hermanos Dalton, concebida por un dibujante español llamado Oscar Mariné” (181). This last fact, along with most of Modlin’s story, can be confirmed on the Internet, but there is nothing about the American elder’s attempt to infiltrate the Spanish punk rock scene. Is this a verifiable antidote or an example of creative license generating an unanticipated *line of flight* across countries, artistic fields, and the ages?

Something similar happens in *Nocilla Experience* with the life of Henry J. Darger, another solitary artist who devotes his life to the creation of

una de las obras más obsesivas, voluminosas y completas de la historia de la literatura, de la pintura, de la música y hasta del cómic. Un manuscrito de más de 15.000 páginas mecanografiadas a un solo espacio, más de 300 acuarelas de colores pastel y dimensiones gigantescas, imágenes de santos, recortes de periódicos y un imposible dietario en el que anotó y comentó cada día sin excepción durante 10 años el parte meteorológico de la ciudad de Chicago, al cual se tomó la molestia de titular *The Book of Weather Reports*, lo que da una idea de que para él toda su vida era sí una obra (126).

All this, as well as the work’s wild title—*The Story of Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*—, Wikipedia confirms as true, but many of the other details of his life have been modified. Darger was born in Chicago, not Brazil. After the death of his mother, his ailing father was sent to a convalescent home, not an asylum. He *did* leave his house, not just for daily mass, but also to work as a custodian. And he died in 1973, not 1970. Fact once more merges self-consciously with fiction for any reader attuned to the *Exonovel*. Having followed my own *line(s) of flight*, I know that what I am encountering only *seems* like a biography (a decidedly arborescent form). In fact, it is an amalgam (and a *rhizome*), its unidentified blend of history and story generating a narrative haze that stands out for its flagrance. All fiction is to some degree a fusion, but here there is no overarching illusion to hide behind because *some* of the outside sources are labeled. The author-function erased in favor a collective (and connected) *murmullo del anonimato*, the reader proceeds through a patchwork of pieces that *might* be from somewhere else. I do not know what is real and so, in all chapters, I proceed hesitantly. Doubt changes my

relationship with the text, indeterminacy paradoxically creating a new kind of clarity that illuminates word as thing. I cannot define exactly where I am, but I can see the language from which the work is constructed as it moves toward (and away from) fact and fiction, novel and encyclopedia, page and website. These many *lines of flight* create more profound (and visible) connections between text and world, thus also serving as evidence of language's objecthood. As they reach out rhizomatically, they acquire volume. Language becomes three-dimensional.

Beyond the (many) chapters that resist classification, there are also countless examples of characters embracing the unknown, the thing or space of the *intermezzo*. They occupy deserts, airports, and underground bunkers. They drive wood-burning cars and, like Steve, “cocinero, ideólogo y regente del Steve’s Restaurant” (*Nocilla Experience* 117), open restaurants that serve inedible (art) objects, most often “fotografías polaroid hechas furtivamente al cliente a través de un agujero practicado en la pared de la cocina, fritas y rebozadas en huevo, de tal manera que al retirar ese huevo aparecen los objetos y los rostros transformados” (117). Other dishes include: “cables eléctricos, de los clásicos 3 colores [positivo, negativo y tierra], sumergidos en aceite con ajo del Líbano”, “libro de bolsillo en almíbar”, and “carpaccio de hojas de obra literaria maceradas a la pimienta...” (117). Steve prepares dishes with care and the public sits at tables to be waited on. The word *restaurant* is even in the name of the space. All the same, if it does not offer nourishment, can it really be called one? Steve’s Restaurant both is and is not a restaurant, and thus occupies that *middle* so praised by Deleuze and Guattari. It is unprecedented and strange, a place of unfathomable encounters. It is truly indefinable—not quite an eatery nor an art gallery—and yet its culinary experiments yield a distinct materiality. Out of the uncertainty emerges an unparalleled art object. So it is with the equally indeterminate *Proyecto Nocilla*, which is a kind of Steve’s Restaurant in writing. Its structure and the nature of its content are perpetually unclear, but the confusion caused by this lack of clarity creates openings for more (and multiple) connections in both text and thought. I am not being served what I expected from a novel, and that is the point—imbalance and ambiguity make room for growth as it happens in the twenty first century.

But what of those other—archaeological—connections? Is the indefinability of the *Proyecto Nocilla* purely a point of contrast or can we actually uncover *algo nuevo en lo viejo*? How can such a uniquely contemporary indeterminacy inform (and alter) our understanding of the other artifacts in the *novel as art object* topos? What about their (distinct) narrative haze? Let us begin (again) with the historical avant-garde, stopping first at the most obvious point of contact—*Vispera del gozo*, a “novel” that looks like a collection of short stories and reads like a poem. It is a quintessential example of the Spanish vanguard *novela lírica*, its (once again) generic ambiguity (this time) a reflection of its innately *pneumatic* nature. As Pérez Firmat explains (with words that undoubtedly recall those of Fernández Mallo—another *cruise in time*), the boundaries of *pneumatic* works are diffuse and ill defined. Not only do they—like the *Nocilla* trilogy—resist categorization, they are also steeped in blurry and unformed imagery. Here, the speed of the automobile means that the sites of old Seville go unseen as crowded urban centers create confusion for protagonists in search of lovers. The language of *Vispera del gozo* is beautifully vague. So are the people and places that populate its pages.

Cazador en el alba, on the other hand, may seem at first glance more solid, its perfectly poetic descriptions having been positioned *just so*. Yet those same visions of the metropolis, sickness, and military life are (at times, intensely) surreal: the advancing face of a doctor, “todo raso, impecable, como el anuncio de un jabón de afeitarse” (19); music that rips “sangrientos ojales...en la piel de la noche” (35); a nightclub that is also “[un] hermoso y lírico prado, donde

la pianola –vaca pr6vida en armonías– rumiaba, paciente, un rollo de verdes y jugosas notas” (28). And we cannot forget how the novel starts –with the deliriums of an infirm Antonio Arenas, his first (feverish) encounter with modern life the haunting sterility of a hospital in the city. Bed-ridden, he spends his time “[telecomunicando] con la irrealidad” (21). Later, on the street, he stays wide-eyed as he observes an elevator ascend, the glowing outlines of its occupants “tan pronto conclusas como borradas: la estilogr6fica enorme o el pez aeronauta” (25). The young soldier feels out of place in modern Madrid. These images too feel strange and uncertain, their mystery not only an indication of Antonio’s astonishment, but also the (newfound) indeterminacy of this particular iteration of the *novel as art object* topos.

Volverás a Región and *Larva* are likewise distinctly indistinct, their richly incomprehensible language concealing understanding and clouding the minds of their readers. The words of both novels are painstakingly precise, but that does not mean they are clear. Quite the opposite. In the case of *Volverás a Región*, there are simply too many of them. They are too close together and too technical. The language of remote Región is as dense and foreboding as the forests it so thoroughly describes. Unlike the *Proyecto Nocilla*, it is an indeterminacy born of blindness. I cannot see though to the signifieds, the signifiers congealing into an oppressively thick (yet still quite beautiful) verbal fog. It feels heavier than *Larva* (and the rest of the topos), which (paradoxically) makes sense given the desperate conditions. So does *Larva*’s curiously carefree density, the product of the triumphant *Movida* less than two decades later. The words of *Larva*, filled as they are with erudite references, foreign tongues, and multivalent turns of phrase, are weighty. They too are hard (and at times impossible) to grasp. Yet there is nevertheless a lightness of atmosphere and intention that more closely links *Larva* to the future of transmedia. My line of sight is once more obscured by an opaquely dimensional language, only now it is disguised as Don Juan at a raucous masquerade ball.

As we reexamine *Cazador en el alba*, *Vispera del gozo*, *Volverás a Región*, and *Larva* from the (intentionally) indefinite future of the *Proyecto Nocilla*, unforeseen points of contact and contrast come into view. Indeterminacy infuses the entirety of the *novel as art object* topos, each work harnessing generic ambiguity, linguistic impenetrability, or notions of authorship and originality in a way that reflects their “historically specific circumstances” (Huhtamo 34). And in each instance, such indeterminacy is not simply a state of being. Along with an unconventional (and often fragmented) narrative structure and the preponderance of poetic device, it is in fact an instrument that these novels wield in order to reimagine narrative language and meaning. That such vagueness is a shared (but different) tool leading to a shared (but different) materiality is a befitting final paradox for the *novel as art object* topos. The topos, after all, is inherently paradoxical concept –an always evolving, yet unchanging entity that connects (and disconnects) literature across time and space.

In the *novel as art object* topos, variation clearly abounds. But even extreme differences in tone, style, and technique cannot obscure the fundamental continuity of language that rebuffs its role as referent. In each of these experimental novels, mimesis is cast aside as false, limiting, and fruitless. Language is no longer subservient to signification, sequence, and story. Rather than an action-packed escape *from* reality, the avant-garde novel becomes an intensely direct (sensorial) encounter *with* reality. My senses heightened by words that rise up off the page as icon, sound, and texture, a new kind of (experiential) meaning emerges. In this shared and beautifully mysterious haze, literature does not exist to be interpreted, or even understood. It *is*, and so it (and I) can engage—and grow—with our own *historically specific circumstances*.

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